Stories of Our Sister Selves: How Educated Yemeni Women Experience the Storylines Available to Them

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Abstract

This study explores the ways in which two educated Yemeni women understand and engage with storylines in their society which position them as 'sisters of men' obliged to conform to expectations of 'good' wives, mothers, daughters and Muslims. My own long immersion in Yemeni society, and de se experience of being discursively, interactively and structurally positioned as a woman and a wife in that context created a compelling desire to explore the ascribed social identities, roles and relationships of women in Yemen. In keeping with the feminist underpinnings of this study, I used a holistic method of investigation, the life history interview, and a voice relational mode of analysis that facilitated engagement with the women and their multiple subjectivities and positionings. Findings suggest that far from understanding themselves as de facto victims of their men and their religion, these strong and outspoken characters actively and willingly embrace those storylines derived from Islam but live them in sometimes unexpected ways. I also collaborated with my storytellers in the construction of personal narratives to enable readers to understand a little more about the world that these women inhabit, and help transform “information into shared experience” (Denzin 2009: 216). This study makes conceptual, methodological, practical and political contributions and suggests areas for further research.
Declaration

No portion of the work referred to in the thesis has been submitted in support of an application for another degree or qualification of this or any other university or other institute of learning.
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Dedication

To all the kick-arse women of Yemen, this one’s for you!


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Mamma for fighting for the education without which none of this would have been possible.

Pabbi for the courage of my convictions, ég er þrjósk og stolt.
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AH</td>
<td>Hijri year (Islamic calendar AH 1 = 622 AD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIA</td>
<td>Central Intelligence Agency</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DfID</td>
<td>Department of International Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>DTO</td>
<td>Direct Teaching Operation</td>
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<td>FCO</td>
<td>Foreign and Commonwealth Office</td>
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<td>FGM</td>
<td>Female genital mutilation</td>
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<td>GPC</td>
<td>General Popular Congress</td>
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<td>GTZ</td>
<td>German Organization for Technical Co-operation</td>
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<tr>
<td>ICQI</td>
<td>International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MoD</td>
<td>Ministry of Defence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NLF</td>
<td>National Liberation Front</td>
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<tr>
<td>PDRY</td>
<td>People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen</td>
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<tr>
<td>RoY</td>
<td>Republic of Yemen</td>
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<tr>
<td>UAR</td>
<td>United Arab Republic</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNDP</td>
<td>United Nations Development Programme</td>
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<td>UNICEF</td>
<td>United Nations Children’s Fund</td>
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<tr>
<td>VRDA</td>
<td>Voice-centred relational approach to data analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>VRM</td>
<td>Voice relation method</td>
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<tr>
<td>WEF</td>
<td>World Economic Forum</td>
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<tr>
<td>WNC</td>
<td>Women’s National Committee (Yemen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YAR</td>
<td>Yemen Arab Republic</td>
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<tr>
<td>YSP</td>
<td>Yemen Socialist Party</td>
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Select Glossary of Arabic Terms

abaya  full length black coat worn by women
al-hamdulillah  Praise/thanks be to God
al-Sa’ada  descendants of the Prophet
bayt  family, literally ‘house’
hafla  women’s tea party
hijab  (1) headscarf  (2) modest attire for a Muslimah
iman  faith
insha’allah  God willing
Islah  Islamic Reform Party
Islahi  member of Islah
jihad  a struggle
miskin/a  poor thing (m/f)
mujahidin  warriors for the faith
Muslimah  (observant) Muslim woman
qat  mildly narcotic leaf chewed by Yemenis
sabr  patience/perseverance
Sayyid  descendant of the Prophet Mohammed
shukr  gratitude
souq  market
Introduction

Multiple voices, multiple selves

The images and representations of Arab Muslim women in circulation, and the debates that continue to rage in Europe about Islamic attire have led to portrayals of such women as diminished spirits, one dimensional ciphers, to be pitied for their subjugation or condemned for colluding in their own oppression. The sight of fully veiled women actively engaged in the Arab Spring uprisings of 2011 was a welcome counterbalance, but commentators were quick to point out how rapidly they disappeared from sight once the battles were supposedly won, as though the resumption of their habitual lives and routines somehow negated their participation. It is this reductionist view of the monolithic ‘Muslimwoman’ (cooke 2008: 91) that I hope to challenge in this thesis, by exploring the ways in which individual Muslim women understand and inhabit the storylines available to them in Yemen. From a Western perspective, those storylines available to women in countries such as Yemen may appear limited and limiting, but that is only the beginning, rather than the end of the story. Women throughout history, and across continents, have traditionally been offered more restricted opportunities than men for self-actualisation, but have found ways of occupying those spaces that they were permitted to enter, using them to resist imposed identities and produce identities of their own.

