

**“Anchored in Our Culture, Focused on Our Future”: Negotiating Spaces for Somali  
Women in Toronto through Gashanti UNITY**

Muna Ali

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research presents and analyses the experiences of second-generation Somali women in Toronto, and argues that there is a significant gap in research about young Somali-Canadian women, and the way they utilize different strategies to manage their multiple and hyphenated identities in order to negotiate social and political spaces for themselves. Through organizations like Gashanti UNITY, with their ‘Anchored in Our Culture, Focused on Our Future’ motto, young Somali women have taken ownership of their own narratives, through the sharing of their experiences and aspirations. This research seeks to examine and understand specifically the experiences of young self-identified Black, Muslim, Somali, Canadian women, drawing on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, as well as Intersectionality and Black feminist theory. It highlights ways in which these young women resist and subvert multiple forms of oppression, including, racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia and sexism. This thesis concludes with suggestions for further research that considers the lives and contributions of young Somalis in Canadian society.

*Keywords:* Somali, Women, African, Black, Canadian, Identity, Intersectionality, Black Feminist Thought, race, gender, Islam, islamophobia.

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to all the Gashanti women that have put their faith in me. I couldn't have done it without you!

Also, to my Grandmother and Mother (Rahma Haji Hussein and Fadumo Mahmoud Ibrahim), for their unconditional love and for inspiring me each and every day that lead me to this journey of self-discovery and introspection. I love you with all my heart.

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## **Declaration**

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis and that no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication.

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, my thesis does not infringe upon anyone's copyright nor violate any proprietary rights, and that any ideas, techniques, quotations, or any other material from the work of other people included in my thesis, published or otherwise, are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices. Furthermore, to the extent that I have included copyrighted material that surpasses the bounds of fair dealing within the meaning of the Canada Copyright Act, I certify that I have obtained a written permission from the copyright owner(s) to include such material(s) in my thesis.

I declare that this is a true copy of my thesis, including any final revisions, as approved by my thesis committee, the Interdisciplinary Studies Graduate Program, and the Faculty of Graduate Studies, and that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other than York University.

## CHAPTER 1

### Background

Despite the fact that Canada's Somali population is the largest recorded African immigrant community in the country (Statistic Canada, 2007, OCASI, 2016), very little is actually known about the ways in which second generation Somali Canadians navigate this complex cultural-political terrain. Even less is known about the unique challenges that second generation Somali women face when trying to create a space in which they can make sense of themselves as both Canadian *and* Somali women. These women often employ create and diverse negotiating tactics and strategies to understand and empower themselves simultaneously as Black, Somali, and Muslim women living both in white normative, male dominated Canada and in the diaspora. Within this complex socio-cultural milieu, Canadian Somali female subjectivity acts as a complex site of meaning in which various cultural, familial, and gendered modes of representation converge and diverge across time and space, subsequently blurring the boundaries of a clear "Somali," "Canadian," and "gender" identity. This is why, despite their wide presence within the Somali community, Somali women tend to be unaccounted for by prevailing Canadian *and* Somali identity discourses, leaving much to be learned about their experiences, achievements, and struggles.

Before I begin, it is important to note that throughout this study I will draw on the common experiences shared by second generation Somali Canadian women. In order to do this, I refer to the shared cultural markers and modes of identification of the Somali community to better understand their collective sense of belonging both in white normative Canada and within the context of the diaspora. My decision to do this is not meant to suggest that "Somali culture" or "Somali identity" is homogenous; I recognize that the Somali community is constituted by



diverse tribal and regional differences (Gardner & El Bushra, 2004. P 2-4). These differences are complicated, however, when materialized within the context of the diaspora (See: Bigelow, 2008, p. 28). Within Canada in particular, significant tribal and regional distinctions in Somali culture may become blurred and renegotiated in the face of larger socio-economic systems and relations that generate common experiences of and with racism, migration, and xenophobia (Berns-McGown, 2013, p. 1).

Moreover, Somali people within Canada, not only face common socio-political struggles, but share similar language, religious, and/or cultural practices. Since, in this sense, second-generation Somali Canadians largely experience the same socio-cultural-political milieu, it is therefore reasonable to refer to them as a collective social group. Accordingly, when I use the term “Somali culture” or “Somali identity,” I am referencing the overall ways in which most Somalis simultaneously identify themselves within both the Canadian *and* diasporic context. While these identity categories can be troubled and renegotiated within Somali communities, this work recognizes that there are similar experiences shared by the Somali diaspora in Canada, such as their common experiences of and with migration, racial discrimination, and islamophobia, and that these experiences help to shape the subjectivities of second-generation Somali women.

### **A. Research Objectives and Research Questions:**

My research aims to uncover the ways in which a new generation of young Canadian Somali women are redefining and empowering themselves through a feminist agenda forged around both their Somali heritage as well as their sense of Blackness in the Canadian context. The study offers new modes of thinking about the following: 1) the ways in which Somali Canadian women navigate past and present identities simultaneously within three distinct, but interconnected, socio-political terrains; local male-dominated Somali communities, white normative, androcentric Canada; and the diaspora; 2) the interconnectedness of these identities when it comes to their sense of racial, cultural, and gendered identification; and 3) how in response to these complexities, second-generation Somali women are now carving out unique definitions of womanhood that bridge and complicate pre-existing gender, racial, national, and cultural identity categories.

This work will contribute to the research about Somali-Canadian women, particularly second-generation women, who exist as liminal beings navigating their immediate and constructed environments along complex racial, gender, national, and cultural lines. I aim to investigate the overarching ways in which Somali and Canadian culture converge to jointly affect the ways in which young Somali Canadian women understand the multiple positionalities they hold; diasporic, Black, Muslim, Somali, and Canadian. Through my own experiences with Gashanti *UNITY*, a non-profit organization I co-founded with my sisters in an effort to empower young Somali women living in the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), I was able to access the intellectual-cultural capital of local Somali women and begin analyzing the following questions: How do young Somali women living in Canada negotiate the complex intersections of race, gender, culture, and religion within the context of the diaspora? In what ways do multiple

hierarchies of oppression influence how second-generation Somali women negotiate their intersecting identities across time and space? And, lastly, how does the contestatory nature of their identity as, on the one hand, Black Canadians and, on the other, Somali second-generation immigrants living in the diaspora, affect young Somali women's participation in community organizations like Gashanti?

I will begin by detailing my personal journey with coming to terms with who I am as a self-identifying Somali, Black and Muslim Canadian woman. Building off of my personal experiences, I will then present my research data findings, analysis, and discussion points. I hope to provide a unique perspective as somebody who is from the community that this research is focused on. Following this will be my suggestions for further research that will hopefully enrich the existing body of literature on Somali women living in Canada.

## **B. Historical Context**

### My Journey of Becoming

I was born in the city of Hargeysa and raised in Mogadishu and Cairo until the age of 9. I was then brought to Toronto by my *Hooyo* (mother). Despite the fact that I have lived in Toronto for the majority of my life, both my homeland and my “host” country have each shaped my sense of self and belonging. Growing up in Toronto, I have long viewed myself as a Black woman. Since Canadian hierarchies and structures are largely grounded in colonial racial-ethnic distinctions that function to support white privilege, racialized Canadians often experience and interpret the social world along “clear” racial-ethnic lines (Ibrahim, 1999, p. 350). As a result, racial signifiers such as “Black” become an important way for those with a shared lineage to make sense of their collective experiences of and with racism within the Canadian context.

Moreover, claiming “blackness” in Canadian society is particularly important, since Black people have long been jettisoned from the country’s national imaginary. This is done through “Black Canadian geographies” that seek to remove blackness from the material and ideological parameters of the nation-state (McKittrick, 2006, p. 118). Within this context, identifying as “Black” plays an important role in troubling a nationalist Canadian rhetoric that tries to write Black bodies outside of Canadian time, space, and history. Accordingly, many from African Diasporas living in Canada identify as Black both as a result of prevailing racial-colonial discourses as well as in response to racist spatial politics that attempt to render them invisible.

This socio-historical specific sense of Blackness is an important part of my identity; however, so is my Somali heritage and culture. Accordingly, while I grew up in Canada, I was still raised by a strong Somali mother and grandmother who taught me about Somali culture through story-telling sessions that took place during tea ceremonies. My mother would prepare *shaah* (Somali tea with spices) for her friends and would invite me to learn and observe how to prepare Somali tea and host a *shaah iyo sheeko* session (tea and talk). When I was younger, I did not like to make tea and considered it to be more of a female chore I resented. However, as I got older, I started to appreciate this tradition. I liked the aromas of the tea, the excitement of welcoming the guests and serving them while they told me Somali stories. These tea sessions helped me develop a stronger connection with my Somali cultural identity, providing a space in which I could begin to understand and reclaim my cultural and familial roots as a diasporic Somali woman living outside of the national and geographical boundaries of *Somalinimo* (Somaliness). In drinking Somali tea, talking to older Somali women, and listening to their stories about our homeland, I began to reconnect with a sense of belonging located, not within my immediate Canadian environment, but within a collective feeling or sense of Somali history.

This was when I first began to clearly confront questions of identity and womanhood within the context of the diaspora and started to truly understand how my immediate reality within Canadian society is shaped by extended geopolitical and transnational forces.

My growing awareness of myself as a Somali woman, and what that meant for my already established identity as a Black Canadian, motivated me to create the Gashanti space, in which other young second-generation Somali Canadian women could explore their own identities and discuss the different issues they face as Somali, Black, Muslim diaspora women living in Canada. This is the reason why, for example, Gashanti UNITY incorporated tea and talk sessions into our programming; tea and talk sessions allow local diasporic Somali women to represent their lived and present realities in Canadian society through more traditional cultural practices. By allowing Somali women to remake themselves in this way, Gashanti honors the true complexity and richness of what, Carole Davies (2007) calls, the “migratory subjectivity” of diasporic belonging. For Davies, this term represents the fact that diasporic subjectivities are forged in movement, through the crossing, recrossing, and blurring of geographical borders, nationalities, and cultures (p. 21). For me, by incorporating traditional cultural practices into our Canadian based program, Gashanti begins to open up a space in which such subjectivities can be fully realized among second-generation Somali Canadian women.

I see my own identity as a Somali Canadian woman as a kind of migratory subjectivity; one that challenges “the entrenched meanings” (p. 21) of intact Canadian and Somali national, historical, geographical and cultural locations. Although I grew up in Westocentric, white normative Canada, and thus identify as “Black,” I was always taught about Somali culture and history through storytelling and poetry, which are important tools for knowledge production and identity formation within the Somali community. One of the stories that have shaped my

understanding of what it means to be a Somali woman is the story of Queen Araweelo (Affi, 1995). Araweelo reigned over almost all of the Somali territories around 15 AD and was known for challenging the traditional gender roles of premodern Somali society in an effort to empower other women. While some Somalis believe that Araweelo was a cruel leader who oppressed men, many others maintain that she was a pioneer of Somali female emancipation and empowerment who –to this day – continues to inspire Somali women to be strong and independent.

When we started setting up Gashanti UNITY 2007, I reflected on this iconic story of Araweelo and used it as a source of guidance in creating this important space for young Somali women. Using Araweelo as a symbol of the potential power, strength, and determination of Somali women, my sisters and I centered the direction of our program on the vitality and wisdom of our foremothers. In doing this, we were able to draw on our shared history as Somali women to begin to make sense of the oppressions we currently face, not only in our local Somali communities, but in Canadian society as a whole. By turning to the history of Araweelo to imagine our future selves, we were able to subvert the myth of male ascendancy in Somali culture and thus carve out a space for Somali women to begin to reimagine a transformative female Somali identity. Moreover, Araweelo's legacy also offers a platform to resist Canada's culture of racial-sexual imperialism by drawing on "African cultures, critical mixes and admixtures of language and thought, of cosmology and metaphysics, of habits, beliefs, and morality" that lie beyond its ideological and cognitive reach (Robinson, 1983, 121). In particular, we drew on a history of female empowerment that exists outside of, and can thus trouble, the patriarchal and colonial foundations of Canadian history and society. In this way, Gashanti was able to construct a narrative of resistance around the migratory subjectivity of Somali Canadian women's diasporic identity; empowering Somali women living in Canada by bringing our

collective histories to bear on our present lives, colliding the divergent national, geographical, and historical subject positions we hold, and mapping out new, more transformative, subjectivities in the process.

In returning to Somali history to ground our resistance, I had hoped that Gashanti could begin to offer other Somali women the same chance to reconnect with their Somali heritage that my mother and grandmother had offered me. Realizing my anchor in Somali culture, I developed the desire to inspire grounded-ness in other young Somali women in Toronto. One West African mythological adage, Sankofa, speaks to this impulse, claiming that “we must go back and reclaim our past in order to create a better future” (Prendergast, 2011, p. 121). This delicate relationship between the past, the present, and how the two function to fashion the future, is further clarified by Laura Purdy (1994), who poignantly reflects that “ignorance of history leaves us with unrealistic conceptions of both the past and the present” (p.238). This quote speaks to the idea that one cannot make sense of the present without understanding the past which mirrors the Somali *Maahmaah* (proverb), ‘*Ha noqon mooyaale*’, loosely translated as ‘Do not be the one who does not know’.

