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## UNPACKING SELF AND SILENCE: LOOKING INWARD, LOOKING OUTWARD, LOOKING THROUGH

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**Abstract:** *Looking inward* as a mother, I see that autobiographical narrative inquiry has further deepened my understanding that my children's dual identity (Muslim Canadians) is not breaking them apart, rather putting them together. *Looking outward* as a researcher, poetic representation has given me a voice where, instead of fearing silence, I am able to "inhabit a more ambiguous and flexible sense of self" (Boler, 1999, p. 176). I am able to act as an interpreter between the chaos of my experiences and an assembly of unbroken monologues and sporadic dialogues. Finally, *looking through* as an amateur poet, I practice poetry "as a method of inquiry to move into [my] own impossibility, where anything might happen—and will" (St. Pierre, 2005, p. 973). I create opportunities for meaning making and insights as my stories and poems resonate for others, and in how my stories inform, enhance, and deepen parents' and educators' knowledge and conceptualizations of an inclusive school community.

**Keywords:** autobiographical narrative inquiry; poetic representation; minority mother; mother stories, dual identity, inclusive curricula

## Looking Inward: Unpacking a Mother's Love

*The moment a child is born, the mother is also born. She never existed before, the woman existed, but the mother, never. A mother is something absolutely new.*

*(Rajnish, cited in Tate, 2013, p. 167)*



*Figure 1. Momina and Irteqa Khan. Peshawar, Pakistan. 1996*

“Mother,” a tiny voice whispers from the womb. “Your tender caresses and euphonious whispers assure me that this world is beautiful and welcoming.... what can I do other than rejoice in this cozy niche of mine?” This is the voice I conceived of and felt as a mother, well before my child had taken his first step in the world. When the time came and his lively cries were heard, the little baby now outside, weakly opened his eyes to see the world. As soon as the nurse congratulated my husband and placed our child in his hands, my husband kissed our son’s forehead and cleared his throat for the deliverance of a sacred rite. Tilting our child’s tiny right ear to his lips, he delivered an *adhan*<sup>1</sup> brightly and resonantly. This rite symbolized our son’s entry into the human world and into a Muslim family, and laid

a straight path for him in terms of humanity and religious faith for the rest of his life. In that moment, with the *adhan* resounding at the forefront, *Allah*<sup>2</sup> became his.

Allah is the Greatest,  
 I bear witness that there is no God besides Allah,  
 I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah,  
 Come to prayer,  
 Come to success,  
 Allah is the Greatest,  
 There is no God besides Allah. (Adhan, n.d.)

Hunger and the attachment bond drove the child to me as his mother, with whom he began an outer-body relation of love, expression, and reliance. When I held my child, kissed his head, and thanked Allah, tears unconsciously flowed from my eyes. I envisioned my own mother, my father, siblings, and family who were seven seas and thousands of miles away in Pakistan. From that moment on, so far away from family, we became our child's everything: his father, mother, grandparents, aunt, uncle, and cousins. What was different for our fourth child was that, unlike his older siblings, he was born on Canadian soil, among Canadians, and during a Canadian spring. Every new day as he grew into a young boy in his Canadian home, my son was nurtured by our love as parents, Urdu<sup>3</sup> lullabies, visits to the mosque, and traditional cuisine. During celebrations of Eid,<sup>4</sup> he received guests to our home with his cute "Assalamu Alaikum"<sup>5</sup> and "Allah Hafiz,"<sup>6</sup> mimicking the accent of his siblings, subsisting comfortably in the sanctuary that was his home in Canada.

Then, a day came when he stepped foot away from us and into a new world, his first day of school. For this child, whose everything was us and us alone, it was difficult and scary to let him go. My mind was inexplicably brimming with questions this day:

- How can I leave him with a teacher who does not know anything about him?
- How can she possibly understand him as much as I do?
- Will she be able to recognize the difference between his shyness and his struggle to express his thoughts and emotions?
- Will she have time to understand his silence as he cannot speak and comprehend English?
- Will she put enough effort to get through all the layers of his identity, to learn about his family background, and try to know him?
- Will she know how precious and vulnerable this gift I am sharing with her is?

One day my son came home from school and spoke to me in our secret language, the language of mothers and children, a language in which eyes speak more than words. As

I studied his eyes and face, my son took out his lunch box from his backpack, and started eating. He was hungry. Once he was eating comfortably, he said, "Mama, please don't pack me potato cutlets for lunch from now on."

Speaking in a curious voice as I reminded him how much he loves potato cutlets, I asked, "How come you don't want to take them to school anymore?"