This thesis tells a story of the lives of two professional women, English language teachers, and their multiple and often competing subjectivities, the ‘sister selves’ of the title. These stories are ‘ours’ because they are co-constructions, belonging to Hana’a and Noor (my storytellers) and myself (the researcher) but they also reflect the subjective realities of the worlds which we inhabit, and as such are profoundly relational and heavily populated. Not only does each one of us speak in multiple voices, but many voices can be heard through ours, those of friends, loved ones and antagonists. My story is woven throughout the text as this is a work of “reflexive, critical and accountable feminist inquiry” (Davis 2008: 79) and one only made
possible by my long immersion in Yemeni society which itself constitutes part of the warrant for my research.

The story starts with an overview of Yemen’s history and my multiple relationships with/in it. This archaeology is necessary because Yemen is commonly viewed through the politically inflected prisms of terrorism, gender inequality and poverty which obscure the rich and glorious history that is integral to how Yemenis perceive themselves and their country. In Chapter 2, I discuss what it means to be a woman, and a feminist, working with and on behalf of women positioned as ‘Other’. I explore the conflation of Islam and the patriarchal contexts in which it is practised and offer my perspective on Arab and Islamic feminisms and their distinctive praxis.

In Chapter 3, I situate my study within the critical qualitative inquiry paradigm in general and the narrative-as-advocacy tradition in particular. I discuss the history and appropriacy of life history, itself a marginalised practice, for researching the lives of those so often spoken about but rarely spoken to, before considering possible criteria for evaluating value-laden, reflexive and context specific studies such as this.

In Chapter 4, I tell the story of designing and conducting a research project with and for Yemeni women, both enriched and complicated by feminist ethics. As one of the primary aims of this thesis was to make a contribution to the literature available on women’s lives, I also document in detail the process of restorying interview data into co-constructed life histories. In Chapter 5, I present the feminist data analysis protocol I adopt to analyse and interpret the life story interviews, and provide detailed interpretations of those interviews in order to mediate the life histories presented in Chapter 6. In the final chapter, I discuss what I have learnt about my storytellers, and what we have contributed to knowledge in practical, political, methodological and conceptual terms. I also evaluate this study and offer suggestions for further research.
Chapter 1
History and my story: Being and becoming

1.1 Introduction
Yemen, remote for much of its history, remains exotic in the imagination and, despite the British colony in Aden, is little known or understood in the West. Whilst it is impossible to do justice to its rich and complex history, here I provide a brief outline in order both to situate my own personal and professional endeavours described later in this chapter and to create a backdrop against which to present the lives of my storytellers (Chapter 6).

1.2 My story: Beginnings...
As I believe that all research is “historically, culturally, and personally situated” (Gergen & Gergen 2003: 579) and that my own experiences inevitably influence not only what I believe but how I see and interpret things, I am going to start by telling you a little about myself.

1.2.1 A life in liminal spaces...
The child of a short-lived, cross-cultural marriage, with family in both Iceland and England, I pass as native in either country and sound like an insider in my mother tongues (admittedly by dint of elocution lessons for English). However, as a cultural hybrid, I have often experienced my identity as liminal, aware of “a difference ‘within’, a subject that inhabits the rim of an ‘in-between’ reality” (Bhabha 2004: 19). At school in the 1970s, there was stigma attached to being both of mixed parentage and having divorced parents, a wickedness that the good sisters attempted to beat out of me. At home, after my mother remarried, I found myself marginalised within the new family by the arrival of my half-sisters, and within my mother’s hyper-religious family, my status as second generation black sheep resulted in earnest and well meaning attempts to save me throughout my adolescence. Having been othered as a child in those places where one might expect to feel most at home, I generally
feel most comfortable in environments where I am alien by definition rather than as a result of my wilful or unwitting non-conformity.

1.2.2 From the City of London to the City of Sana’a
Not all my sojourns as an outsider have been happy ones, and my experiences in the male bastion of corporate finance in the City of London in the 1980s led to an enduring distaste for banking and a change of career. Retrained as a teacher, I taught for a while in the UK, but my keen interest in exploring and engaging with other cultures meant that I was off to see the world as soon as I had amassed some experience and the requisite collection of teach-anywhere texts. Lacking a British passport, European Union destinations were not an option, and I worked in Turkey, Poland, China and Hong Kong before finding myself in Yemen, “one of those rare places where the past is not another country” (Mackintosh-Smith 1997: 47).