This concept is relevant to my research and the work I do with Gashanti UNITY, because it reinforces the importance of our connection to our history which in turn helps us to better understand who we are. Moreover, this need to reclaim our past is particularly relevant for the migratory subjective positioning foregrounding our feminist resistance. Here, our past, the past of Somali second-generation women, is not sutured to some idyllic homeland per se, but emerges as a collective history experienced in and through movement, or as Stewart Hall (2005, p. 244) claims, within “a conception of ‘identity’ which lives within and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity.”

With this in mind, myself and the founding members of Gashanti UNITY agreed that our main objective would be to build bridges and strengthen bonds between Somali women in the GTA. We hoped to achieve this by providing a space in which these women could begin to make sense of the struggles they face both within Canada as well as the diaspora and subsequently start the processing of remaking an agentic Canadian-Somali gender identity. This impetus is even reflected in our title: the word ‘Gashanti’ in Somali culture, describes a young Somali woman who is coming of age and ready for marriage. As the founders of Gashanti UNITY, we decided to reclaim and reinterpret this meaning to reflect our new realities living in Canada and the hybrid character of our diasporic migratory subjectivities. Many younger Somali Canadian women, for example, no longer consider marriage to be the focal point of their lives. On the contrary, gaining an education, building a career, becoming financially independent, exercising agency and the ability to articulate our own beliefs, wants, and goals are some of the new ideals that young Somali women are now working towards.

These “new” goals of second-generation Somali women may be viewed by some as shaped solely by Canadian value systems, however, they rather speak to the particular social location of Somali women in Canada and the fact that such aspirations are particularly hard to achieve for them and other Black women operating within white, male normative Canadian institutions (Bannerji, 1995; Smith, 2005; McKittrick, 2006). Within this context, there is particular symbolic power associated with Somali women who, despite experiencing racism, sexism, and/or classism at every turn, are able to achieve educational, vocational, and financial stability. Accordingly, it follows that economic and financial success represents more than just Canadian ideologies of liberalism and individualism for these women, but their personal triumph over social injustice.



Moreover, the emphasis such women place on agency and the ability to claim and speak their truth, reflects how their subjectivities simultaneously emerge out of Canadian and Somali histories; historically speaking, Black women in Canada have long used strategies of self-reliance and speaking truth to power to resist intersecting systems of racial, gendered, and classed-based oppression (Copper, 2005, p. 45). Similarly, as represented by the story of Araweelo, Somali women have also done this throughout history, using their voices and agency to resist male hegemony in Somali communities and advocate for the future liberation of Somali women. We can thus see how the aspirations of second-generation Somali Canadian women emerge out of a diasporic context in which the histories and cultural-value systems of each society merge and subsequently take on new forms and meanings.

As co-founders of Gashanti UNITY, we recognized that there was a need for spaces in which young women could come together and discuss the many issues, concerns, challenges, and successes associated with their particular experiences within the Somali Canadian community and the diaspora. Eventually, “Anchored In Our Culture, Focused On Our Future” became our motto. Our goal was to ensure that we occupied a physical and mental space that could work to reclaim our collective histories within the context of white normative, androcentric Canada, while still recognizing the migratory subjective positioning of our diasporic realities. This is a space where we could dream, imagine and try to forge our *own* paths within this complex socio-cultural terrain and despite the multiple hierarchies of oppression that constitute it.

For five years, we created programming catered towards the needs of young Somali women, which included a photography series called *Portrait of a Lady*, a discussion group called *Shaah & Sheeko* (Tea & Talk), and a leadership program called *Tusmo* (Exemplary). We worked with teenage girls, newcomers, and even our own mothers. In many ways, this was a gestation

period for us; we were creating a safe space in which we could learn about our community, our women, and our selves. I soon learned through my experiences with Gashanti UNITY that our work was not confined to the City of Toronto, but could move beyond the boundaries of our neighborhoods, our cities, and our own minds. In short, coming to terms with our own migratory subjectivities, we learned that what it means to be a Somali woman cannot be fixed or confined to a singular image or a particular geographical location.

Our ancestors, for example, are nomadic people who moved from one area to another depending on harvest seasons, and our parents themselves had migrated to different countries before finally settling in Toronto. Similarly, living within the diaspora ourselves, we further complicate the geographical specificity of Somali identity, constantly crossing and recrossing national, historical, and cultural boundaries by bringing our historical past as Somalis to bear on our current realities as Black women living in the West. Although my research focuses on young Somali women in Toronto, I am therefore aware that there are similarities in the experiences of Somali women across the Diaspora. Some of the young women who participated in my research shared with me that they have connected with likeminded Somali girls on different social media platforms. Some of these platforms include, *Araweelo Abroad*, *Idil Collectives*, and *Mandeeq* that facilitate a space for second-generation Somali women to connect, write and discuss issues relevant to their lives. Once again, the importance of our migratory subjectivity becomes clear; for these women, solidarity and community transcend rigid geographical and national boundaries and is forged instead around a collective history and a shared location with the diaspora.

Throughout this process of carving out novel spaces for young Somali-Canadian women, I relied significantly on bell hooks' book, *Teaching To Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (1993). The chapters which were particularly pertinent to my work with Gashanti and

to this thesis were, “Building a Teaching Community, Holding My Sister’s Hand” and “Feminist Scholarship” because they address some of the challenges and themes relevant to the experiences of young Somali/Black women attempting to remake an empowered diasporic gendered identity within a white normative, male dominated society. This book provided me with the practical tools and ideas that I needed to transgress the racism, discrimination and exclusion I, a Black Canadian woman, encountered within academic Canadian institutions especially and everyday life in Canada more generally. Moreover, it provided a platform for me to begin to envision an identity, not constrained to the here-and-now, but located in the historical past of my people, a movement that allowed me to start to reimagine my place within both white normative Canada and male-dominated Somali culture. In conjunction with my sisters and friends, we built on the knowledge we learned from hooks’ work to shape and develop our work in Gashanti’s space.

#### Somali History – a Brief Historical Background

The state of Somalia as we know it today, was “created by the partition of the Horn of Africa by Britain, Italy, and France, and the Abyssinian Empire, during the scramble for Africa in the nineteenth century” (Gardner and El Bushra, 2004, p. 2). This partition, however, did not take into account the distribution of ethnic Somalis prior to colonial invasion into present-day Kenya, Ethiopia, and Djibouti. The territories inhabited by Somali people were divided into three separate states during the colonial period: French Somaliland, British Somaliland and Italian Somaliland. British and Italian Somalilands became independent in June and July 1960 and they decided to form the Somali Republic, while the French Somaliland became independent in 1977 and was renamed Djibouti.

In 1969, General Siad Barre’s military coup in the Somali republic “overthrew a

democratically elected” government (Gardner and El Bushra, 2004, p. 3). Similar to other traditional African communities, the clan is the basis of social organization among the Somali people; thus, it is not surprising that an abrupt joining of all groups from two regions resulted in clan tensions that increased over the next decade. Eventually, a civil war between 1978-1991 led to the downfall of Siad Barre and the self-proclaimed secession of the northern Republic of Somaliland, although it is yet to be recognized internationally (Gardner and El Bushra, 2004, p. 2-3).

After the collapse of civil society and the outbreak of war in Somalia, members of the Somali community settled in Canada as refugees in the late 1980s and 1990s. Since then, the community has grown exponentially to over 150,000 (Berns-McGowan, 2013) and are dispersed among cities such as Toronto, Ottawa, London, Waterloo, Calgary, Saskatoon, Edmonton, and even as far as Inuvik. Upon settling in their new homes and host country, they were further traumatized by unemployment, racism and other ills associated with ‘newness’ (Berns-McGowan, 2013; Jorden, Matheson, and Anisman 2009). As a result, Somali immigrants have experienced institutionalized racism in relations to employment, housing, schooling, media and police.

This history of institutional racism has subsequently created significant barriers for both first and second generation Somali immigrants. While these barriers are both diverse and complex, research indicates that media stereotyping and lack of public policies play a major role in maintaining the racial oppression and marginalization of Somali people (Berns-McGowan, 2013).

The institutional racism long experienced by Somali people explains why, despite the fact that Somalis in Toronto are the largest reported African diasporic community in North America

(Berns-McGowan, 2013), second-generation Somali Canadian youth experience significant barriers when attempting to integrate into mainstream Canadian society. Our community is in dire need of sustainable solutions that can foster a community of motivated and capable young people. Moreover, in concert with the aforementioned barriers, young Somali women are also experiencing internal and external pressures that specifically speak to their experiences as women. On the one hand, they are navigating the White-western racist Canadian landscape detailed above while, on the other hand, they are resisting the patriarchal norms and values systems within, not only androcentric Canada, but their own Somali homes and communities.

Within the Canadian context, Somali women must continually confront what Himani Bannerji calls (1996, p. 137) “racist-sexism;” the normative social relations of Canadian society in which gender and race “express or contain a ‘normalcy’” of white, maleness; this norm takes for granted the absence of the non-white, especially black, female body in institutional spaces in an effort to create the white male’s sense of Canada as “their ‘normal’ space or territory.” In turn, Black women, including Somali women, continue to be marginalized, ignored, and exploited by racist patriarchal Canadian institutions.

Within the Somali community, these women also face gender-based discrimination and sexist expectations. For example, Somali women face the scrutiny of their families and the larger communities and are expected to behave in a particular way. Men and boys on the other hand are not subjected to the same scrutiny or expectations. The cultural values of the Somali society at large are measured through the ways in which Somali women behave and carry themselves. Many younger women find themselves pigeonholed into an image that is socially constructed and does not always reflect their self-image and own identity. For example, a Somali woman is supposed to be a practicing Muslim who wears the hijab, who is helpful to her family, obedient

to her husband and gives him several children particularly male children, and who upholds the reputation and name of her family and by extension, her clan. All these expectations are drilled in the minds of young Somali girls from a very young age. If a Somali woman carries herself and speaks in a way that does not fit in with this socially constructed image of what a Somali woman should be, she is seen as a problem who is disturbing the social, political, and religious order set up by the dominant group, in this context, Somali men and religious leaders. Many Somali women have often been ostracized for making personal choices that their families did not approve of, while men rarely receive the same treatment. Even in the cases that these expectations are not verbally expressed by their parents, there are subliminal messages that these young women pick up on through social and familial settings.

All the participants in this research, have expressed their frustration and anger at the disparity in the ways they are treated compared with their brothers. These young women are expected to perform most if not all house chores and are also expected to care for their parents and siblings. However, the men are not expected to take on the same responsibilities. Furthermore, many young women are not accorded the same freedoms that their brothers are accorded. For example, many young women have curfew hours and are expected to be home at a certain time; a rule that usually does not apply to their brothers.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

This thesis draws on my chosen three disciplines, Education, Women and Gender Studies, and Humanities to unpack critical questions about second-generation Somali women's experiences in Canada. Building off of Gashanti's use of education to empower young Somali women through art and culture (Gashantiunity.ca, 2014; Balkissoon, 2010; Omar, 2013), my research draws on theories of identity, intersectionality and culture to critically interrogate Somali-Canadian women's experiences with racism, Islamophobia, and racist-sexism in white, male normative Canada, and in male-dominated Somali culture. In particular, I hope to investigate how these social ills are played out in complex and contested ways within the context of the diaspora in an effort to shed light on how, within such a space, second-generation Somali Canadian women can begin to draw on their migratory subjectivities to remake a liberatory Somali-Black female identity.

Available research on Somali-Canadian women tends to focus on questions of migration and refugee experiences, however, little has been done on how race, gender, nationality, culture, and geography intersect to shape their journey of self-actualization and future aspirations (See: Spitzer 2006; OCASI, 2016; Daniel & Cukier, 2015). Accordingly, this paper addresses these questions by explicitly centering the voices and experiences of second-generation Somali-Canadian women within the relevant themes of family dynamics, education, friendship, identity and religion, community engagement, and migration stories.

This study is grounded in Patricia Hill Collins' work on intersectionality theory and Black feminist thought. Collins developed a framework that functions to better understand the lived experiences of Black women in relation to what she calls the "Matrix of Domination"

(Collins, 1990). This term describes the unique forms of oppression and exploitation that Black women face in North American society based on the intersecting systems of racism, sexism, classism, etc., that organize their lives. The value in such a perspective is that it begins to peel away at the many layers of power and control, oppression and resistance, exploitation and injustice that shape Black women's everyday worlds and the "intersecting oppressions" that constitute them (p. 89). Because second generation Somali Canadian women hold complex and intersecting identities and experience multiple forms of oppression, Collin's understanding of a matrix of domination offers a theoretical standpoint from which to begin analyzing their joint experiences of and with racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia, racist-sexism, and Somali-patriarchy.