He said, "Cuz no other kids in my classroom bring them for lunch." In that particular moment, I found myself dwelling in a contested space, experiencing I am sure the same mysterious feeling my son felt each time he opened his lunch box at school.

I dwell in contested spaces  
the betwixt and between  
constantly surprised  
by twists and turns  
views and vistas  
fission and fusion

Morning, as usual,  
in the kitchen  
beckons the thrumming of pots  
boiling of earth's edible wares  
the fry pan sizzles  
aroma of masala lingers in every nook  
pinch of savory spices and herbs mixed  
tantalizing desi fried potato cutlets ready  
the gardening of lunches, and  
clicking of a gratified lunchbox

In sleep wiped from early eyes  
making a motion down the stairs, as usual,  
asking about his lunch for the school day  
*What are you making, mama?*  
Fried potato cutlets, your favorite  
(refusal to accept the known)  
*No, I don't want to take these to school*  
(request to embrace the unknown)  
*Can I have pasta instead?*  
But it's what you love, my son  
*I do, but I don't*  
opening the lunch box at home  
is different from opening it at school  
*No one, none of my friends, brings it for lunch*

Moment of silence, awkward spaces of mothering  
 unsettling emotions, into the abyss of the bizarre  
 in between spaces filled with uncertainty  
 realizing my son is making sense of his duality  
 grade two, a process of self discovery  
 seeing self in relation to self and to others

Identity negotiations in a cold white land  
 Stem from what others think of me  
 Others' from whom I look different  
 in a struggle of self legitimation  
 not only color, race, religion, and language matter  
 but also and even  
 a potato cutlet

In my son's refusal to take a potato cutlet in his lunchbox, I heard the unspoken words, "Mother, this world is so very different from the one of which you inspired me to dream. It judges me on the basis of 'who I am' and treats me based on the stratification of my color, race, religion, ethnicity, beliefs, culture, language and accent."

In my heart I responded, "I know my child, how torn you are between your two worlds of identity. I promise you that I will teach you how to see the beauty in broken things. I promise you that I will teach you not to let your silence make the loudest noise. I promise you that I will teach you it is okay to feel weak and scared because, when we feel the weakest and the most defeated, we are not breaking apart, we are just transforming into who we are meant to be. I promise you, my son, that I will relay your message of identity struggle to everyone who has a role to play in your life until you learn how to stand up for yourself and speak through your own voice."

I am a mother who has carried each of my four babies in a cozy niche inside me for nine months; my blood runs in them. My bonding with my babies began when no other bonding existed for them, from conception to the umbilical cord, from feeling the joy of them kicking up their legs inside me to the fear of quiet movements, from hearing silent calls

***"My bonding with my babies began when no other bonding existed for them, from conception to the umbilical cord, from feeling the joy of them kicking up their legs inside me to the fear of quiet movements, from hearing silent calls inside my womb to loud cries after they opened their eyes in the new world."***

inside my womb to loud cries after they opened their eyes in the new world. No one in this world can understand, love and protect them more than I can, as a mother. I am a mother of four Canadian children who, for the past 18 years, have called Canada “home.” As a minority parent raising children with multiple identities, cultures, nationalities, languages, and beliefs, I have experienced, through my lived stories, how complex integration and the process of blending and balancing identities can be. My experiences have shaped my understanding in a narrative manner; either being a law-abiding Canadian, or a mother helping my children with homework, or a former educational assistant in the school system, I have diligently followed social, political, institutional, dominant, standard, and structured stories presented to me. Somehow faithfully following along led me to practice structured silences without fully knowing it. My children’s experiences of being colored and minority Canadians on the school landscape and in the school curriculum bumped into my silences.

I vividly remember times in my graduate education classes when teachers would share their stories and experiences of children and families. One colleague said that the goal of teachers should be to treat and see children equally, to teach them in a “colorblind” way. In that instance, I began constructing meaning out of my personal lived experiences as a minority mother. I wanted to request, as a mother, to please invite me into your classroom, create a space for my voice, and present me with the choice of whether or not I would like you to teach my child in a colorblind way. I wanted to tell that teacher that I would like her to be colorblind when treating my children equitably in relation to others, but not when teaching them. I wished to let her know that “color” is a significant aspect of their identity and makes them who they are as individuals and Canadians. I wanted to tell her that when educators ignore the differences in their students’ identities or “assume that their students are ‘normal’ i.e., expect them to have the normative, privileged identities or neutral, i.e., without race, sex, and so forth which is often read as ‘normal’ anyway” (Kumashiro, 2000, p. 29), they miss the opportunity to create inclusive classrooms.