1.3 History: Yemen
In the 21st century, portraits of Yemen generally depict a failing state sponsoring terror, whose inhabitants suffer food insecurity, widespread poverty and alarming rates of gender inequality. Whilst those facts may not be in dispute, they do not in any fashion constitute a comprehensive picture of the country or its people, who are fiercely proud of their land, its history and culture.

1.3.1 Arabia Felix
Yemen, the cradle of Arabia, is one of the world’s oldest civilisations, and the Yemenis claim, with some justification, to be al-arab al-aribah the ‘original’ Arabs (Dresch 2000), whose descendants peopled the Arabian Peninsula. Archaeological evidence suggests that Yemen has been continuously inhabited for millennia (perhaps 40,000 years) and in the 5th century BC, Greek historian Herodotus waxed lyrical about its fabulous wealth and fertility in acknowledgment of which, the Romans named it Arabia Felix (Happy Arabia). Amongst the earliest converts to Islam (in 6 AH/628 AD) the Yemenis made an impression on the Prophet Mohammed, who claimed they had “the kindest and gentlest hearts of all. Faith is Yemeni, wisdom is
Yemeni” (Clark 2010: 12) and reportedly described the ancient city of Sana’a as “the paradise of earthly paradises”. Divided many times in its long history, but always unified as an idea (Mackintosh-Smith 1997, Dresch 2000) Yemen’s current borders are remarkably similar to those in existence in the year of the Prophet’s death 10 AH/632 AD, when it was divided into three provinces, the North, the South, and Hadramawt, demarcations immediately recognisable in the modern and theoretically unified state which remains perilously fractured along tribal and dynastic lines.

1.3.2 A thousand years of Zaydi rule

In 897 AD, a temporarily successful mediation in the three hundred year old tribal war between the Hashid and Bakil tribes (now into its fifteenth century) led to the founding of the Zaydi Imamate in Sa’adah, which was to rule much of Yemen until the Revolution of 1962. The Zaydi Imams were Shi’a sayyids, descendants of the Prophet through the female line, Mohammed’s daughter Fatima and her husband Ali bin Abi Talib. The Imamate was not hereditary, and any male sayyid, strong in arm, of good character and knowledgeable of the Qur’an was eligible for consideration “Imams being properly men of the sword as well of the book and righteousness” (Dresch 2000: 15) one of the reasons perhaps for the longevity of Zaydi rule. A century after the establishment of the Zaydi kingdom in the North, Shafi’i sayyids arrived in Hadramawt from what is now Iraq, but unlike the soldierly northern sayyids, the southerners set about creating centres of learning, one of which, Tarim, remains an important centre of Sunni scholarship in the region.

1.3.3 An abundance of all things

Yemen’s fabled fertility and strategic location attracted the attention of neighbouring powers over the centuries, the Romans, Ethiopians, Egyptians and Ottomans amongst those covetous of its wealth and natural resources. Repeated attempts at invasion, and short lived occupations of usually limited areas of land, in concert with

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1 “The country of the Sabaei...is the most fertile of all, producing myrrh, frankincense, and cinnamon. There is such an abundance of these aromatics, that cinnamon, cassia, and other spices are used by them instead of sticks and firewood...By the trade in these aromatics...the Sabaeans...have become the richest of all the tribes, and possess a great quantity of wrought articles in gold and silver, as couches, tripods, basins, drinking-vessels, to which we must add the costly magnificence of their houses; for the doors, walls, and roofs are variegated with inlaid ivory, gold, silver, and precious stones.” Strabo in 22AD (1857: 206-208)
internal conflicts and competing claims to territory – the capital Sana’a changed hands twenty times in a period of twelve years in C4th AH/C10th AD for example – ensured that war and bloodshed were woven tightly into the country’s identity. It was Yemenis as the original mujahidin who spread the word of Islam at the edge of a sword in the early days of the Islamic Empire, who helped force the Soviets out of Afghanistan in a different type of jihad in the 1980’s (thirteen centuries later), and today make up a sizeable minority of the armed forces throughout the Arab world. To be Yemeni means to be a warrior, for God or for money, and the majority of Yemen’s youths, those without money or connections, are conscripted, but will have learnt to shoot long before joining the armed forces. Against a centuries old backdrop of continually shifting allegiances and bloody coups, the diktat of a central government in-situ for mere decades to serve “God, the Nation and the Revolution” (Presidential Decree 61/1986) carries little weight, and allegiance is widely accorded to bayt, qabilah, iman (family, tribe, faith) instead².