However, intersectionality theory is limited insofar as it does not take into consideration the ways in which Western systems of domination materialize within the "third world" in ways that are distinct and different from North American society. In particular, within postcolonial contexts, matrices of domination are largely constituted by relations of war, displacement, and poverty that are linked to histories of Western colonialism, slavery, imperialism, and domination (Heng, 1997; Moghadam, 2002; Mekgwe, 2008). These histories brought over to the Western world by first-generation Somali women, impact both their lives and the lives of their children. This is something Collin's theory of intersectionality is unable to address in a comprehensive way. The social relations and locations that are thought to constitute Collin's Matrix of Domination are largely circumscribed by Western cultural value systems that are based entirely on the socio-historical context of American society, thereby marking, by its very construct, "the limits of 'outsider within' positionality" (Davies, 2007, p. 13). As a result, the migratory subjectivity of the African female diasporic subject is flattened by an essentialist, Westocentric logic of a particular Black female identity that fails to take into account the ways in which



imperialism, displacement, and colonialism effect Black women's location within the Matrix of Domination.

In order to apply Collins's concept of "the Matrix of Domination" to the lived experiences of young Somali women in Canada, we have to first acknowledge the internal and external forms of oppression and discrimination that these women are subjected to: not only do they have to navigate racism, racist-sexism, and islamophobia in Canadian society, but they must also resist patriarchal norms within Somali culture, which puts intense pressure on them to find ways to resist and subvert these multilayered systems of oppression.

#### **A. Public discourse on Somali women:**

In her 2006 study, *'The impact of government policy and public discourse surrounding Somali refugee women in Canada'*, Denise Spitzer argues that "government policy and public discourse have operated to enhance and maintain the liminal status of Somali women refugees in Canada" (p. 48). Spitzer goes on to state that Somali women have to wait up to five years before they can apply for permanent residency, which she explains negatively impacts their ability to integrate into Canadian society and subsequently gain control over their lives. In addition, Spitzer argues that the Eurocentric definition of family in Canada directly contradicts the Somali definition of family (p. 48). For example, the concept of the family in Somali society usually includes an extended family of parents, siblings, grandparents, uncles and aunties and adopted children. On the other hand, the Canadian concept of family is based on the western notion of the nuclear family unit, which is constituted by 2 parents and 1.5 children. These diverging definitions of family pose a particular challenge for Somali families migrating to Canada, because extended family members are not included in Canada's normative notion of family, they

have to go through additional hoops in the immigration process that prolongs the issuing of a permanent Canadian status (Spitzer, 2006).

Many anti-racist, transnational, feminist, and/or postcolonial Canadian family scholars have argued that this reflects the imperialistic and colonialist undertones of Canadian family policies and discourses that attempt to normalize and reproduce the familial structures of white, settler families (Smith, 1993; Dua, 1999; Elgersman, 1999; Brigham, 2015). It is within this socio-political terrain that Somali mothers must navigate the institutional and discursive racism of Canadian society in order to empower and support their second-generation daughters and thus reveals the particular parental hardships they face. As first-generation immigrants or refugees, these women confront a historical-geographical disjuncture in their family formations in which they have to renegotiate traditional-cultural family ties within the dynamic of white, Settler-Colonial Canada. As a result, they are left at an economic, social, and personal disadvantage that creates additional barriers for them as both women and mothers.

In 2006, a *Needs Assessment Research*, (Ahmed, B., Jimaale, M., Roble, A., Yusuf, A.) conducted by the Somali-Canadian Education and Rural Development Organization (SCERDO), identified the challenges faced by Somali women and children in Edmonton. The study recognized that Somali mothers, regardless of their marital status, take on the responsibilities of being the main teachers, caregivers, and breadwinners of their family. Some of these women have husbands who are “present,” but are required to work long hours and, in most cases, outside the city or country. As a result, many of these women find themselves physically and mentally exhausted, financially disadvantaged, and socially isolated. This is, in part, due to the fact that the Somali concept of the “African Village” does not translate into the Western context in which migration and family policies are designed around the normalcy of the nuclear family.

Moreover, because of displacement, many families scatter across the globe, ultimately leaving the burden of care-giving to far less family members than in the past (Ahmed, Jimaale, Roble, Yusuf. 2006). In addition, Somali families are often economically marginalized by the fact that their educational credentials are not recognized by the Canadian government (Spitzer, 2006). This puts pressure and stress on families because it prevents them from settling properly, securing suitable employment, supporting themselves and their families and being productive members of society. Together, these issues have put a significant amount of pressure on Somali women particularly because many of them have become the breadwinners in their families. This point is relevant to this study given that seven out of eight participants in my research came from women-led families where mothers were the only bread-winners.

SCERDO's study (2006) offers several recommendations for improving the lives of first- and second-generation Somali-Canadians. For example, it details practices to increase Somali youth civic engagement and employment opportunities. Nevertheless, the study falls short in terms of addressing the gender and religious issues that are specific to Somali-Canadian mothers and daughters within white normative, settler-colonial Canada and the diaspora. For instance, it fails to address the fact that most community-based projects specific to the Somali population are led by men and the effects this has on Somali women and female community leaders attempting to resist Canadian racist-sexism, Somali patriarchy, and the gendered effects of displacement, imperialism, and racism on Somali female-breadwinners.

Nonetheless, due to their high degree of resilience, kinship, and mutual aid, many of these women overcome these challenges and create their own social spaces in which they can affirm their identities as both individuals and community leaders. The young women interviewed for this project, for example, followed the footsteps of their mothers and continue to take up and

create their own spaces, communities, and identities. This reveals how second-generation Somali women often draw on the various strategies of resilience that constitute their migratory subjectivities to assert and reclaim power; by foregrounding their resistance to white normative Canada within the Somali-centric feminist legacies of their Somali mothers, they began to carve out a space within the diaspora in which they can start to remake themselves simultaneously as Somali, Black, Canadian, Muslim women.

### **B. Empowerment through education:**

Pre-supposing their identities as ethnic, linguistic, political and religious minorities, Melanie Pothier's study, *LINCing Literacies: Literacy practices among Somali refugee women in the LINC program* (2011), explores how Somali refugee women in Canada use and value literacy through federally-funded programs, such as Language Instruction for Newcomers to Canada (LINC) and English as a Second Language (ESL). This demonstrates the high level of importance first-generation Somali women attribute to learning English because they view it as a means to communicate with their Canadian-born/raised children, their teachers, and the various institutional bodies responsible for their learning, health, and well-being. This, in turn, allows them to play an active role in, not just their children's lives, but their educational and financial trajectories. Learning English for Somali women is therefore not just an attempt to integrate into Canadian society, but a self-conscious strategy of survival that helps them maximize their children's quality of life and future success. In turn, Somali mothers often place high expectations on their children to obtain a quality education because they see a direct correlation between human and cultural capital and personal satisfaction and happiness.

One interesting observation about the mothers of the young women in this study is that,

as immigrant parents, they have been able to function within Canadian society without acquiring higher education. The fact that many older Somali women came as refugees or immigrants without knowledge of the English language explains why they place emphasis on the functional success of education and why they invested in developing their entrepreneurial skills without necessarily pursuing formal academic aspirations. Although, many of these women did not have the resources and/or time to go to university, they were still self-conscious of the Westocentric institutional pressures, such as the ability to speak and write in English that constitute white, normative Canada. In turn, they negotiated their restricted socio-economic positions and acquired skills that would help them to improve their children's education trajectories. Accordingly, despite not gaining higher education themselves, these mothers encourage their children to pursue a university career as they recognize that this resource would afford their children opportunities they did not have themselves. This speaks to the ways in which Somali mothers laid the foreground for their daughters to become successful and productive members of society.

### **C. Problematizing Black Identity**

In his essay, *'Other/ed' Kinds of Blackness: An Afrodiasporic Versioning of Black Canada* (2012), Mark Campbell problematizes the concept of "Black Canada" for its lack of nuance and complexity. Campbell argues that "Black Canada" is a term of convenience that serves as a mechanism for "order", a strategy that is used by different groups including "scholars, activists, and politicians" (p. 47). However, the use of this term "obscures the very transnational, multi local ways in which Afrodiasporic people live in, beyond and between nation as a concept and nation as a lived identity" (p. 47). As such, this conception does not reflect the

myriad of ways in which Black peoples living in Canada exist. Campbell further suggests that we must look at how “Afrosonic innovations” can speak to the varied subjective identifications that can emerge around Black Canadian’s multiple lived experiences and migratory subjectivities within wider African Diasporas.

As I previously described, for example, young Somali Canadian women have learned to embrace and perform Blackness as both a personal as well as public identifier. In response to racist-sexism, hegemonic colonial-racial discourses, and prevailing Black Canadian geographies that function to erase Black bodies and histories from Canada’s national imaginary, second-generation Somali women often perform Blackness as a mean to subvert hegemonic Whiteness. From the way we dress, do our hair, to the music we listen to and literature we read, Somali women learn and perform their diasporic Blackness to resist Canada’s long history of imperial, colonial, and racial domination and the ongoing subjugation of Black bodies especially and non-white bodies more generally within the Canadian context. In these instances, young Somali women identify with other Black women because they have similar experiences of and with racism and racist-sexism within Canadian society. In this way, they move beyond their first-generation mothers in articulating a more complex understanding of self and in bargaining new political affiliations. In North American societies in which African-ness and Blackness often conflate, these cultural and political affiliations are critical. Thus, while emerging out of the struggles of their mother’s specific experiences of and with displacement, racism, and imperialism, the migratory subjectivity of second-generation Somali women truly takes from within the context of the diaspora in which the complexities of racial formation in Canada are confronted.

Andrea Davis (2004) in discussing the usefulness of the concept of diaspora for

understanding the experiences of people of African descent, states that as a concept, “diaspora” allows for both differences and similarities across multiple national and cultural contexts, while also allowing for a “necessary if sometimes contested, narrative of resistance” (p. 64). This definition of diaspora permits a better understanding of the ways in diasporic “Blackness” materializes and rematerializes across national, historical, geographical, and cultural borders in diverse yet politically meaningful ways. The means by which Black people identify themselves in the diaspora, she argues, is dependent on their individual struggles with rearticulating their sense of belonging in new geographic spaces, and repairing the fragmented historical memories that connect them to other Black peoples in different parts of the world:

*By opening up discussions beyond provincial and national borders and by encouraging a cross-national perspective that can engage the histories of Europe, Africa, Asia and the Americas, the concept of the Diaspora in its most amorphous and transgressive terms offers ‘New World’ Blacks a way of confronting and critically rewriting their experiences of racism, fragmentation, and nationlessness. (p. 64)*

In this way, we can see the notion of diasporic Blackness as a way to begin to capture the migratory subjectivities of second-generation Somali Canadian women who seek to resist white normative Canada and reimagine a liberatory sense of self. Still, as Davis (2004) notes, identity formation for Black people in the diaspora can be problematic because persistent experiences of racism and exclusion often lead to “the constructions of Black identities guarded within . . . rigid notions of identity, nation, and belonging” (p. 65). Whatever the motivation, Davis argues, any attempt to develop a hegemonic and static cultural identity will be oppressive for those people

who invariably fall outside of its borders. This demonstrates the value of anchoring Blackness to a migratory subjectivity in which “racial” formations function as assemblages; it reveals the historical specificity of such signifiers, while also recognizing the multiple and divergent ways in which Blackness is articulated and disrupted within and across translocal and local contexts.

Although Davis’s discussion does not explicitly include Somali women in Canada, it helps outline some of the ways in which Somali immigrant women in general are located in Canadian society. Being Somali, Muslim, and woman in Canada creates a complex experience with oppression, identification, representation, and community that falls outside of the parameters of most concepts grounded in hegemonic notions of “Black identity.” As such, while there are shared experiences of being Black with other Afro-Diaspora women, there is also a different experience of being Somali and Muslim. The demands of culture and religion for example, which are placed on both Somali and Muslim people, significantly impact the lives of young Somali women, who must not only negotiate their Blackness in Canada, but also their specific cultural and religious identities. This is why I posit that the realities of second-generation Somali woman can be understood within a geopolitical, translocal, and local formulation of Collin’s Matrix of Domination in which race is subjectively and materially lived, on the one hand, in concert with gender, class, and religion, and, on the other, within the context of the diaspora. Here, Blackness is only one function of oppression and resistance that, while materializing within a specific socio-historical context, is constantly being read and redefined in relation to the multiple positionalities Black/African subjects hold.

In rethinking the meaning, function, and socio-historical specificity of diasporic Blackness, we can begin to map out a space in which both the diaspora and Blackness can function, not to homogenize transnational African communities, but to mobilize a migratory



subjectivity capable of building political coalitions across time and space. Ultimately, when looking at the identities of diverse Black women, there must be a reimagining of what unity looks like across Black communities; we must move away from the homogenization of Black Canadians and begin developing a sense of unity that respects differences of gender, sexuality, religion, location, and class. Moreover, it is important for Black women to understand how they have internalized multiple oppressions and to devise ways to pull out and locate those oppressions within relevant social relations, systems, and institutions. Lastly, it is important for us to respect the differing ways in which other Black women experience oppression as a diverse and complex terrain of struggle and resistance.