By narrating my mother stories of my children’s experiences with the school curriculum, inquiring into them, and imagining possibilities and transformations, I become awakened to the particularities of excluded epistemologies, power relations, hegemonic institutional structures, intersections of my children’s identity narratives, and the tensions they experience in regard to the mandated curricula for all children. Through my stories, I challenge the validity of existing policies, practices, and attitudes. I wonder what happens when children’s sense of themselves is under attack by a dominant narrative that does not fit coherently with their own. I wonder what it means in terms of identity making to be excluded so readily and so regularly that the only comfortable space is the space that excludes. What does it mean to identity making to recognize yourself as positioned on the outside looking in (Clarke, 2014, p. 117)?

*I question!*

Why does a thin piece of fabric on my head carry the weight of the world?  
 Why does my name switch to Alpha, Bravo, or Charlie at airports?  
 Why does my skin colour speak louder than my spoken words?  
 Why does my accent receive more attention than my English skills?  
 Why does my ethnicity appear quicker than my humanity?  
 Why does my difference lock my place as the 'other'?  
 Why does my higher qualification adhere to odd jobs?  
 Why does my faith become politicized as an extremist ideology?  
 Why does my positioning face subjugation to systemic power and privilege?  
 Why does my identity become tormented in a dichotomy between home and land?  
 Why does my racial identity bump into racialization of identity?  
 Why does my citizenship demand a certificate of assimilation?  
 Why does my hybrid identity undergo ceaseless rupturing?  
**Why** does my silence make the loudest noise?

*We question!*

**When** can we be ready to affirm the identity of all citizens?

**Who** can we engage in combating the biases and assumptions?

**How** can we sculpt the colourless face of every race?

*Our quest and attempt to honour Humanity Matters,*

*We seek to find answers!*

Questioning is a powerful way of learning because it not only mediates the temptation to plunge in with our opinions, wonders, conclusions, and proposals but it also initiates a wrestling with our personal biases, assumptions, preconceived notions, and ideologies. Questioning is an introspective way to gain deeper insights into our lived experiences in order to understand ourselves better, and to also understand our existence in relation to others. I question and wonder:

- How does a minority mother explain to her children the meaning of "exclusion" when she sees her children's identity being shaped by "structured silences" (Greene, 1993) offered through curriculum?
- How does a mother compose an answer for her Canadian born and raised children when they are being consistently asked where they are from?
- How does a mother respond to a question when her "Muslim Canadian" children ask her about why Muslims are targeted the most in the Western world?
- How does a mother prepare her culturally diverse children for a world that will not care for them unconditionally?

As a mother, I know that one of the cruelties my children may encounter, over and above the typical slings and arrows of childhood and adolescence, is racial prejudice. My autobiographical narrative inquiry into my mother stories, situational and contextualized in nature, explores the role of school community in affirming identities of children who are bearers of multiple nationalities, languages, cultures, and beliefs.

## Where Are You From?

	Every time you ask, I pause no longer annoyed, I seek
<i>You persistently ask me, "Where are you from?"</i>	I am an 'ethnically diverse' Canadian.
<i>You question me about my origin.</i>	I am a 'hyphenated' Canadian.
<i>You remind me that policy calls me multicultural.</i>	I am a 'multicultural' Canadian.
<i>You label me a promoter of mono-culturalism.</i>	I am a 'racialized' Canadian.
<i>You consider me an advocate of differentialism.</i>	I am a 'Pakistani' Canadian.
<i>You suspect me as a dubious subject of patriotism.</i>	I am a 'Muslim' Canadian.
<i>You brand me a hallmark of fundamentalism.</i>	I simply assert... I am a Canadian.
<i>You innocently ask me, "Where are you from?"</i>	
	I am a Canadian. I operate in a pluralistic mode Neither White nor Indigenous Neither 'half' nor 'bi' nor 'multi' I am one 'whole' of an in-between identity I live beside, between, and among you in a space between 'your' home and 'their' land a little like you, a little different from you I am only one, but I am one of you



Ah, don't forget to ask me again, "*Where are you from?*"

Your question helps

it invites me to think, wonder, seek, and know

it staples together the narratives of my diasporic moments

it offers me a chance to love living on the periphery

it stirs an inquiry into myself in my own autobiography

it clarifies my response to the crisis of representation

it challenges me to effectively talk back to power

it drives me to resist dominance and authority

it forces me to foresee inquiry in a failed experiment

it convinces me to crave confusion

it inspires me to unmask inequalities

it braces me to embrace mystery

it prompts me to compose poetry

it solicits me to make sociology

it assists me to restore humanity

Questions matter.