1.3.4 The Violet Line

The nineteenth century saw Yemen firmly in the sights of Empire, besieged for the second time by the Ottoman Empire in the North and Aden annexed as an outpost of the British Raj in the South. The turn of the twentieth saw the country divided roughly between the colonial powers by virtue of the so-called ‘Violet line’ on the map. The Turks were reasonably successful in establishing influence with their fellow Sunnis in the centre and to the South, but rarely managed to hold the capital Sana’a for long³. Their ill-fated attempts to take the northern highlands resulted in the annihilation of their forces⁴ on more than one occasion, and Yemen is still referred to as ‘the graveyard of the Turks’. The Turks did however make lasting contributions to northern culture, introducing dishes such as dolma (stuffed vegetables), kebab and konafa (long, thin, noodle-like threads of pastry) now considered an integral part of Yemeni cuisine, and the all-enveloping, triple layered

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² At times the fākhīd (extended family or ‘clan’) and sīl (tribal confederation) may be the most meaningful units in a dispute, whilst “in the name of Islam, or the nation or revolution, not tribalism, one can turn against immediate kin and neighbours” (Dresch 2000: 25) for temporary gain/leverage.

³ In 1849 for example, a thousand Turkish soldiers arrived to garrison Sana’a, and within twenty four hours the entire company had been slaughtered by the Sana’ānis (Lewcock 1986: 29). The Turks did not return until 1872.

⁴ The assault on the highlands in the vicinity of Shihara resulted in the deaths of 30,000 Turks in 1905 alone (Dresch 2000: 6)
black *sharshaf*, which gradually replaced the brightly coloured garb previously worn by women, a sartorial code exported in turn from the conservative North to the more liberal South\(^5\) after reunification in 1990.

1.3.5 Aden: Last outpost of Empire

With the capture of the port of Aden in 1839 by the East India Company, the British founded a colony that was to endure for 130 years, and which at its height encompassed huge swathes of territory in the Eastern and Western Protectorates, administered by ‘client kings’, *sayyids* and *sultans* to the East and *amirs* and *shaykhs* to the West. The crown colony at its most extensive, consisted of only 75 square miles, and typically was administered for the benefit of the colonizers, but the British did build infrastructure, developing the port, building power stations, miles of housing, administrative buildings and belatedly schools. By the 1960s in Aden itself, it was common for girls to attend both primary and secondary school, and many went on to study at the teacher training institute.

Eventually evolving into a major port, the second busiest in the world after New York by the 1950s, Aden increasingly looked outward and adopted habits and practices from both East and West. Trade unions were established, workers discovered and enthusiastically embraced their right to strike, and dissidents from the North found themselves at liberty not only to criticise the Imamate but to do so in public and in print, “local discontents and pan-Arabism coincided readily, while a ‘new class’ of young clerks and intellectuals in Aden came to organise urban workers” (Dresch 2000: 72). In the Protectorates, the stipends paid to the *sultans* and *shaykhs* allowed them to keep standing armies and therefore diminished the importance of tribal allegiances, and well-crafted peace treaties reduced the need for weapons, further loosening traditional ties and weakening an ancient social order, particularly in Hadramawt (Mackintosh-Smith 1997: 164).

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\(^5\) These terms, whilst potentially loaded, are distinctions that the Yemenis make themselves.
1.3.6 ‘A fiery front dividing the whole Arab World’

The north, kept in a state of isolated feudalism by the Zaydi Imam Yahya (1904 – 1948) and the tyrannical Ahmad7 (1948 – 1962) finally revolted in 1962, a military coup deposing Ahmad’s son, Al-Badr only a week after he had been installed as Imam, and establishing the Yemen Arab Republic (YAR). Egypt sent in troops to support the Revolution, in a move that was viewed as tantamount to annexation by Nasser’s United Arab Republic (UAR), prompting both Saudi Arabia and Britain to throw their considerable weight behind the Royalists fighting from their highland strongholds. Thus began a civil war that was to last 8 years and cost the lives of 4% of the population of North Yemen, as well as 20,000 Egyptian troops. With the overthrow of the repressive Imamate in the North, the notion of freeing the South from its colonial overlords gained currency, and the National Liberation Front (NLF) was created, galvanised by nationalists, radicals and Marxists from liberal Aden, and a long and bloody war of attrition started.