Drawing on Davis's discussion, the concept of migratory subjectivity, and Mulki Al-Sharmani's (2007) case study of second generation Somali women's experiences in Canada, this research argues that the lived experiences of these women are socially constructed simultaneously within the diasporic and white, male normative Canadian context. In turn, I posit that this complex and contested social milieu provides the foundation for these women to continuously redefine and remake themselves as Somali *and* Canadian women. Within this context, young Somali women have experiences that are unique to them and which differ from the experiences of their mothers because of their divergent migratory positions. These young women must continuously cope with the historical effects of migration in concert with ongoing Canadian racism and gender-based discrimination within their families. These women often use their own version of feminism as a means of breaking the yoke of oppression that is part of their everyday lives.

Ultimately, this study asks: is there value in Black, Somali-Canadian women speaking truth to power and making known the complex and multifaceted nature of their lived experiences

of and with multiple hierarchies of oppression? In other words, in the concerted struggle against racist-sexism and white supremacy in Canada, patriarchy in Somali culture, and the spatial-social-temporal rupture of diasporic belonging/non-belonging, what does speaking out for oneself accomplish? Davis (2004) states “By opening up these otherwise silenced spaces, Black women insist that the potential for healing is wider and more expansive – can take place both inside and outside of communities” (p. 66). Looking at Somali women in Canada, one can see that by declaring their unique identities and working through the complexities of their migratory subjectivities, they begin to remake an agentic, feminist Somali gender identity that acts as a place of hope; as a site of personal and collective transformation.

## CHAPTER 3

### Methodology

This study uses interviews with the women of Gashanti UNITY to examine the challenges faced by second-generation Somali women in Toronto. I use **three** theoretical frameworks to theorize and contextualize the experiences of these young women: 1) Black Feminist Thought, 2) theories of identity, and 3) intersectionality. Drawing on the works of prominent Black feminist thinkers, such as Patricia Hill Collins (1990), bell hooks (1994) and June Jordan (1982), I will critically interrogate the multiple hierarchies of oppression faced by second-generation Canadian Somali women. I use Black feminism as my theoretical framework because it represents a source of empowerment and validation for young Black women living in the West. It encourages us to utilize our own experiences with oppression as a means to resist social injustice. As hooks argues, Black feminism grounds knowledge production in Black women's experiences because, "If any female feels she needs anything beyond herself to legitimate and validate her existence, she is already giving away her power to be self-defining, her agency" (hooks, 2000, p. 95). However, in order to address the complex realities of diasporic Somali Canadian women in particular, I expand Black feminist scholarship beyond the theoretical limitations detailed in section two, by drawing on Carole Davies' concept of migratory subjectivities. By incorporating this concept into Black feminist frameworks, I can better map out the ways in which second-generation Somali women simultaneously navigate white, male normative Canada, patriarchal Somali culture, and the diaspora, in complex and unique ways.

Combined, Davies concept of migratory subjectivity and Black feminism's emphasis on agency, praxis, and a politics of self-determination, provide a strong foundation to investigate the means by which second-generation Somali Canadian women remake themselves in empowered

and agentic ways through the transformative space of Gashanti UNITY. The main objective of Gashanti UNITY is to provide ‘opportunities to enhance personal growth, autonomy and empowerment of girls and young women so that they can achieve fulfillment and maximize their potential’ (GashantyUnity.com); essentially, we want to empower Somali women to empower themselves, by providing them with the tools they need to navigate their unique socio-historical milieus. In particular, we provide multiplatform educational programs in photography, filmmaking, and narrative and creative writing that function to help second-generation Somali women come to terms with, not only the multiple hierarchies of oppression they face, but the complex political terrain in which they must navigate.

In carving out a space in which these women can understand the multiple positionalities they hold as Black, Canadian, Muslim, Somali, diasporic, feminist women, we begin the process of allowing them to speak for themselves and address important issues “that young Somali women face every day” (GashantyUnity.com). These issues include confronting anti-black racism, xenophobia, racist-sexism, and Islamophobia in white, male normative Canada, sexism and patriarchy in Somali communities, and cultural alienation and familial discord within the context of the diaspora.

Ultimately, the goal of Gashanti is to present a voice for young Somali-Canadian women who, because of their unique social location, must resist forms of oppression that extend across national, cultural, and historical borders and thus navigate a complex matrix of local, extralocal, and transnational oppressive social forces. This is done by urging them to build life-skills, values, relationships, and community relations that help them to make sense of their migratory subject positioning and by providing them with resistance and problem-solving skills that help them to foster an agentic Somali-Canadian gender identity that both aligns with and broadens

Canadian identity discourses. As a result, these women are able to mobilize a positive sense of self constituted by multiple, even divergent, histories, communities, and identities.

In this way, Gashanti occupies what postcolonial feminist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1984) calls the rhetorical space of “postcoloniality;” a contested political space where non-white and third world women can encounter the epistemological violence of imperialist racial-sexual-national discourses in order to reclaim and reimagine their subjectivity as a cite of multiplicity. By creating a space in which second-generation Somali Canadian women can express themselves through dialogue, poetry, singing, and writing, Gashanti allows them to envision a gender identity forged around their migratory subject positioning and thus begin the process of resisting the epistemological violence and rupture of their lives.

This research uses the methodologies of auto-ethnography and life history which allow me to move between my roles as both researcher and researched by fostering a creative space that is both reflexive and iterative (Grant, Short & Turner, 2013). As Ellis (2004) claims, “this auto-ethnography affords: research, writing, and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural and social. The form usually features concrete action, emotion, embodiment, self-consciousness, and introspection ... (and) claims the conventions of literary writing (p.19).” Additionally, a life-history approach also “allows for the location of youth life stories within a broader context” (Dlamini, Wolfe, Anucha & Yan, 2009; Goodson, 1992), and enables both youth and interviewer to “contemplate the effects of our actions, and to alter the directions of our lives” (Richardson, 1990, p. 117 quoted in Dlamini, Wolfe, Anucha & Yan, 2009).

Through auto-ethnography and a life-history approach, I can draw on personal and collective experiences of and with the multiple hierarchies of oppression second-generation

Somali Canadian women face as migratory subjects and use this knowledge to set the parameters of my research within the various social domains that constitute our lives: white, male normative Canada, male dominated Somali culture, and the diaspora. Moreover, because these experiences contain intimate knowledge of what it feels like to move through these divergent spaces as a Somali, Black, Canadian diasporic women, they illustrate the importance of linking Somali Canadian women's lives back to a rhetorical space of postcoloniality and multiplicity. Using a life-history and auto-ethnography approach, I can articulate a politic capable of capturing the ways in which second-generation Somali Canadian women remake their gender identity in creative and multifaceted ways.

I gathered data for my research by using traditional Somali forms of knowledge synthesis: *cilmi baadh* (research), including *talasho* (advising), and *wareeysi* (interviewing). Interviews were recorded and transcribed to identify, analyze, and report common themes found throughout the interviews. In order to foster a culturally sensitive interview environment, I critically examined my own position in relation to the research by looking at my intersecting identities of being Somali, Black, Muslim, and woman (Dlamini, Wolfe, Anucha & Yan, 2009; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). For example, as a film maker, I initially assumed that interviewees would be comfortable with being filmed and thus intended to video record the interviews. However, I had to revise this because I realized after my first interview that participants might not be comfortable with being filmed. In the end, I had to re-interview my first participant with an audio recorder, which appeared to foster a more relaxed and comfortable interview environment. Given that the rest of the participants all belonged to similar cultural and ethnic backgrounds, I decided that all interviews should only use audio recording.

Despite my attempts to unpack my positioning as an inside researcher, the emotional

responses from some participants made it difficult for me to study and evaluate their responses “objectively”. Data from my study demonstrated that second-generation Somali-Canadians face serious challenges when navigating the intergenerational cultural gap between themselves and their immigrant parents within the context of the diaspora. These women often had to reconcile the knowledge that they learned at home from their families, with the values and norms their Canadian peers adhere to. The data also suggests that in addition to living in a male dominated, White supremacist society in which racism, Islamophobia, and racist-sexism are all common everyday experiences, Somali women are also subjected to patriarchal domination and subordination within the Somali community itself. In turn, unlike their Somali mothers and Canadian peers, these women often found themselves confronted with multiple hierarchies of oppression that were not located to one particular social or geographical location, but merged together across time and space, forming a “Matrix of Domination” (Collins, 1990) particular to their migratory subject positioning within both Canada and the diaspora.

#### **A. Recruiting Participants & Participants:**

To recruit participants for my study, I circulated a call for volunteers among the Gashanti UNITY youth members via email, which laid out the goal of the study. I relied on the women who had already established relationships with each other through sharing the community space at Gashanti UNITY and who would feel a sense of trust and emotional connectedness with other interviewees. This method of recruitment is known as snowballing, which is “well suited for a number of research purposes and is particularly applicable when the focus of the study is on a sensitive issue, possibly concerning a relatively private matter, and thus required the knowledge of insiders to locate people for study” (Biernacki & Waldorf, p. 141). For example, because of

my leadership role at Gashanti, participants felt comfortable sharing their private stories and feelings with me during the interview process.

Eight youth members from Gashanti UNITY agreed to participate in this study. The interviews took place at the Gashanti programming space in Scarborough, Toronto. The participants selected this space because they considered it to be a safe and familiar environment. All participants were self-identified Somali-Canadian women, in full-time education and between the ages of 20 and 26. Below are participants' biographies, which are presented in the order in which they were interviewed.

*Participant 1* is a 21-year-old woman born in Abu Dhabi. She has two older sisters who were also born in Abu Dhabi. Her mother moved the family to the United States when she was two years old; however, due to lack of family support, they soon moved to Canada. She has lived in Toronto for the last eighteen years and now has a younger brother who was born here. Although she has no memory of what it was like to migrate from Abu Dhabi, her sisters have told her stories about the hardships that her family faced when travelling to Canada. In concert with the literature, this reveals the sense of rupture created by migration and the subsequent cultural and familial disjuncture of living within the diaspora; while unable to access the historical memory of immigrating to Canada herself, such stories were still present in her and her family's lives. She spoke positively about her father and his role in the family, describing him as an encouraging and supportive parent.

*Participant 2* is a 21-year-old university student specializing in the sciences. Her parents migrated from Somalia to Scarborough, Ontario, where she was born. She is very proud of her humble upbringing in Scarborough. Interviewing her was challenging for me because half way through the conversation, she became very emotional. Talking about her experience seemed to



trigger a lot of negative emotions which took me by surprise because she was usually one of the least expressive women in the group. She disclosed highly personal information about how she feels about her self-image and her tenuous relationship with her mother and her friends. In concert with the literature detailing the strong educational values of Somali mothers, she talked about how her mother puts a lot of pressure on her to do well in school. She spoke extensively about the challenges that she faces due to her strained relationship with her mother. These challenges largely included difficulties in making and maintaining relationships. She also talked about how, as a racialized student in a White dominated discipline, she often feels isolated in school and feels obligated to adopt strategies to “fit in” better. For example, she talked about how she always wears her glasses because she thinks they make her look “smart”. This relates to the literature because it demonstrates the ways in which Black women in Canada often attempt to negotiate racist-sexist institutions by performing blackness in creative ways. Combined with her difficult relationship with her mother, we can see that participant 2 must also navigate personal and social struggles within a diasporic space; as a first-generation immigrant Somali woman unable to participate in higher education herself, her mother clearly attributes great value to educational success that, while valid, is complicated by the racist-sexism the participant actually experiences within Canadian educational institutions.

*Participant 3* is a 22-year-old Somali woman whose parents migrated from Somalia before she was born. She is the first Canadian-born Somali in her family and is currently attending university. She has four older siblings and four younger half-siblings who were born in Somalia and Saudi Arabia. This interview was also challenging because questions about her family triggered strong emotional responses. Consequently, several breaks had to be taken during the interview process. Similar to participant 2, she touched on the particular struggles of

diasporic second-generation Somali women and extensively talked about the significant amount of pressure her mother places on her to perform well academically. However, unlike participant 2 who does not have younger siblings, participant 3 talked about how she feels pressured to be a good role model for her younger brothers. In addition, she struggles with depression and feelings of isolation and loneliness. However, she does view herself as the nexus of her friend group because she often brings her friends together and organizes social meetings and outings. She is also very active on social media and finds a community and support systems through spaces such as Black Twitter and Muslim life-style blogs, and uses these platforms to remain civically engaged. Also, like participant 2, she negotiates social inequality in multifaceted and unique ways. In particular, by mobilizing Black and/or Muslim-centered social media platforms, this participant is able to move beyond the racist-sexism, Islamophobia, and anti-blackness entrenched within Canadian institutional spaces. Thus, this participant was able to use this contested space to build transformative communal ties and explore her migratory subjectivity.

*Participant 4* is the oldest participant in my study. She is 26-years-old and was born in Abu Dhabi. She was six months old when her family moved to Ottawa from Abu Dhabi. Shortly after moving to Ottawa, they relocated to Toronto where she grew up. This was another challenging interview, as the participant was not forthcoming with her responses. Her responses were also conflicting, and she seemed disinterested with some of the research questions. One of the things she talked about was how she feels regret about dropping out of college and concerned about the lack of positive role models in her life. She uses the Gashanti UNITY space to access its one-on-one mentorship and guidance opportunities, which she states helped her deal with the feelings of isolation and depression she struggles with. This reveals the ways in which Gashanti UNITY can provide a safe space where Somali women can practice self-care and improve their

overall well-being.