## Looking Outward: Unpacking a Researcher's Inquiry

Narrative inquiries are always strongly autobiographical. The focus of autobiographical narrative inquiry is personal lived experience – that is lives and how they are lived (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Clandinin and Caine (2012) employ the terms *autobiographical* or *narrative beginnings* to refer to the personal stories narrative inquirers explore to “make evident the social and political contexts that shaped our understandings” (p. 171). Inquiry into the researcher's own narrative of experience includes “living, telling, retelling, and reliving” (p. 70) in order to understand ourselves in deeper ways. With understanding ourselves comes understanding others (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). “People are individuals and need to be understood as such, but they cannot be understood only as individuals. They are always in relation, always in a social context” (p. 2). As Eisner wrote (as cited in Connelly & Clandinin, 1988), “Experience is what people undergo, the kinds of meanings they construe as they teach and learn, and the personal ways in which they interpret the worlds in which they live” (p. ix). Our personal and practical experience teaches us how to respond to situations, crises, representations, and interpretations. The meanings that come from these experiences generate transformations within us and lead to our future movements. The narratives of my experiences from immigration to citizenship, from multiculturalism to eurocentrism, and from parent involvement to parent engagement on my children's school landscapes, are narratives which emerge from my “personal, social, practical, and political experience” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 447) and which result in my knowledge of schools, curricula, and the world.

We live in and we live by many stories throughout a lifetime. Storytelling and unpacking those stories emerged as a resource enabling me to revisit my past experiences, reconnect to my present experiences, envision my future priorities, weave webs of significance and cohesion, and create meaning out of what otherwise might have remained an unbearable and unquestionable sequence of happenings. “Our stories are authored from the particulars of experience and are expressions of our personal practical knowledge” (Olson, 1995, p. 122). My everyday experiences in personal, social, institutional, political, and ethical settings reflect, create, and contribute to broader socio-economic and socio-political conditions as they are expressed through grand narratives like immigration, multiculturalism, capitalism, eurocentrism, neocolonialism, and racism. Through inquiry I unpack my mother stories, the layers and depth of the moments I live and relive in order to raise consciousness and unmask personal and institutional realities.

Knowing comes from experience while wakefulness comes from experiencing the experience. As an individual I am both unique and separate, being isolated in my own “continuity of experience” (Dewey, 1938). At the same time, being part of this world situates me in the context of interaction with the social world, granting me a collective identity. Identity negotiations as a culturally diverse Canadian encouraged new insights in me about retelling my stories in new ways. I seek to write and unpack my mother stories and to present this analysis to all Canadians to attain legitimization of my Canadian “born and raised” children’s identity.

Often in my stories, I situate myself in my incessant state of negotiations: dialogues of dilemmas, moving back and forth, inward and outward, between right and wrong, black and white, fairness and injustice, belongingness and alienation, exclusion and inclusion – essentially in dialogues belonging to the “in-between” spaces in which I reside. In the act of unpacking these stories, unpacking brings forward the most focal moment of my story, and makes visible the multiple climaxes where I, or others, either dissolve or evolve as characters in that story. Unpacking is a critical stage where we either melt into our fears, vulnerabilities, insecurities, and silences or a stage where we evolve beyond who we have been, and into who we are meant to be. Unpacking a story requires attention to extreme detail and intricacies of the moments in which we live, those we hold on to, and those we are trapped within.

As Caine, Estefan, and Clandinin (2013) state, “These in-between spaces are filled with uncertainty and indeterminacy. They are places of liminality; the betwixts and between, which, we argue, require attention to context(s), relationship(s), and time to explore narratively” (p. 580). Through dwelling in these spaces of liminality, I became awakened to how my children and I are positioned on both school and Canadian landscapes. Being in a

state of intense liminality developed my understanding of who we are to ourselves and to each other. Without this process of analysis, I would not have seen an inquirer in myself.