1.3.7 ‘Dancing on the heads of snakes’

Royalist or Republican, Zaydi or Shafi’i, the tribes had their own agendas, “many played all ends against the middle, and the Egyptians in the North, like the British in the South, identified tribalism with endemic treachery” (Dresch 2000: 99). Nasser’s forces, defeated in their war with Israel and as disillusioned with tribal intrigues as most Yemenis were distrustful of Egyptian motives, pulled out of Yemen abruptly in the summer of 1967, followed by the British who having announced their intention to withdraw in January 19689, were finally and ignominiously forced out of Aden at gunpoint by the NLF in November. The former colony embraced the Marxist agenda of the NLF, becoming the People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen (PDRY) but without the powerhouse of the British economy found itself dependent on aid from the Soviet bloc and China. There was massive unemployment and a huge exodus of

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6 Dresch (2000: 91)
7 The brutality of Ahmad’s reprisals for the murder of his father Imam Yahya, the so-called Sacking of Sana’a meant that the capital had to be moved to Taiz. Ahmad survived countless assassination attempts and exacted bloody revenge on his enemies, transforming the garden in front of his palace in Taiz into an execution ground, where he gathered court and family (those he had not already killed) to witness decapitations en-masse.
8 President Salah on ruling Yemen in an interview in Al-Hayat newspaper on 28 March 2009 (Clark 2010)
9 The new Labour government taking office in 1964 having decided that Yemen was ungovernable.
labour, with an estimated 100,000 workers migrating out of a total population of less than 2 million. In the North, battles rumbled on until 1970 when General Al-Amri (a Zaydi Republican) negotiated a peace of sorts and prominent Royalists were accommodated within the revolutionary government, creating an “extraordinary 775 governmental figures with the salary and rank of minister” (Dresch 2000: 124) for “the Revolution had resulted not in the destruction of the old socio-political edifice, but in a reshuffling of its constituent blocks” (Mackintosh-Smith 1997: 110). In truth the writ of the new Republic did not extend much beyond Sana’a, and whilst taking the government’s money many of the tribal leaders were also fortifying and expanding their traditional, regional areas of influence and stockpiling weapons.

1.3.8 A country of two halves: The view from the South

The 1970s saw Yemen still divided by the violet line of the imperial powers, but now an impoverished Marxist state committed to nationalisation, land distribution and the eradication of ancient systems of patronage and power, faced a new Republic built on bribery, nepotism and horse-trading, and the theme of national unity was no more than rhetoric. To those in the PDRY, where tribal affiliations had been weakened by the long years of British rule, the North seemed backward and chaotic, and so the new government built on the highly bureaucratic colonial legacy, imposing tight central control, limiting individual freedoms, and restricting movement. Faith was side-lined (Clark 2004:199), the Catholic mission in Aden expelled, and Islam viewed by the hard line Communists as little more than a useful prop for Arabic nationalism.

1.3.9 Education and equality

Education was seen as a way of instilling revolutionary values in children and school attendance increased rapidly, particularly in rural areas, with 60% of ten year olds...

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10 By the late 1990’s the traditional seat of Zaydi power, Sa’adah had once again become a fiefdom, under Shaykh Al-Ahmar with guarantees of safe passage required for outsiders (foreigners and government officials like).

11 The Nasserite puppet President Sallal boasted during the Revolution that he was “ruler of 5 million lunatics” and Northerners “reviled in the image” (Dresch 2000: 140).

12 Guarantors (hostages essentially) had to be produced if one wanted to travel outside the PDRY. Families were often divided by the border, and those with close relatives in the ‘capitalist’ North were viewed with suspicion and monitored closely. Crossing the border in either direction often resulted in a period of detention (Paluch 2001) .
school, and 40% literacy by the end of the PDRY’s first decade (Dresch 2000: 140). The intention was to create a new personal sensibility, “an aim enshrined not only in education but for instance in the 1974 family law: ‘Building a new culture will be the basis of creating a new awareness, a new mentality…burnishing in people’s awareness and sentiment new spiritual values and the project of building the new person’” (Dresch 2000: 140). Equality for women was another central tenet of the 1974 family law, and so polygamy and child marriage were outlawed, it was made harder for men to divorce on a whim, women were given equal inheritance rights and substantially improved custody rights, and actively encouraged to participate in civil society. Admittedly, these rights were honoured most often in Aden and other urban areas of the PDRY, whilst in distant and rural areas the old *ahkam al-aslaf* (rules of the ancestors) went largely unchallenged (Clark 2004; Molyneux et al 1979). Scholarships to study subjects such as medicine, engineering, politics and journalism in the Eastern bloc and the more progressive Arab states, were made available to girls as well as boys. The newly opened colleges of Education (1970) and Agricultural Sciences (1972) welcomed women in their first intake, and became part of the University of Aden on its inauguration in 1975 along with the recently founded colleges of Economics and Medicine. Law and Engineering faculties followed and then began the process of establishing affiliated Colleges in each of the PDRY’s six governorates.