*Participant 5* is a 22-year-old Somali woman who was born in Canada. She is the oldest of five children, with three younger sisters and one younger brother, all of them born in Canada. The participant has a particularly high amount of family responsibilities: she takes care of her younger sisters and brother, cooks for them, and cleans the house, while also working a part-time job. Her parents are separated. Due to her parent-like role in her family, she has learned to suppress her own needs, desires and ambitions and is often selfless in giving her time and attention to help raise her siblings. During the interview, she confided in me that her mother had recently moved to Ottawa, leaving her and her younger sisters in Toronto. She often feels that unlike other young women her age, she does not have the opportunity to socialize with friends. This was the first time this participant engaged in any community activities and she wanted to have similar experiences of young women of her age, beyond her household. She reached a point where she wanted to embrace her own desires and ambition and put her own needs before the needs of her families. As highlighted in the literature, this participant uses the Gashanti space to work through the complexities of her Somali-gendered identity and reclaim her personal autonomy while sharing a collective space with her peers.

*Participant 6* is a 21-year-old Somali woman, born and raised in Scarborough, Ontario. Her parents migrated to Canada from Somalia before she was born. She has three older siblings, one sister and two brothers who are all attending university. During the time of the interview, this participant was undergoing a personal transition of removing her *hijab* (Islamic headscarf). She confided that a year prior to the interview, she would wear her *hijab* in particular spaces. For example, when she was with friends, she would take off her *hijab*, and when she was in school, she would wear it. Eventually, she made the decision to stop wearing the *hijab* completely. Upon

doing this, she noticed that she was getting a lot of unwanted attention from men and started to feel unsafe in public. Similar to participants 2 and 3, this demonstrates the particular challenges visibly racialized Canadian women must face when navigating racist-sexist, and also Islamophobic, Canadian institutions and how this subsequently affects their performance of identity. Moreover, also like participants 2 and 3, and participant 1, participant 6 does this within a diasporic space; while wearing a hijab is one way in which Somali women can connect with their collective histories, religion, culture, and families, within the context of white, male normative Canada, doing so actually puts them at an increased risk for violence and marginalization. Also, in concert with past literature and other respondent testimonies, she spoke of a contested relation with her mother. In particular, she passionately described her good relationship with her older sister, who moved out of their family home to escape what she called an “overbearing and religious” mother.

*Participant 7* is a 20-year-old Somali woman born in Toronto to immigrant Somali parents. She has three sisters and one brother who are all significantly older than her. Her older siblings practically raised her. Her parents travel back to their native homeland very often, thus, she is less confined by her parents’ expectations. Interestingly, for her, growing up in the diaspora actually allotted her more freedom as it was linked to migratory trajectories that encouraged transnational parenting styles, which, she believed, gave her a stronger sense of freedom and agency. Moreover, this participant was the most comfortable of all the eight participants during the interview process. She was very self-aware and independent. She was comfortable with her identity as a Somali woman and wearing the *hijab* while also wearing western clothes like jeans. She is an avid consumer of social media and she has a part-time job. Arguably, this reveals the ways in which the migratory subjectivities of second-generation

Somali women can be further complicated by the presence of first-generation immigrant parents whose experiences and worldviews do not always translate into the diasporic context. Left on her own, this participant could more easily navigate her “hybrid” Canadian-Somali gender identity as she was not forced to reconcile her own experiences with that of her parents. This does not suggest, however, that Somali parents are the cause of their children’s misfortune. In contrast, it reveals, as suggested by previous literature, the sense of familial, geographical, and cultural rupture created by forced migration and the negative effects this then has on family dynamics within the context of the diaspora.

*Participant 8* is a 21-year-old Somali woman who was born and raised in Scarborough, Ontario. Her parents decided to move to Ottawa after she completed her first year of undergraduate studies while she decided to stay in Toronto with her aunt. Subsequently, her aunt is the mother figure in her life. In concert with past literature, this demonstrates how, despite Canadian racist-colonial family policies and discourses, diasporic Somali-Canadian women can draw on their collective histories to create and recreate family formations in Canada that align more so with notions of the “African Village;” troubling the prevailing ideology of the normative nuclear family, this participant attributed motherly and parental qualities to her aunt. Similar to participant 7 who also positively negotiated her hybrid identity within the context of the diaspora, participant 8 is very comfortable with her identity and how she sees herself in the future. She is also a very social person with a lot of friends. However, she did say that she grew up living in the shadow of a younger brother who was given more privileges than her. For example, she was expected to do house chores, while her brother was not. In concert with past literature, this suggests that the patriarchal culture of her Somali parents, likely confounded by the sexist culture of Canada at large, impacted her gendered sense of self.

## **B. Interview Process:**

Before beginning each interview, participants were read the interviewing guidelines approved by the York University Ethics Board and assured their identities would remain confidential. Participants were also given a copy of the Informed Consent Form to review and sign prior to each interview session. Once the interview started, participants were given the freedom to ask questions or express concerns about the interview process.

As noted earlier, the first interview session had to be cut short due to a participant's discomfort with being filmed. The interview and video recording were stopped as soon as the participant expressed discomfort, thus, I decided to only audio record the remaining interviews.

Field notes were taken during the interview process, while participants shared their life stories. Care was taken to watch for physical cues of discomfort and to note sentences, words, and phrases that might become useful at a later point in the interview. While it would be presumptuous to predict the emotional responses and outcomes of each interview, steps were taken to support participants in the case of powerful and emotional responses. This was done by sharing my own experiences and thoughts at certain points of the interview in an effort to show solidarity and understanding. I also prepared a list of carefully researched support associations and websites I thought would be helpful for participants in the future.

## CHAPTER 4

### Findings and Discussion

#### A. Findings:

Once the eight interviews were conducted, they were transcribed. Following this, using my field notes, I identified common themes across the interviews. The themes that originated from each interview are recorded in the “Themes” column on Table 1. In addition, common interview themes are color coded.

**TABLE 1**

Story	Themes
<p><i>"I always identify myself as a Black person, because that's who I surround myself with."</i></p> <p><i>"When I'm in that scientific science field, I don't really talk about my interests ...It's the makeup of the people. It's predominantly Asian, white, Male. It's like I haven't found anyone yet that I can relate to outside of that field."</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong sense of family</li> <li>- Difficult relationship with mother</li> <li>- Friendships made based on race rather than ethnicity</li> <li>- Problematic school experience</li> <li>- Strongly identifies with being Black</li> <li>- Lack of Somali identity</li> <li>- Lack of Canadian identity</li> <li>- Unclear memories of migration</li> <li>- Canadian sexist-racism</li> <li>- Community engagement through Gashanti UNITY-related activities</li> <li>- Realizes the value of school</li> </ul>
<p><i>"I do identify myself first as Somali, because I like the idea that I can speak a different language other than English."</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong sense of family</li> <li>- Difficult relationship with mother</li> <li>- Awareness of gender bias within family structure</li> <li>- Strong Somali identity</li> <li>- Lack of Canadian identity</li> <li>- Awareness of socio-economic status in school setting</li> <li>- Comfortable negotiating spaces across religion and ethnicity</li> <li>- Friendships made based on race, not religion</li> <li>- Active on social media</li> <li>- Moderate community engagement</li> </ul>
<p><i>"I feel like if I was a boy and I</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong sense of family</li> </ul>

<i>was the oldest, my life would not be same in the sense that he wouldn't be expected to do everything."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Difficult relationship with mother</li> <li>- High sense of responsibility towards siblings</li> <li>- Awareness of gender bias within family structure (as dictated by mother)</li> <li>- Matured at an early age</li> <li>- Friendships made based on ethnicity, not religion</li> <li>- Strong community engagement including Gashanti UNITY</li> <li>- Financial stability is important to take care of family.</li> </ul>
<i>"It's kind of like this juggling act of different identities and different ways to conform. Sometimes they are supportive and sometimes they are like mutually exclusive, wherein they're kind of fighting against each other in different contexts like the home."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong sense of family</li> <li>- Difficult relationship with mother</li> <li>- Strong sense of responsibility and family pressures</li> <li>- Strongly identifies with religion</li> <li>- Lack of Canadian identity</li> <li>- Strong Somali identity</li> <li>- Friendships made through community engagement</li> <li>- Friendships with first-generation Somalis</li> <li>- Active on social media</li> <li>- Ambiguous future plans</li> </ul>
<i>"I don't want to explain everything I do. Not everything I do is because I'm a Muslim or not, it's just me basically."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong sense of family</li> <li>- Difficult relationship with mother</li> <li>- Awareness of gender bias within family structure</li> <li>- Strong Somali identity</li> <li>- Lack of Canadian identity</li> <li>- Preference to invest in friendships with other Somali women</li> </ul>
<i>"I always describe myself as Black first. It's the easiest thing. It's the most identical ... Even though people think females, I think Black to me is the most easily identifiable way to categorize myself in a way."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong sense of family</li> <li>- Isolating school experience</li> <li>- Detachment from Somali culture</li> <li>- Support from online digital spaces</li> <li>- Friendships based on interest rather than race, religion, or ethnicity</li> <li>- Strong Canadian identity</li> <li>- Identifies strongly with being Black</li> <li>- Independent identity</li> </ul>
<i>"I feel like there are a lot of expectations. Like, you're a woman, so you have to do this. You're a girl, so you have to do this."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong sense of family</li> <li>- Good relationship with mother and father</li> <li>- Awareness of gender bias within the family structure</li> <li>- Feels pressure because of being a Somali woman</li> <li>- Strong Somali identity</li> <li>- Comfortable moving between different groups of friends</li> <li>- Active community engagement outside of Somali communities</li> <li>- No clearly defined plans for the future</li> </ul>
<i>"In my family we're Muslim/Islam first and Somali second."</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strong sense of family</li> <li>- Difficult relationship with mother and father</li> <li>- Strongly identifies with being Black</li> </ul>



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Strongly identifies with being Muslim first and foremost</li> <li>- Friendships based more on religion</li> <li>- Friendships predominantly with Somali women</li> <li>- Community engagement with other Somali women</li> <li>- No clearly defined plans for the future</li> </ul>
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Once I identified common themes among the interviews (Table 1), each theme was then categorized according to the research questions outlined in the introduction (table 2). These categories include: (a) Patriarchal Family Structure, (b) Canadian Racist-Sexism, (c) Friendships, (d) Identity and Religion, (e) Community Engagement, (f) School Experience, (g) Migration Stories, and (h) Future Plans.

**TABLE 2**

<b>RESEARCH QUESTIONS</b>	<b>CATEGORIES</b>	<b>THEMES</b>
How do young Somali Canadian women navigate past and present identities simultaneously within three distinct, but interconnected, socio-political terrains; local male-dominated Somali communities, white normative, androcentric Canada; and the diaspora.	<i>Family Structure</i> <i>Canadian Racist-Sexism</i> <i>Friendships</i> <i>Identity and Religion</i> <i>Community Engagement</i>	Sense of family; relationship with parents; friendships are based on similarity of gender, race, ethnicity; identifies with religion, race, ethnicity, and sometimes, being Canadian; community engagement based on religion, race, ethnicity.
How do the interconnectedness of these identities when it comes to their sense of racial, cultural, and gendered identification?	<i>School Experience</i> <i>Growing Up and Becoming</i> <i>Future Plans</i>	The sense of Canadian identity comes into play only in the context of access to resources and learning opportunities.
How are second-generation Somali women now carving out unique definitions of womanhood that bridge and complicate pre-existing gender, racial, national, and cultural identity categories?	<i>Family Structure</i> <i>School Experience</i> <i>Growing Up and Becoming</i> <i>Identity and Religion</i> <i>Community Engagement</i>	Difficult relationship with the mother; gender biases within the family structure, where all the pressure falls on the girls; preference for engaging with Somali communities more than other external Muslim communities.

## **B. Analysis:**

During the analysis phase, each participant was given a number to protect her anonymity and to help identify her responses. This part of the analysis will discuss the recurring themes presented in table 2:

### Patriarchal Family structure

Family structure and relationships played a major part in the ways that Somali women dealt with issues of gender and religion. 4 out of the 8 participants belonged to a family that included both a mother and a father. In some cases, the biological father was present, while in other situations the biological father was either not or only partially present. In 7 out of the 8 families, an older female sibling took on a parental role within the family. All participants indicated that strong family ties played a significant role in forming their identities. All but one participant said their mother puts enormous pressure on them to excel academically, while simultaneously expecting them to maintain the household. All of the interviewees reported that they, their sisters and their mothers did all the cooking, cleaning, and other household tasks, with some participants indicating that their older sister(s) helped them navigate familial pressures by taking on the role of the mother.