Unpacking my mother stories awakened in me the courage to sit with my struggles. It is not easy to sit with one's struggles and almost equally impossible to push past them. A series of questions followed my emotions: Is it safe to unpack my stories? Will the people around me understand me, or further silence, isolate, and judge me? Will I be able to take those words back or is it going to be people's property to interpret the way they want? Will I be prepared to face the aftermath of people's interpretations? Do I have the right to share my mother stories of my children? Will sharing my mother stories of my children make them stronger or even more vulnerable? Is it a safe space and place to unpack my stories? Is it the right time to unfold my stories publicly? Do I have enough words and strong enough English skills to unpack hard matters with softer words? Thomas King (2003) states:

...once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the stories that you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories that you are told. (p. 10)

I weighed the meaningfulness of unpacking my stories for myself, my children, and all of us as a society. Simultaneously, I weighed the significance of unpacking my story as opposed to the implications of holding it in. "When the stories we tell differ from the stories we live, we may live a cover story of self-deception" (Crites, cited in Olson, 1995, p. 132). Though fearful, I felt prepared to unpack my stories, yet I still found myself wrestling with what to uncover and what to conceal in those particular moments of unpacking. "Sometimes dissonance will break through and pull you into an intense involvement" (Bateson, 1994, p. 5). As I sat at my kitchen counter unpacking my stories, I realized that the authorship and ownership were strictly mine, and that "authorship not only expresses itself through narrative, it also develops through narrative" (Tappan & Brown, 1989, p. 192). This realization inculcated in me the strong sense of responsibility and empowerment to put the entirety of my translucent thoughts to transparent words on paper. In the transfer from thoughts to written words, I experienced the transformative power of the single word "unpack," which gave birth to inquiry in my life's narrative. The moments of "unpacking" taught me that it was not my story that had to be unpacked, rather it was an inquiry into the vulnerabilities, insecurities, and silences of my past, present, and future which were hidden among the endless words of my narrative.

Through this process of unpacking my mother stories, I learned to uncover my whispers, my long self-imposed and structured silences. I learned to question, to resist, and to create a "counter story" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32). I learned that "we are a species whose main purpose is to tell each other about the expected and the surprises that upset the expected, and we do that through the stories we tell" (Bruner, 2002, p. 8).

It was when my eldest daughter embarked on her journey to school that stories that upset the expected began to enter our home. Stories created by the context of school bumping up against our home context included requests that I drop her at the school door instead of near the classroom, a refusal to take traditional foods I had cooked for lunch, and English becoming the preferred language spoken among my children. As time went on and more of my children entered school, these kinds of new stories continued. They included my children's correction of my Urdu accent, their desire to dress up as ladybugs, unicorns, and tigers for Halloween instead of wearing traditional gowns, and how excitedly they awaited Christmas – memorizing carols, pleading to go to the mall and to purchase a Christmas tree – and asking when Santa would come to deliver presents. When my children began correcting my English, I wish it had dawned on me that Urdu language was escaping our home. Instead of speaking more Urdu, I naively spoke English as much as possible in hopes that my children would find acceptance in school and be able to connect with their peers and teachers. Many questions began arising for me and I began to feel my repositioning as a mother. I asked myself many questions, such as: Why is Halloween celebrated? How should my children participate in it? How do I understand the excitement my children feel for Christmas in comparison to Eid? These kinds of questions caused me to embark on a new journey full of surprises and wonders about the values and beliefs by which I should raise my children in their new home of Canada. I puzzled, "How do I as mother make sense of the hybridity of my children's identity?" "How do I help them to understand their multiple worlds and the often in-between position in which they find themselves?" These questions also caused me to wonder about how my children's teachers were making sense of these same questions on the school landscape. Were they awake to them too? Puzzled by them? Struggling with them? How were my children being reflected in school curriculum, language, literacy, pedagogy, history, and celebrations?

King (2003) quoted the Nigerian storyteller Ben Okri as having said, "We live by stories, we also live in them.... if we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives (p. 153). The older my children grew, the harder the questions became. Early on, my mother story was shaped by the fact that my children, who spoke, read, and wrote fluent English, and were academically high achieving in reading and writing comprehension, were placed in an EAL class for their first four years of school. I was puzzled by how their color seemed to speak louder than their comprehension skills. Later on, my mother story was further shaped by my younger daughter's friends, who asked her why she wore a hijab<sup>7</sup> and wondered aloud what her hair was like. I, in turn, wondered why what was *on* her head seemed to speak louder than what was *in* her head. Even later, my story was further shaped when my daughter, who was graduating high school, questioned the nature of festivities like the Graduation Banquet and After Grad Party, asking how young Muslim students graduating could be a part of them instead of feeling excluded and alienated by them. I was

struck by how her religious choice not to partake in dancing or drinking seemed to speak louder than her right to celebrate her graduation with her peers.