**1.3.10 The view from the North**

Somewhat richer than the PDRY, and steeped in ancient cultural and religious practices, little changed in the YAR, now a military rather than a feudal state. There was however an exponential increase in the export of its labour, where once Northerners had gone to the Aden Protectorate to work, now they were heading for Saudi Arabia and Kuwait in unprecedented numbers. The remittances they sent home dwarfed the national budget and brought the trappings of modernity, thermos flasks, powdered milk and radios to many highland homes for the first time. In the absence of able-bodied men, the bulk of agricultural work was carried out by

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13 An estimated 800,000 by the end of the 1970’s from a total population of 5.3 million.
women, although they were rarely permitted control of the proceeds of their labour (Myntti 1979).

1.3.11 Education and inequality
State funded education began in earnest in 1970, before which only 1 child in 20 in the North\textsuperscript{14} was receiving an education, limited to memorization of the Qur’an. By the end of the decade, 30% of ten year olds were believed to be in school, but girls made up less than 3% of the total number enrolled in some areas, and even in the capital only accounted for 15% (Myntti 1979: 77). Having no teachers, the YAR was forced to import them, primarily from predominantly Sunni Egypt whilst Saudi Arabia’s Wahhabis were funding and founding religious schools throughout the highlands, resulting in a creeping ‘Sunnification’ of rituals and practices in the predominantly Zaydi state\textsuperscript{15}. Associated with the Imamate by lineage if not inclination, sayyid families were being side-lined, and their traditional roles as mediators and legal experts were being taken over by religiously educated qadis (judges). The YAR’s family law of 1978 was as reactionary as the PDRY’s was radical, stipulating that “the silence of a virgin gives consent” to marriage, a wife may not leave the house without her husband’s express permission and restricting women’s divorce and custody rights.

1.3.12 Unity at a price
An uneasy truce, punctuated by border wars and presidential assassinations, prevailed between North and South for twenty years, until re-unification on 22 May 1990. A pragmatic rather than philosophical marriage, the PDRY was bankrupt, and with the collapse of the Soviet Union, in receipt of ever dwindling funds from fellow Communist states, whilst the YAR was eyeing recently identified oil deposits on the other side of the border. The two former governments became political parties, the General Popular Congress (GPC) representing the North and the Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) the South and were joined by a predominantly northern Islamic party,

\textsuperscript{14} Apart from in Taiz, a city with a history of radicalism, which adopted education early in the twentieth century and exhibits progressive attitudes to women’s participation in education and society.

\textsuperscript{15} Zaydis is one of the more moderate Shia sects, and the closest to mainstream Sunnism in practice. Doctrinal differences are limited and Zaydis and Shafi’is in Yemen have always prayed together.
*Islah*, a loose coalition of conservative Zaydi tribes, the Muslim Brothers\(^{16}\) and more radical Wahhabi Islamists\(^{17}\). The President of the former YAR, General Ali Abdullah Salah, assumed the Presidency of the unified Republic of Yemen (RoY), with the PDRY’s President Ali Salim Al-Bid as his Vice-President. A constitution was drafted in 1991 for the newly minted Republic, promising equality for all, and democratic rights and freedoms. The following year, the existing family laws were abolished and replaced with a new Personal Status law, in which the gains made by women in the PDRY were largely dismantled. Wives were once again “legally existent for the pleasure enjoyment of the man” with “total obedience to be the sacred duties of the woman towards the man” (CSO 1999).

1.3.13 The appearance of democracy

The RoY’s support of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in the months following re-unification resulted in the expulsion of close to a million Yemenis employed in Gulf States, and isolated Yemen internationally. The loss of remittances and the severing of international aid decimated an already fragile economy, and there was little prospect of work for those returning. The GPC, dominated by military and tribal leaders from the President’s own Sanhan\(^{18}\) tribe, made few concessions to the democratic process and there was suspicion on all sides. Hijacking and hostage-taking increased, and as the political and economic situation deteriorated, YSP officials were assassinated with impunity on the streets of the capital, and GPC-controlled armed forces were deployed strategically in YSP supporting regions.