One major theme I found across interviews was that, while first-generation Somali women often develop tools to help their children succeed in Canada, in particular, emphasizing their educational and academic success, they still draw on patriarchal Somali norms to interpret their daughter's lives. This reveals the specific migratory subject positioning of Somali-Canadian women within the diaspora; within this context, second-generation Somali women are encouraged by their mothers to pursue educational trajectories in order to resist the kind of marginalization they faced after being forced to migrate. At the same time, however, participants

are expected to also fully adopt patriarchal Somali cultural values that, not only subjugate them as women, but clash with the emphasis their parents place on educational success. This reveals not the mothers' parental short-comings per se, but the particular struggles migrant families must face. The mothers of the women in this study were born and raised in a different socio-cultural milieu than their children and then confronted specific challenges associated with forced migration that their children either did not experience or do not remember. In turn, when these women try to translate their lived experiences and histories into their daughters' lives, there is an obvious disconnect caused by a temporal-spatial disjuncture in their family history.

While some of the participants often saw their mothers as figures of oppression who had unrealistic expectations for them, such a perspective signals, not a parental deficit on their mother's part, but intergenerational tensions that emerge between first-generation mothers and second-generation daughters living within the context of the diaspora. Based on their past experiences, Somali mothers have a specific idea of what a "proper" Somali woman is. In contrast, their second-generation daughters must negotiate these images alongside their hybrid identities, migratory subjectivity, and diasporic realities. In turn, many participants often understood themselves independent of (and sometimes alongside) the identity discourses adopted and enforced by their mothers. For example, in the case of *participant 7*, her mother expected her to get married after she received her undergraduate degree. However, the participant did not believe that she was ready to get married because she was on a journey of self-discovery. This source of tension between this participant and her mother reveals the ways in which familial relations forged within the context of the diaspora must constantly move between divergent world views and experiences. Not only does the participant's mother's expectations, however well meaning, fail to translate into the diasporic context, but the participant's beliefs themselves

may also be culturally unintelligible to her mother.

Two other participants also indicated having difficult and enduring relationships with their mothers:

Participant 1:

My mom, is completely the opposite in the way I think. Like she will....she's very.... like her thought process is different. So sometimes I feel like we're both thinking in two completely different ways,"

Participant 3:

"Yeah, my relationship with my mom is always tricky, but it's gotten really good now, because when I was younger we never saw eye to eye because I am a very sensitive person..."

The way in which both of these participants describe their relationships with their mothers is revealing of the cognitive dissonance that characterizes first- and second-generation immigrant relations; participant 1 claims that her and her mother have different "thought processes," while participant 3 states that her and her mother do not see "eye-to-eye." What these comments are getting at is the ways in which first-generation Somali mothers and second-generation Somali daughters develop different cultural cognitive maps as a result of growing up in divergent social milieus. In short, the former often interprets and understands the social world within the context of forced migration and as a Somali immigrant living in Canada, while the latter does so within the context of the diaspora and as a Somali-Canadian.

Similarly, all the participants felt pressured to perform household tasks and chores, along with their academic duties. In contrast, the same pressures were not placed on their brothers.

Participant 6:

“...just the way my mom would treat my brother and me, like when it comes to different things like household chores, or even like coming home at a certain time, curfews. I was thought that was absurd. ‘Cause like we’re both can be in a position where bad things can happen to us from society but because he’s a man and I am a woman, it’s treated very differently. I think the relationship I have with my parents is kind of the same like a lot of Somali families,”

Participant 5:

“My mom,... she was always making sure that like every mom, you know, you’re a girl, make sure you can cook, make sure you can do this, make sure you can do that, laundry,...all of that. I clean properly.”

“Being the oldest and having so many responsibilities and my sisters not picking up their slack is what’s getting in the way right now because like, the youngest is 13 and at 13 I was doing so much more than just following...I would say...my cousin at the time...around. Like I was the one who was actually doing stuff for the family. So, trying to do what I have to do, at the same time trying to pick up their slack, I guess it’s draining me.”

Participant 7:

“I mean growing up I don’t think I’ve ever seen my brother do any house work, whatsoever. And even now the only thing he does is... he cooks. And after he cooks, he doesn’t even clean. So, we have to do it.”

Now that Somali women, particularly those living in Canada, can have successful and lucrative educational and work careers, second-generation Somali women have gained an independence that was never allotted to their mothers. In turn, this creates significant tensions between Somali women and their children because their socio-cultural experiences do not “match up”. In this way, young Somali women challenge a common cultural practice within Somali families to transfer the father’s responsibility to care for his daughter(s) onto their husband upon marriage, thus rendering Somali women financially dependent on their husbands. While liberatory for these young women, such acts may clash with the gender cognitive maps of their mothers, who view marriage both as a cultural norm as well as a means for young women to ensure economic and social stability. In turn, this disjuncture created by the rupture in family

history caused by forced migration, creates tension and conflict within migrant families that second-generation Somali women must navigate within the contested space of the diaspora.

### Canadian Racist-Sexism

All participants felt that their identities were shaped by the racist-sexist culture of white, male normative Canadian society, therefore, these women try to avoid spaces in which they stand out racially. All participants expressed a strong affinity to making friends within local Black communities. One of the participants even suggested that while being Somali was important to her, she did not necessarily prefer to socialize with members of the Somali community, because of the restrictive demands placed on Somali women by communal elders. This demonstrates how Somali-Canadian women adopt and perform “blackness” in the Canadian context in order to navigate the contested space of the diaspora and thus come to terms with their migratory subjectivities, thereby beginning the process of remaking an empowered Somali gender identity. Safety and comfort were also important factors in helping them resist the overlapping and confounding oppressive and discriminatory effects of Somali cultural patriarchy and external institutional racist-sexism.

#### Participant 1:

“I guess in different spaces I feel like more Black, ‘cause I’m in an all-White space or I feel like more Muslim ‘cause I visibly am Muslim or I feel more like an immigrant...I guess it depends on where I am. I feel more of something based on the people surrounding me.”

“I operate completely fine in brown spaces. I used to be in rooms full of brown people ‘cause that’s what I was mostly raised around...like Indian, Pakistani, Desi people. So, like I really didn’t feel out of place. So I would say that sometimes I even spoke their language. To be honest I knew a lot of Urdu. I could pick it up or I would feel comfortable.”

#### Participant 8:

“I study cell biology and a lot of times with that kind of stuff, it's not that it's not discussable, it's just black women as a scientist is very difficult to find. I have yet to find another Somali girl, at least, that I've seen in my classes. It feels kind of alienating in a

way because I don't like to talk about what I do usually when I'm in certain spaces. Then when I'm in those spaces, I don't like to talk about what I'm doing outside of those spaces, do you know what I mean? When I'm in that scientific field, I don't really talk about my interests because of the make up of the space ... It's predominantly Asian, White and Male. It's like I haven't found anyone yet that I can relate to outside of that field”.

From these testimonies, it can be understood that some of the participants emphasize one aspect of their migratory subject positioning, and corresponding sense of identity, depending on the space they are in and how welcome and/or safe they feel. They might try to find a commonality with other marginalized groups with common experiences of and with Canadian racist-sexism or they might perform more strongly their Black identity as a way to subvert Whiteness and racism. In both instances, these women attempt to come to terms with the many cultural, national, and historical narratives that shape their lives and thus navigate the varied social terrains that constitute the complex matrix of domination in which they exist.

### Migration stories

While all participants' parents and/or older siblings had endured the difficulties of migrating from Somalia to Canada, they themselves were either too young to remember the journey or were born in Canada post-migration. Regardless of this, however, all the participants still identified more strongly with being Black and Somali than with being Canadian. Similarly, many of them offered thoughtful insights into how their family's migration experiences affected their lives. The migration stories that emerged from the interviews are as follows:

#### Participant 2:

“I just started to talk to my mom about that time because she dealt with a lot in that time and space and it's interesting to know”. “It was distinct moments in her life that she didn't like to talk about, so she didn't want to tell me about it.”

Participant 1:

“I was really, really young when we came. By the time we got to the States, or like we first kind of visited the US or came to the west, I was two, so I have absolutely zero recollection of the traveling or the migrating experience. My two other sisters remember the flight, the whole...I wouldn't say the immigrant stuff, but they remember coming to Canada, and not knowing where they were, and they remember like that whole experience. But like I, might as well have been born here coz I don't remember anything before Toronto and my brother being born.”

These migration stories highlight the intergenerational conversations and tensions that can arise between parents, particularly mothers, and daughters given the difference in the way they recall their migration experience. Most of the participants could not remember their journey from back home to Canada, however, they are aware of the sacrifices their parents made, especially their mothers, and the trauma they have experienced through that journey. In turn, most participants, while critical of many aspects of their family life, tried to bargain their identities in ways that placed, not their mothers and families at the center of their oppression and resistance, but a complex matrix of domination located within a socio-historical disjuncture created by forced migration. For many participants, the struggles they faced were linked to multiple hierarchies of oppression that emerged from their unique location within three divergent social terrains; patriarchal Somali family structures, racist-sexist Canadian society, and the hybridity of diasporic (non)belonging. Below, I address the ways in which these three terrains influence their familial relations, political affiliations, performances of blackness and Muslimness, friendships and support networks, and general sense of identity and belonging.



## Schooling Experience and Canadian Racist-Sexism

All participants felt that their Canadian identity was important when it came to accessing educational and learning opportunities. Participants also expressed an awareness of the fact that because they were born in/grew up in Canada, they have more privileges than their Somali and first generation counterparts. Two participants shared stories about the difficulties their parents faced when migrating to Canada and subsequently expressed gratitude that they did not have to go through the same thing. Despite this, however, participants also recognized the racist-sexist culture of white, male normative Canadian educational institutions and problematized their ability to take full advantage of the benefits and privileges of higher education.

Historically, education is said to have had an equalizing influence in modern democratic societies (Ghosh and Abdi, 2004). However, with economic globalization and the mass movement of people, specifically people from ‘third world countries’, the equalizing qualities of education are becoming increasingly problematized. Ghosh and Abdi further explain that:

...the globalization of difference in cultures, languages, value systems, modes, and methods of economic and business management, levels of aspirations and possibilities of failures, and individual and community relationships as well as the programs of education that would permeate many of these, all carry with them notions and realities of difference that will be, ipso facto, globalized. (p. 143).

Although education is perceived as leveling the playing field for all people, this has been proven to be untrue for racialized and marginalized communities (Dei, 1997, Ilmi 2012). Many of them experience discrimination and social exclusion when navigating the education system. My research reveals that young Somali-Canadian women experience racist-sexism in schools and do not see themselves represented in what they learn. As a result, although they show resilience in the sense that they still pursue higher education, they remained skeptical of such

educational and academic spaces.

Participant 2:

“You see....I am a Black women studying in a White male dominated field and I have to do thing to fit in. I make sure to always wear my reading glasses although I don’t have to so that I look smart.”

This demonstrates the unique and creative ways Black women in Canada negotiate racist-sexist spaces through specialized identity performances; for participant 8, wearing her glasses acted as a protective mechanism against prevailing racist beliefs that Black people are not smart enough to go to, and thus do not belong in, higher educational spaces. These spaces, moreover, are designated white and male through racist-sexist practices and belief systems. Similarly, by performing her identity in a way that offset the racist stereotypes attributed to black bodies, participant 8 was also able to, albeit partially, subvert the negative effects of dominant Canadian Black geographies that attempt to erase blackness from white institutions. I can relate to this participant’s sentiment in the sense that I also experienced similar forms of discrimination in the school system. In particular, I was advised by one of the Guidance Counselors to pursue Applied Courses, (then known as ‘General Courses’) instead of ‘Advance Courses’ which would have allowed me to pursue higher education. The Guidance Counsellor did not believe I was intelligent enough to do well in university, despite the fact that I obtained excellent grades.

### Friendships and political affiliations

Building positive and supportive friendships played a major role in helping participants navigate their migratory subjectivity and thus address questions of gender, race and religion within the context of the diaspora. However, due to the nature of their intersecting oppressions, they also found that fostering such relationships was a difficult and taxing process. Having

grown up and attended schools in immigrant-heavy localities in Toronto, the participants noted that during their formative years, they were more comfortable socializing with other new immigrant communities such as the Tamil community. They also explained that they preferred to make friends within their local Somali communities because many Muslims of Asian descent often questioned their faith based on their race. This reveals the ways in which religious communities can be divided by race, within the context of settler-colonial Canada due to prevailing colonial racial-ethnic discourses that function to segregate minorities among distinct racial-ethnic lines. Accordingly, second-generation Somali women who are both Black and Muslim must strategically learn to work against and through these distinctions when making friends.

Moreover, all participants indicated that they preferred socializing with other Black people; they felt solidarity with the Black community in general. In concert with existing literature, this reveals the ways in which Blackness functions within Canadian society to foster political affiliations forged around shared experiences of and with anti-black racism and how, within the context of the diaspora, African-ness and Blackness are often re-conceptualized in context specific ways. Similarly, participants also all noted that they felt comfortable in Black dominant circles because their Blackness did not “stick out”. This once again demonstrates the historical and cultural specificity of diasporic Blackness, since, within the Canadian context, being “Black” is something that participants had to negotiate in relation to racist-sexist institutions that function to normalize white, male ascendancy and marginalize and ostracize Black and other non-white bodies.