As Caine, Estefan, and Clandinin (2013) assert, “In a narrative inquiry, stories are not just a medium of learning, development, or transformation, but also a life” (p. 578). As we compose narratives, then, we are also composed (Clarke, 2014, p. 114). Through inquiry into my mother stories, I began to realize my state of being. With time, I began to see that the stories that entered our home from the outside changed the climate within as well – some days storms, some days rain, some days sunshine, and some days wind. There became a nonstop duality of speaking English and Urdu, valuing Christmas and celebrating Eid, displaying one half of the closet with casual pants and t-shirts and the other half with traditional shalwaar kameez,<sup>8</sup> eating pasta and pizza but also appreciating biryani<sup>9</sup> and Haleem,<sup>10</sup> lip singing to Western pop music but also sitting in silence when the adhan was recited. It is out of this nonstop duality that my mother stories emerged. I realized that I was in the midst of my own fluid story, which involves the experiences of my four children who are struggling daily with the ambiguities and pressures of blending and balancing their national, ethnic, and religious identities as Canadians, Pakistanis, and Muslims. By moving backward and forward, inward and outward, between the spaces of policy and practice, home and land, belonging and alienation, us and them and, multicultural and dominant narratives, I became a parent-researcher.

As a researcher, I have learned “new ways of decentering [myself], of breaking out of the confinements of privatism and self-regard into a space where [I] can come face to face with others and call out, ‘Here [I am]’” (Greene, 1995 p. 31). I have become awakened “to new ways of storying experience and constructing knowledge (Olson, 1995, p. 131) through unmasking oppression and openly dialoging with the world. I have dared to invite readers of my work into a space of “wakefulness which allows us to proceed forward with a constant, alert awareness of risks, of narcissism, of solipsism, and of simplistic plots, scenarios, and unidimensional characters” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 182). As eloquently expressed by Greene (2000), “If we keep our own questions open and take intentional action against what stands in the way of learners’ becoming, of our becoming, the spaces for freedom do enlarge” (p. 13). As Canadians, we all must continue to explore the complexity of our positioning on Canadian landscapes. We must ask ourselves how to create ethical and honouring spaces for silenced voices in curriculum in order to unearth the weeds of oppression and move closer to the development of a just and democratic Canadian society.

## **Looking Through: Packing it all up with Poetry (When the Words Begin to see the World)**

Unpacking my story lead me to inquiry, whereas inquiry initiated in me the process of listening, feeling, and seeing new ways of how the words and the world interact. Inquiry taught me how to gather the scattered thoughts from every nook of my body and how to fold them nicely. Inquiry inspired me to play with the words sans hesitance. The consistent fight between Urdu words of my native language and English words of my additional language was unstoppable; it still is to this day. I find myself continuously kicking around words in my head, pulling them apart, putting them back, switching them with other words, balancing words with rhyming words, and twisting and weaving them incessantly, sometimes in search of rhythm, flow, and specificity and, at other times, to unveil ambiguity, tension, and wonders. Stronach (2011) wrote that “casting around in ignorance, confusion, (and even despair!) is very much the process of coming-to-think” (p. 308). As I seek to make sense out of the chaos of words, emotions, identity negotiations, experiences, and thoughts that swirl around my head without end, I am constantly reminded that my life is inextricably intertwined with language, rhetoric, and literary device whereby I disclose (and conceal) what I know about the world and my experience in it. I am caught up in language, in word-making, in meaning-making, constantly striving to create the world, or at least a sense of place in the world (Leggo, 2004). Initially it felt chaotic, cluttered, incredibly difficult, and painfully overwhelming. With countless listening practices, self-talk, restless thoughts, sleepless nights, grammar fights, frequent word tensions, sentence flipping, and idea spinning, finally playing with words freed up my mind and gave me access to the cave of wonders where imagination resides. Inquiry unlocked the doors of imagination where I can finally see the world with closed eyes. I learned that inquiry did not exist between A and Z, or Urdu and English, or outward and inward, or backward and forward, or past and future, rather it got me everywhere; it began to flow in my every breath, it began to run everywhere in my body and blood. Poetry began to rewrite my story. “I rarely think of poetry as something I make happen; it is more accurate to say that it happens to me” (Kingsolver, 2002, p. 229). Sullivan (2007) indicated that there is a delicate architecture in poetry that includes concreteness, voice, emotion, ambiguity, tension, and associative logic. As my inhibitions began to go, the ideas kept flowing and, finally, I found a new and deeper understanding of my own being. Poetry came into being for me and for the first time my words began to see the world rather than me. Poems began to come into being and started to rewrite me within me. Poems became my voice, a way of expression, and reliving from moment to moment. I began to live and relive in a different place in my same body.