1.3.14 Civil war

The Vice-President retreated to Aden in 1993 and bolstered by Saudi support declared secession on 21 May 1994. This bold move, and the civil war it initiated, alienated many Southerners, who despite their misgivings about being ruled from Sana’a, wanted a one state solution. Salah had a huge conscript army at his disposal

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\(^{16}\) An offshoot of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.

\(^{17}\) Funded by the Saudis, and fronted by Abdul Majeed Al-Zindani, a mentor of the late Osama Bin Laden, sponsor of most of the now illegal madrasas in Yemen and founder of the university, Jamia –Al-Iman, considered ‘a cradle of extremism’ by the US, as Anwar Al-Alawki taught there, and John Walker Lindh (the American Taliban) and Umar Farouk Muttalleb (the Underpants Bomber) were both students.

\(^{18}\) Part of the ancient and powerful Hashid tribal confederation.
as well as thousands of returned mujahidin, and the declaration of jihad against the secessionists brought tens of thousands of tribesmen with their own weaponry into the fray. Aden was besieged, and fell to his forces on 7 July 1994. Al-Bid and his closest aides fled overseas, as did other key supporters of the YSP, and Aden was sacked much as Sana’a had been by Imam Ahmad, “not only weapons and money, but electrical and bathroom fittings, window frames, even door knobs, were carried off; large garbage trucks given Aden municipality by foreign donors were driven away northwards” (Dresch 2000: 197). Casualties were high, with the Southerners bearing the brunt of the estimated 10,000 dead with many more to come as the legacy of hundreds of miles of landmines laid down during the conflict.

1.3.15 Counting the cost

With Aden subdued, and the YSP obliterated, there was no longer any pretence at power sharing, and the South complained bitterly of ‘a Northern invasion’ that is still in evidence. Northern shaykhs seized land with impunity, military units stationed in former YSP strongholds conducted campaigns of intimidation and conservative officials were posted to key roles in Southern governorates (education amongst them). The constitution was amended on 29 September 1994, and women were relegated to “sisters of men”, no longer citizens in their own right or equal before the law. On 1 October 1994, General Ali Abdullah Salah was re-elected as President of the Republic, receiving all but 6 votes in a parliament consisting almost entirely of GPC and Islah members.

1.4 My story: Middles

Having established Yemen’s ancient glory and the high esteem in which it was held in the early days of Islam, and outlined some of the key events in its turbulent 20th century history, I turn now to my arrival in-country and integration into a world both thrilling and frustrating.

19 In 2002, de-mining agencies were reporting 5,000 mine casualties, and an average of 5 new civilian deaths per month.

20 An exercise in acclamation rather than democracy, the first popular vote for the Presidency was held in 1999, and as the nominated candidate for both the GPC and Islah, Salah was re-elected with 96.3% of the vote.
1.4.1 Enter the Queen of Sheba

I came to Yemen to teach at the British Council DTO in the autumn of 1997, little imagining then that it was to be my home for the next thirteen years. Arriving in Sana’a, I discovered a city at once ancient but modernising, in a country apparently at peace yet riven by conflict, and characterised by sometimes startling contrasts. Tribesmen abided by the pre-Islamic codes of justice, *ahkam al-aslaf* and nursed grievances centuries-old, but drove flamboyantly painted Toyota pick-ups, satellite dishes were beginning to sprout from the gingerbread houses in the Old City of Sana’a, whilst in many of Yemen’s numerous villages running water and electricity had yet to arrive. With little to export other than its oil, Yemen was almost entirely dependent on aid, yet attacks on the property of foreign agencies and embassies supplying the funds were commonplace, and the oil pipelines were repeatedly severed. During my first months in Yemen, tribesmen hijacked two of the British Council’s cars\(^{21}\) and kidnapped one of my colleagues\(^{22}\), whilst I, having been befriended by a well-connected Bedouin chief rode through the streets of the capital at the head of a camel caravan and was presented to the great and good on World Tourism Day.

1.4.2 Fitting in

Wanting to immerse myself in Yemeni culture, I chose to live with a local family, much to the consternation of fellow expats at the British Council. It was to prove a fateful decision, allowing me access to the very private and fiercely guarded domestic domain, and involving me in the rigidly segregated life and rituals of Sana’ani women. In the conservative community of *Bir Al-Azab*\(^{23}\) where I settled these included; visiting the sick, distributing *zakat* (charity), celebrating religious festivals, births, deaths and weddings. The price to be paid for the privilege was conforming to the behaviour expected of women; wearing the all concealing black *abaya* and *hijab*, respecting the evening curfew, informing the family of my movements, and not entertaining men. Any suspected infringement of the rules was reported by neighbours to the family,

\(^{21}\) One of which was released on the payment of a ransom, the other was not seen again.