Interestingly, religion did not appear to take on the same function for participants: while many considered their religion to be important, they did not view it as a major determinant for

making friends. Furthermore, these participants consider the hijab as a personal choice and only one aspect of their Muslim faith and spirituality. These young women understand the way in which the hijab is hyper politicized by Western media, therefore, wearing it makes them even more vulnerable to islamophobia and racism. In turn, although the hijab is an important religious-cultural symbol for Somali women, many chose to either not wear one or to only wear one in certain environments.

Participant 1:

“I just feel safer around people who look like me.[...] I was at this taco place [...] the other day, or couple of days ago and someone made a comment like, I think it was a server or something like that. We were talking amongst ourselves with two other hijabi girls, one was a cousin and one was a family friend, and we were saying that oh look how whenever we hang out together people always look at us, but when we’re by ourselves no one looks at us coz we are by ourselves. [...] I wonder why white people...can walk around, it’s fine, but like five hijabis walk around and it’s a problem and it’s like...yeah.. you stick out and people are like why they hang out together or why they don’t have a more diverse group of friends, that’s why do they stick together. You go out in friend groups too, you hang around with people you feel comfortable around and that look like you and that share your experiences.”

Participant 3:

“Like I tend to get very defensive in terms of engaging with that type of conversations like, about my religion because I feel like it’s such a personal thing. So when people are asking me to define things for them, share things with them, stereotypical things like all women are oppressed and like Oh, what does hijab mean to you and stuff, I feel like those are things I won’t really discuss because those are personal to me. But just in general stuff like debunking what Islam is, is stuff I will engage in, but even then I don’t really, because you can Google everything.”

This demonstrates the vulnerability that comes with wearing the hijab for Muslim women (Jamil, 2012) in a society in which Islamophobic attitudes are becoming more and more widespread. However, there is also a complex visibility and invisibility associated with being

Black and Muslim. Wearing the hijab makes Black Muslim women hyper-visible in White dominated spaces and their skin color/Blackness makes them invisible in non-Black/Brown Muslim spaces. These complexities and tensions produce multilayered forms of oppression and erasure in which the religious identity of Black Muslim women is often delegitimized by their non-black, Muslim peers. In concert, as Black Muslims, many participants expressed feeling ostracized or alienated by non-Black Muslim communities.

Participant 5:

“I did go to Islamic school where there were like other Muslims who were non-East African, but those friendships never really stayed.”

This demonstrates how the various identities of second-generation Somali women are renegotiated in relation to their migratory subject positioning within a historically specific matrix of domination; within the diasporic-Canadian context, Blackness and Muslim-ness materialize and rematerialize in divergent and unique ways based on the specific cultural meanings attributed to each identity category. This, in turn, affects the kind of political allegiances and friendships they can create around race and religion.

While this ultimately created additional tensions around their gendered, religious, and racialized identities, all eight participants indicated that by building friendships with other Somali girls who faced similar conflicts, they could begin making sense of their migratory subjectivity and complex positionality within both Canada and the diaspora. Many participants cited the Gashanti UNITY as a space in which they could foster such connections and thus begin remaking an empowered Somali gendered identity forged around their multiple positionalities, diasporic reality, and the many struggles they faced within transnational, extralocal, and local matrices of domination. Participants claimed that the diverse, affirmative, and safe environment

of Gashanti allowed them to escape the daily pressures of being a Somali-Canadian Muslim woman caught between multiple and divergent social terrains; racist-sexist Canada, the diaspora, and patriarchal Somali culture, and thus begin to work through the multiplicity and complexity of their own lives.

Participant 3:

“I feel like it was the Canadian-ness of it [Gashanti]. I could connect because it wasn’t just distinctly Somali but it was like navigating Somali identity, Somali experience within the North American context. So that played heavily into how I could connect to it. Like you would do a lot of Gashanti developed arts-based programming, things like leadership, things that were pertinent to being a Canadian. And also, they [Gashanti] did a lot of Somali programming for people .....new comers. And a lot of Somali kids are now like, first generation born in Canada and don’t speak the language, so, it’s a place where you can connect to people like yourself.”

In the case of two participants, their friends’ circle included their own siblings; by socializing with their own kin, it was easier for them to negotiate stigmas related to gender.

Participant 1:

“So, I have two older sisters. I would say we have a pretty good relationship. ...we’re pretty close in age. So...the sisters are pretty close. Whenever people see us – we hang out a lot together – and people who don’t know us actually think we’re friends coz we hang out together, maybe it’s weird, we hang out together all the time. We love it, it’s nice. I think when I met you and I met people within Gashanti.... I definitely felt like it was new coz I was meeting Somali people. I don’t meet Somali people outside of masjid and in university. It [Gashanti] was neutral. There was no...I could do whatever I want, I could start new.”

This demonstrates how second-generation Somali women often create bonds and friendships with their siblings and peers as a protective mechanism against internal oppressive forces within male dominated Somali culture and external oppressive forces within racist-sexist, settler-colonial Canada. This, in turn, allowed them to better navigate the different spaces they occupy

in the diaspora and the many hierarchies of oppression they face. Within Gashanti UNITY, respondents cited feeling as if they were a part of a community of other Somali-Canadian women who understood the sense of rupture and alienation they felt within the diaspora. Within this space, Somali-Canadian women are able to find support and share their stories with those who have similar experiences and histories. This allows them to foster political affiliations within the contested space of the diaspora and thus begin to work towards personal and collective agency.

### Hybrid Identities

As Stuart Hall (1990) claims, identity is a ‘production’, one that is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation (p. 222). This understanding of identity is useful when discussing diasporic realities, where changes in lived experiences bring about shifting political-cultural identities. As Anver Saloojee (2004) points out, in the case of Canadian identities that are based on hyphenations (e.g., Somali-Canadian), there is discrimination and exclusion from and of various groups. This speaks to the migratory subjectivity of second-generation diasporic Somali women and the subsequent complex matrix of domination and multiple hierarchies of oppression they must navigate. There is no *ONE* racial, religious, and/or ethnic identity to which these women belong. Consequently, their sense of self is merged across national and social borders and spatial and temporal boundaries, materializing and rematerializing within the context of the diaspora; a space rife with contradictions and divergent historical and cultural narratives. As Nef-Saluz (as cited in Saloojee, 2004) theorizes, because their identity emerges within a historical disjuncture caused by migration in which racial, ethnic, and religious ‘identities’ are subjectively lived “within and through, not despite, difference” (p. 44), forging political affiliations with other Black, Muslim, and/or Somali people

can be very challenging.

This is why reorienting diasporic blackness to a migratory subjectivity can help us understand the complex matrix of domination in which second-generation Somali-Canadian women live. Members of the African Diaspora are identified as hyphenated African-Canadians, which, Castells (as cited in Salojee, 2004) claims, has promoted a “defensive, assertion of identity” (p. 417). While most Canadians view African-Canadians as hyphenated subjects (distinguishing between their geographical past and present modes of self), the fact remains that there are other important layers of identity that are not only relevant to how they experience living in Canada as Black people, but also complicates and contests a singular hyphenated sense of self. For example, young Somali-Canadian women are not just that one hyphenated identity; they are also, Black-Canadian and Black-Muslim, which are all relevant to their experiences in Canadian society.

#### Participant 1

“I was put in spaces where I didn’t really fit well with the Pakistani Muslims that made up the group.”

“Like people think that Black people are all a separate category and that women are a separate category and you think like Muslim people are a separate category, when people don’t realize that people can be all of those at the same time.”

The point that is being made by this participant is that, not only are there multiple hyphenated identities that constitute her subjectivity, but that, within the context of the diaspora, they might be lived or performed all at the same time, yet in divergent and inconsistent ways. In short, young Somali-Canadians cannot occupy one single identity. These issues have to be considered if we want to understand the formation of new identities for second-generation Somali women in Canada and the ways in which they occupy an intersection of oppression and resistance.

All the participants in this study identified themselves as Black and preferred to socialize and



engage in community activities with other Black people. Overall, their Somali ethnicity was not considered as important as their Black identity. This reflects the varying forms of marginalization they experience based on their diasporic subject positioning within a transnational matrix of domination, and how, as a result, they simultaneously perform Blackness, Muslim-ness, and the other facets of their identity, in convergent and divergent ways. As indicated by the quotes below, one of the participants clearly identified an instance in school, in which she felt like her race was much more of an identifier than her religion.

Participant 4:

“I wasn’t treated in anyway for being Muslim, but I was treated in a way for being Black. Like, my principal was ready to get rid of me in grade 9. He could not wait till I turn sixteen to kick me out of that school.”

“It was just the fact that I was Black, because back in the day when I was growing up, Somali wasn’t really a big thing like it is now...being Somali”

“They labelled me as a trouble-maker, off the bat”

These comments speak to the hyper-visibility of her Black body in the school setting and the way she was treated by White dominant bodies in position of power. This emphasizes the saliency of skin color and race, and her awareness of the hyphenated identities she occupies; she is able to consciously decipher the various ways in which her multiple positionalities yield complex identity formations that materialize and rematerialize in racist-sexist Canadian institutions in complex, inconsistent, and divergent ways. In turn, she articulates a politics of self that aligns with her migratory subjectivity and associated social location within the diaspora.

### Community Engagement:

Drawing on the above testimonies, we can see that an understanding of identity as multiplicitous is central to political organizations that occupy a rhetorical space of postcoloniality, such as Gashanti UNITY, and function to reimagine subjectivity for transformative and emancipatory purposes. Accordingly, all the participants indicated a strong sense of attachment to the Gashanti UNITY space. To them, Gashanti UNITY is a place where they can express themselves without judgment and persecution. They feel at ease with their fellow Somali sisters and enjoy participating in Gashanti activities that encouraged them to engage in difficult conversations about race, gender, and identity that they felt they could not engage in within the patriarchal environment of their home life and the racist-sexist culture of Canadian institutions. One participant confessed that coming to the Gashanti space helped her feel less isolated and depressed because she felt motivated and positive when she was in this space and around other young women like her.

#### Participant 3:

“I feel like it was the Canadian-ness [or neutrality] of it (Gashanti UNITY). Like in terms of ...I could connect because it wasn't just distinctly Somali but it was like navigating Somali identity, Somali experience within the North American context. So that played heavily into how I could connect to it. Like you would do a lot of Gashanti developed arts based programming, things like leadership, things that were pertinent to being a Canadian. And also they did a lot of Somali programming for people that were not that ...you know...yeah new comers. And a lot of Somali kids are now like, first generation born in Canada and don't speak the language, so, it's a place where you can connect to people like yourself.”

This demonstrates the ways in which Gashanti UNITY occupies the rhetorical space of “postcoloniality”; within this domain, second-generation Somali women can encounter the sense of rupture created by forced migration by coming to terms with their often conflicting identities and reclaiming their many histories, voices, and narratives. Within Gashanti UNITY, Somali-Canadian women confront the epistemological violence associated with existing within a liminal

space constituted by complex matrices of domination and divergent modes of representation and identification. In short, by creating a space in which second-generation Somali Canadian women can express themselves and connect with other women who exist within and across the three social terrains discussed throughout this paper; white, male normative Canada, patriarchal Somali culture, and the diaspora, Gashanti UNITY allows second-generation Somali women to reimagine their hyphenated identities in a way that aligns with their subjectivities.

Social media and digital spheres also provided an important outlet in which participants could foster and find supportive communities. Through this medium, they were able to connect with other Somalis and like-minded people in other parts of the world.

Participant 3:

“I personally use it and I connect with a lot of people through that. Oh yeah, I guess that’s another...like I meet a lot of people online through talking about these kind of similarities and experiences. So that’s another different space for me to connect with people outside of my own personal network. So that’s a space where I met a lot of different people going through similar things from different parts of the world. And that’s a space for me to do that. And also physical spaces, like school, when we’re chilling out in each other’s houses and stuff like that.”

Participant 2:

“A lot of it was online. It was a collective of different outlets, reading, critical thinking about things. I can break down obviously who you are based on a certain area, like how you view yourself politically, how you view yourself economically, how you view yourself spiritually. All those types of things were mainly influenced by me just reading and getting into different outlets and reaching different platforms through digital spaces because that just gave me more information into the areas that I found most interesting and through those avenues, I was able to really see what I like and what I really define myself.”

Participant 1:

“I think on Periscope is where I saw, goodness gracious, Toronto became super small, through that app, number one, and I guess I have seen other people through social media how it creates connectivity. It’s interesting ‘cause I do feel like sometimes, especially Somali people, I feel like the Somalis are the biggest Diaspora in the world.”