**I am a Story I Tell Myself**

I live by my stories.  
 I exist to tell,  
 to discover my story.  
 Everything in this universe is a contradiction.  
 Messy moments embossed in a fluid path,  
 numbing and disembodied sensibilities,  
 lost time never returns but the past can be recalled.  
 Time to unpack, to reveal the concealed.  
 Trying hard to pull myself out of dissonance,  
 the crushing weight, the hollowness and questions,  
 my settling words into the new configuration.  
 Scratching scars to help the itch stop,  
 it burns even more,  
 An inquiry arises, a path to recovery begins.  
 Reliving the moments of experiences,  
 echo, repetition, and patterns interacting,  
 rhythms and a beat aligning,  
 gazing at harmony in contradiction,  
 moments of silent emptiness.  
 Seeing and hearing the world,  
 in a new dimension,  
 I live in my stories.

Richardson (1994) explains that “lived experience is lived in a body, and poetic representation can touch us where we live, in our bodies. Thus, poetry gives us a greater chance of vicariously experiencing the self-reflexive and transformational process of self-creation...” (p. 143).

An urge and intuition to write poems echoes and symbolizes the birth of my Canadian identity and experiences with which that birth is correlated. Orr (2002) advocates the “enormous transformative power” (p. 6) of poetry and story-making because they help us “to live” (p. 21). Poetry forces me to look and think twice, not just over the poems themselves, but at myself, my children, the world, life, and the people around me. Poetry to me is an enriching medium in which I can wrap up all of my natural, distilled, and chaotic thoughts, microscopic experiences, and grand narratives while achieving a powerful sense of fulfillment. It portrays particular qualities of being, elicits metaphorical wondering, synthesizes various modes of perception, unravels imaginative openness, and shows a way of paying attention (Wormser & Cappella, 2004). My existence as a naïve poet has grown between my two homes in which I have transitioned my writing from a right-to-left beginning (Urdu) in the east to a left-to-right ending (English) in the west. Through poetry, I find my

truest expression of soul, self, and thought. Poetry invites me to breathe, to attend, to slow down, to embrace the healing of body and spirit and imagination (Leggo, 2004). The poetic representation is situated in my understanding, retelling, and reliving of my pivotal experiences and cross-cultural encounters. In my attempts to retell through poetry, and the narrative unpacking of this poetry, I engage in reliving those particular moments in that particular time and place. By metaphorically connecting each of those moments to my poetry, I dwell in the in-between spaces filled with moments of full consciousness where newness and possibility come into the world. My inspiration comes from my second home, Canada, my children's experiences of dual identity, the Canadian people, and unpacking and inquiring into my stories. Behind every poem I write is a role which I embody as a Canadian: a mother, a researcher, a Muslim, a vulnerable being, and simply, a writer.

As a parent-researcher, the themes I seek to explore and present to my readers include the human complexities quilted within diversity, the multiplicity of Canadian identity, the quality of equality, the rising tide of intolerance, the politics of color, the significance of ethical values and morality, and the challenges associated with raising Canadian children with multiple identities, languages, nationalities, and values in this era of identity politics. Poetry convinced me that having "awful thoughts" (Britzman & Dipppo, 2000) is necessary as they stir emotional nuances and develop evocative renderings of the way things are. "They can break us out of the numbing routine... our thoughts can question their own grounds and then wonder over the relation and difference between thoughts and things" (Britzman & Dipppo, 2000, p. 34). Poetry keeps replacing all of my whys with hows by teaching me to distrust neatness and accept messy moments embossed in a fluid path of identity for seeing and hearing the world with various lenses. Poetry as a contemplative, intentional, and transformational process can assist "both the authors of the poetry and the audience of the poems to reach praxis or the process of being moved to action, to affect change, and to better the next experience" (Roberts, Crawford, & Brasel, 2014, p.168).

### **Distrusting Neatness**

Because we are constituted in color  
 because we are created in our living stories  
 because we see ourselves in everyday experiences  
 we constantly tell, retell, and relive our lives  
 when mysterious moments arrive  
 with sharp poignancy in a new place  
 away from home and in a strange culture  
 separateness, alienation, loneliness  
 when fact unveils its real face  
 a heightened sense of self evolves  
 the frailty of being human  
 alert awareness of risks



of who we are to ourselves and others  
 unfolding stories of the self  
 and deconstruction of the social self  
 the imagined now, some imagined past  
 or some imagined future  
 experiences growing out of experiences  
 rather than trying to fix the mess  
 distrust any neatness  
 repositioning in the continuum helps  
 now writing, rewriting, and reimagining the story  
 searching out and valuing the complexity  
 marvelling at richness that comes with the mess  
 by changing the story we live by  
 We change our lives  
*(Inspired by text readings)*