This reveals the ways in which second-generation Somali Canadian women do not necessarily

perform community engagement the same way as their older generation. My peers and I who are several years older than the participants in my research had to attend community events and initiatives, while the younger generation are using social media to be engaged and participate in community life. Their communities are larger and go beyond the Somali community thanks to the internet. They are connecting with diverse people with whom they share similar interests. Despite these differences, however, we can see that Somali-Canadian women have long tried to resist social injustice in creative and complex ways. While my generation sought to disrupt the racist-sexist, Islamophobic, and anti-black ideologies entrenched within Canadian institutions by carving out new and transformative spaces within such domains, our younger sisters are now using social media to subvert these same ideologies. In both instances, Somali-Canadian women mobilized spaces of social and political transformation that function to disrupt the multiple hierarchies of oppression they face within a complex matrix of domination.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **Discussion**

The goal of this study is to investigate how Somali and Canadian identities affect second-generation Somali women in their processes of self-actualization. This research was born out of the need to address the ways in which Somali-Canadian women negotiate their multifaceted identities within the context of their geographic upbringing, their race, their ethnicity, and their religion. I have demonstrated that racist-sexist institutions in white, male normative Canada, patriarchal family structures within Somali culture, and the contested space of the diaspora, are key determinants in defining the identities of these women, their family relationships, political affiliations, friendships, and community engagement. Because of the multiplicity, complexity, and historical specificity of these women's experiences within translocal, local, and extralocal matrices of domination, I believe it is important to center their voices as individuals with multiple hyphenated identities.

All the participants came from families where they were one of many siblings. Excluding two participants, all other participants said that their fathers were not part of their family, either because of divorce or because their father was simply not present. In turn, the Somali mothers of the eight participants became the enforcers of the rules within the family structure. However, these mothers still abided by the patriarchal norms of Somali culture, often making their daughters responsible for all the domestic chores, while placing no such expectations on their sons. All the participants indicated feeling more pressured by their mothers than their fathers.

I have argued that this reveals an intergenerational gap between second-generation Somali women and their immigrant parents that stems from the sense of familial and historical rupture caused by forced migration. Traditionally, Somali womanhood is measured based on

how well a woman looks after her husband and house and how many children she bears (Gardner & El Bushra. 2004). While such beliefs may hold social and cultural value for Somali mothers, I have suggested that they do not translate well into the diasporic-Canadian context. While North American notions of “emphasized femininity” also tend to emphasize domestic and maternal traits, Western ideologies of individualism, liberalism, and productivity also place tremendous pressure on women to engage in unpaid labour (Connell, 1987; Smith, 2005; Mitchell, 2014). In this context, women are expected to juggle the “double shift” and simultaneously be “good” mothers, wives, and workers. Accordingly, womanhood in these contexts is performed in divergent ways when compared to Somali culture.

This is not to suggest, however, that Somali-Canadian women are also not pressured to do well in school and work. Due to Canada’s long-standing history of colonialism, xenophobia, and racism, first-generation Somali mothers often place significant value on educational and financial success in the hopes that their daughters can avoid the same racialized poverty and economic precariousness that they experienced after migrating. Importantly, this is different than the work and family pressures faced by non-diasporic Canadian women. In the context of the diaspora, competing work and family demands do not materialize in the form of the “double shift” but as a confounded pressure to simultaneously resist white, male normative Canada, while also conforming to Somali patriarchal norms. As a result, in addition to being subjected to culturally incompatible domestic expectations, the young women in my study are also expected to do well in their educational and professional lives. Unlike their Canadian peers, where this pressure stems from Canadian ideologies about work and productivity, the pressure for these women is linked to their parents’ past experiences of and with racism and their subsequent need to protect their daughters from similar injustices. In turn, where Canadian women are able to

understand their simultaneous work and family demands within prevailing cultural discourses of “modern womanhood” (Mitchell, 2014), Somali-Canadian women can only do so by working through and against divergent social cognitive maps. As a result, many second-generation Somali women have a different idea of Somali womanhood and personal success than their parents, and their priorities have changed over the years.

Accordingly, second-generation Somali women have difficulties navigating their familial terrains and mothers’ expectations; these women and their mothers’ worldviews, gender cognitive maps, and life experiences are located in divergent socio-geographical and migratory trajectories that must be constantly reconciled and renegotiated within the context of the diaspora. Second-generation Somali women want to reimagine and express their own version of “*Somalinimo*” even though it may clash with their parents’ historically specific versions of Somali culture and subsequently create conflict within their homes. For instance, in line with prevailing Western ideologies of identity, some of the participants I interviewed believed it was more important for them to grow as individuals, travel and be independent thinkers before settling down and having a family. Because the latter goals are held in high regard within the Somali community, while the former goals align more with Western notions of self-actualization and individualism, these women’s choice to prioritize the former over the latter often created tensions between them and their mothers.

It is important to note that, although in general, Somali mothers uphold patriarchal norms, they still exercise agency and are empowered enough to be self-determined and make decision for their families. This is demonstrated by the fact that many of them consciously and purposely negotiated their restricted socio-economic positions as negatively, racialized immigrants in white normative Canada, and acquired skills that would help them to improve their children’s

educational success. This, in return, enabled their daughters to also have the agency to resist the racist-sexist culture of Canadian institutional spaces and thus pursue different aspirations and objectives than their mothers.

All participants indicated that they prefer socializing and engaging in community activities where they could strengthen their ties with other Black women (who were not necessarily Somali or Muslim). Their racial identity comes to the forefront when these young women are in non-Black spaces; they have learned to embrace their Blackness as a means to resist White supremacy and anti-Black racism. I have argued that this speaks to the ways in which Blackness functions within Canadian society to foster political allegiances rooted in common experiences of and with institutionalized racism, thereby revealing the socio-historical specificity of diasporic Blackness and the importance of reading race as one function of Somali-Canadian women's migratory subjectivities. Similarly, these women's religion and ethnicity were also negotiated in complex ways based on the specific socio-historical realities of racist-sexist Canada. In some cases, for example, being Somali or being Muslim is seen as a hindrance that participants thought added to the social stigma perpetuated by prevailing anti-Muslim public discourses in Canadian society (Ilmi, 2012).

The following statement by one of the participants captures this experience:

Participant 1:

"Like it really depends on the kind of spaces I'm in. Around other Muslim women, even like visible Muslims... I don't feel like I need to do or I need to put on anything, but around strangers I feel like I do need a...act in accordance or there is certain things I need to overcome to even have a conversation. I personally do not live my life to prove anything to anybody, especially White people."

This demonstrates how the young women of this study face multiple and shifting hierarchies of oppression that extend across historical, cultural, geographical, and social borders in ways not



true for their mothers and Canadian peers. Within this context, the various identities of their migratory subjectivities materialize and rematerialize in and across various social terrains and within transnational, extralocal, and local matrices of domination. As a result, they experience cultural and familial alienation, while also having to battle racist-sexism in Canadian institutions and work through divergent historical and cultural narratives within the contested space of the diaspora.

Taken together, my findings reveal that, as identity, oppression, and resistance shift and transform across time, space, and history, the image of Somali women must also shift to capture the rise of diasporic Somali communities and migratory subjectivities. In order to mobilize such an image, participants in this study often developed and adopted frameworks for understanding, interpreting, and transforming fixed racial, gender, religious, and or cultural identities within the rhetorical space of postcolonality and through associated self-organized and grass-root communities like Gashanti UNITY. In turn, they were able to move towards self-assurance and recognition. Gashanti UNITY provides a space for younger Somali Canadian women to self-identify while legitimatizing and validating, their personal experiences of and with oppression. As a result, they can begin to move towards personal and collective agency.

Within the transformative and self-actualizing space of Gashanti UNITY, these young women are creating their own version of feminism which considers their cultural and religious identities. Such a reconceptualization of feminism acts in accordance with Nigerian scholar Mary Kolawole's (2002) critique of feminism and purported alternative of "womanism". She argues that "many versions of feminism leave out culture" and that, "the most acceptable alternative appears to be womanism." (p. 95). Kolawole draws upon Alice Walker's definition of womanism and states that it "emphasizes cultural relevance and an interest in issues that concern Black

people parripassue, of which gender is only an aspect” (p. 95). Womanism, in turn, can be thought of as a feminist theoretic forged around a migratory subjectivity. Accordingly, in order to embrace the postcolonality of Gashanti UNITY’s political promise, women in this space are encouraged to reimagine their gendered Somali identity in a way that it is informed by their personal location and experiences within the context of the diaspora.

The Gashanti UNITY space also provides an environment in which second-generation Somali-Canadian women can understand themselves, not just as Black-Somali women, but as Muslim, “feminist” women. Through photography, filmmaking, storytelling, and creative writing, these women can come to grips with their spirituality in concert with other like-minded women and inform themselves of Islamic teachings and what this means to them (as women).

Within the Gashanti’s space, we discuss authentic Islamic teachings (Hadith) in order to distinguish between the pronouncements of the Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) and unauthentic pronouncements by some Muslim scholars which have departed from original teachings. Many of the original Islamic teachings were empowering and accorded many rights to Muslim women, however, there are interpretations that are patriarchal and discriminatory towards women (Al-Sharmani, 2014). These discussions have allowed Gashanti members to reexamine some of the teachings they have been raised with so that they are able to worship on their own terms.

Second-generation Somali women affiliated with Gashanti UNITY are encouraged to move beyond the multilayered oppression they face, as Black and Muslim women, to a place of empowerment where they could improve their social and financial conditions, while simultaneously addressing important questions of race, culture, religion, class, and gender. It is a place of continuous learning and reimagining oneself in ways that reconcile multiple and

conflicting identities.

#### **A. Limitations of the study:**

The main methodological limitation of this study is its small sample size. Based on the responses of only eight participants, the findings of this study cannot be generalized to reflect young Somali-Canadian women at-large.

Although I have enjoyed conducting this study and I have learned a great deal from the women I interviewed, the sensitive and emotional nature of the research topic also often presented difficulties in the interviewing process. It was particularly difficult to hear about some of the participants' family conflicts and tensions, the intergenerational issues between mothers and daughters and the way these issues impacted on the young women in the study. Furthermore, the age of the participants was restricted to between 20 – 26 years. As such, the ideas, views and experiences shared represent a faction of the Somali female Diaspora population in Toronto.

Another limitation was the lack of video footage which would have allowed documentation of the physical cues and body languages. In other cases, some of the participants wore their hijab, while others did not. Video footage would have allowed for these physical nuances to be captured and would have added a wealth of knowledge to the ways in which the participants identify themselves as Muslim, Black and Somali women.

During the analysis process, I realized that there were multiple areas that would benefit from further examination which my research scope could not cover. For example, an interesting topic to look at would be the extent of the influence of Arab culture on Somali identity. Another topic of research to further investigate is the intergenerational tensions between mothers and daughters and how that is negotiated by second-generation Somali women within the context of

the diaspora. One of the issues that I observed during this research, is that most of the participants did not have a good command of the Somali language and given that language is crucial to accessing Somali ways of being (Ilmi, 2014), it would be interesting to know if the lack of Somali language skills among second-generation Somali women has any bearing on their identity formation.

## **CONCLUSION**

This research presented and analyzed the experiences of second-generation Somali women in Toronto and argued that there is a significant gap in research about young Somali-Canadian women, and the way they utilize different strategies to manage their multiple and hyphenated identities in transnational, extralocal, and local matrices of domination in an effort to negotiate transformative spaces for themselves. Through organizations like Gashanti UNITY, with their ‘Anchored in Our Culture, Focused on Our Future’ motto, young Somali women have taken ownership of their own narratives, identities, and migratory subjectivities, and shared their experiences and aspirations with other like-minded diasporic women. This research sought to examine and understand the experiences of young self-identified Black, Muslim, Somali, Canadian women, drawing on an interdisciplinary theoretical framework, as well as Black feminist thought. It highlights ways in which these young women resist and subvert multiple forms of oppression, including, racism, Islamophobia, xenophobia and sexism.

This research revealed that second-generation Somali-Canadians living in Toronto face serious and multifaceted challenges when navigating the intergenerational gap between their

immigrant parents and their Canadian peers and often must negotiate their own shifting identities in response to those inconsistent cultural landscapes. Self-identified young, Somali, Muslim, Black women, living in a society, where racism, Islamophobia, and male domination are everyday experiences, also face additional challenges due to their gender and race but also due to the patriarchal aspects of Somali culture. In short, within the context of these women's lives, the social terrains of white, male normative settle-colonial Canada, the diaspora, and patriarchal Somali culture, merge to create a unique matrix of domination which Somali-Canadian women must resist and subvert. These are all forces against which they must work to establish their own identities.

However, as my research demonstrates, Somali Canadian women are increasingly determined not to allow these challenges to limit them. The young Somali women, who participated in my study as well as most of the women in my own circles, are highly successful in diverse fields and are leaving a mark on the Canadian social landscape. Women such as, Huda Hassan, a PhD candidate and social commentator; lead singer of Cold Specks, Ladan Hussein; Idil Abdillahi, Assistant Professor of Ryerson school of social work; Riya Jama who is a diasporic Somali visual storyteller. Blogger and Journalist, Sarah Hagi, to name the few, are all great examples of Somali excellence and achievement. These women are taking up space and creating space for other women and it is truly inspiring to witness their work, confidence, bravery and creativity.

As a Somali woman myself, I am given the gift of documenting and telling the stories of my fellow women. There are stories to be told and heard, voices to be emancipated, truths to be searched and revealed, and misconceptions to be broken and clarified. As, June Jordan says, "We are the ones we have been waiting for."

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