Parini (2008) claims, "The poem is also a labyrinth. One makes a journey through the poem, from beginning to end, moving within the space of the work, its boundaries, tracking its labyrinth or pattern" (pp. 100–101). Like each living day, we seek the way in a labyrinth. Poetry can show us the way (Leggo, 2016) – a journey of story writing to story unpacking, to inquiring into a story, to poetic representation. In this entire journey, the labyrinth in which I maneuver, poetry is the "way," where instead of being surprised in speechless moments, I discover possibility. Eisler (1987) tells us:

The human psyche seems to have a built-in need for a system of stories and symbols that "reveal" to us the order of the universe and tell us what our place within it is. It is a hunger for meaning and purpose seemingly beyond the power of any rationalistic or logical system to provide. (p. 183)

We construct our narrative knowledge through telling and retelling, writing and rewriting our stories in order to make comprehensible meaning of our experiences. Instead of searching for logic, and getting stuck in structures and binaries, I am learning to be "willing to risk thinking again and again" (Britzman & Dipbo, 2000, p. 34). I now understand that "learning to see differently requires a willingness to live with new fears (Boler, 1999, p. 182). I agree with Bingham (2004), "Poetry is scary because it whispers transformation – of self and world" (p. 224-225).

## Closing Thoughts

In the process of writing and rewriting  
     I am ready to risk  
         thinking again and again  
         hearing with obsessive ears  
         willing to loose myself in chaos  
 an urge to change everything into words  
     as I turn my gaze on the written words  
         they turn their gaze on me  
     thoughts and experiences are looped  
 I come to see that it's not only about me  
     it is also about the play between  
         Words and ideas  
         Thoughts and things  
         Thinking and doing  
 it's breaking me out of the numbing routine  
     it's not reinventing the narratives  
 rather capturing the essence of experience  
     playing with words freed up my mind  
 giving me access to a cave of wonders  
     I meet imagination there  
         I smell possibility  
         I feel stillness  
         I hear silence  
         I touch earth  
         I see myself  
             finally,  
 my words can see the world  
 (*Inspired by text readings*)

*Looking inward* as a mother, I see that autobiographical narrative inquiry has deepened my understanding that my children's dual identity is not breaking them apart, rather putting them together. *Looking outward* as a researcher, poetic representation has given me a voice where instead of fearing silence, I am able to "inhabit a more ambiguous and flexible sense of self" (Boler, 1999, p. 176). I am able to act as an interpreter between the chaos of my experiences and an assembly of unbroken monologues and sporadic dialogues. Finally, *looking through* as an amateur poet, I practice poetry "as a method of inquiry to move into [my] own impossibility, where anything might happen—and will" (St. Pierre, 2005, p. 973). "Becoming unsettled is partially a resistance of linearity, an interruption

of the autonomous humanist self. (My)self, conceptualized as tangled and mangled” constitutes non-linear possibilities. The intersecting fragmentation and dispersal of selfhood is “something other than a conscious, free decision to shape shift” (Aamodt, 2016, p. 35). I have learned that poetry is “an awareness of the disorderly and chaotic world we inhabit [as] a fundamental aspect of being human” (Orr, 2002, p. 16). As a result, I am willing to let myself drift into “the perpetual and elusive process of becoming” (Gide, 1970, p. 197) in order to enable myself to live well for existence and coexistence.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> **Adhan** is the Islamic call to worship.

<sup>2</sup> **Allah** is the Arabic term used by Muslims to refer to God.

<sup>3</sup> **Urdu** is a language spoken in South Asia specifically in Pakistan.

<sup>4</sup> **Eid** is a Muslim religious festival.

<sup>5</sup> **Assalamu Alaikum** is a standard salutation among Muslims which means, "Peace be upon you."

<sup>6</sup> **Allah Hafiz** means, "May God be your guardian," The vernacular translation is good bye.

<sup>7</sup> **Hijab** is a head covering worn by Muslim women.

<sup>8</sup> **Shalwaar kameez** is a traditional outfit worn by women and men from South Asia.

<sup>9</sup> **Biryani** is a south Asian mixed rice, spices and meat dish. It is popular in Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia.

<sup>10</sup> **Haleem** is a stew composed of meat, lentil and pounded wheat made into a thick paste. It is popular in Middle East, Central Asia, and South Asia.