\(^{22}\) David Mitchell, Senior Teacher at the only recently re-opened British Council DTO in Aden (comprehensively looted during the 1994 Civil War) re-opened in 1996 and closed permanently in 1999.

\(^{23}\) A garden suburb just outside the old city walls, first established early in the sixteenth century, and much favoured by the Ottomans.
who defended my honour vigorously in public and chastised me equally energetically in private.

1.4.3 The third sex

Being a member of the so-called ‘third sex’ (Western women defying traditional Yemeni sex roles) meant that I also had access, albeit limited, to the world of men. I often ate lunch in the company of assorted male members of the extended family for example, sitting in the carpeted comfort of the mafraj (main reception room) with a tempting array of delicious dishes spread before me. I was always the only female to eat with the men, since the women of the house, fully-veiled, would serve the food and then retire. Naïvely, I assumed that they sat down to the same meal, until the day when the presence of ‘unknown’ men (i.e. non family members) meant that I was instructed to join the women. Crouched on the packed earth floor in the soot blackened cavern of the kitchen, I watched in dismay as the women tucked into the discarded scraps of the men’s meal, not a morsel of meat, chicken or fish left among the rice and vegetables strewn across the platters.

1.4.4 An education

That any women should suffer such discrimination, even at the heart of family life, was profoundly shocking. Knowing these women in particular to be strong, independent and outspoken characters made the fact that they seemingly accepted their subjugation even more troubling. I found it hard to reconcile the warmth and hospitality that I had always experienced in the family, and the love and respect which the young men of the house demonstrated for their mother, with discriminatory nutrition. How could they take food out of their mother’s mouth? More perplexingly, with the fridge and store cupboards firmly in the female domain, why did the women not just take their share before serving the men? Until that day, I had participated in the social rituals of women, and been entertained in their houses, but now I had breached the carefully patrolled boundaries and glimpsed what lay at the heart of the home. My subsequent marriage to a sayyid forcibly integrated me into that hidden society, and my own lived experience of constraint, marginalisation and subjugation, situations in which the only ways I differed from my
Yemeni sisters was education and nationality, neither of which offered much in the way of practical defence against the systematic mental, physical and sexual abuse I encountered.

1.4.5 Going back to work

Being a woman, and a wife in Yemen, created a compelling desire to explore the concepts, and understand women’s lived experience of power and agency in this environment. Sequestered in my in-laws home, I was introduced to the very real hierarchy that exists in the all-female domain, presided over by a matriarch, the disposition of whom affects the quality of every woman’s life. The wife of the eldest son takes precedence over the wives of younger sons and unmarried daughters are relegated to the bottom rung. I was fortunate to be the wife of the heir, which dictated the direction of my labour but the lack of modern time and labour saving devices meant that most of the day was given over to physically draining drudgery. After months of being confined to the house, I won the battle to be permitted to return to work, initially part-time, but gradually over the months I increased my hours, and finally, having persuaded my husband of the necessity of our own home, was able to justify working full time to furnish it.

1.4.6 Getting involved

Although the British Council’s teaching operations in Aden and Sana’a were closed in 1999, the Sana’a office remained open, if somewhat under London’s radar and the arrival of an interested and engaged Country Director in 2000, meant that a flexible approach was taken to opportunities for meaningful engagement with education and development initiatives. This facilitated a continually evolving role for me encompassing teaching, training and project management for the Department of International Development (DFID), the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO).

24 ‘Returned’ daughters find themselves at the very bottom of this hierarchy, the reason for so many remarrying, or going to live in the household of a close relative, as daughters are meant to be ‘guests’ rather than permanent members of a household.

25 Domestic labour is generally directed upwards, so I was to work for my husband and my parents in-law, but not for his siblings, even his brothers. This rigidity is very much a characteristic of conservative sayyid families in the North and in other classes the work may be divided differently, but always under the supervision of the matriarch.

26 The result of the deaths of hostages (3 British and one Australian) seized by a militant Islamic group loosely linked to what is now Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).
and the Ministry of Defence (MoD). It also entailed working relationships with the Yemeni Ministries of Defence, Education, Foreign Affairs and Human Rights, the Islahi University of Science and Technology in Sana’a and international aid organizations such as the German GTZ. Many of these roles enabled me to pursue my personal and professional goals of getting women actively involved in education and civil society.

1.4.7 The end of the affair

Like the majority of Northern Yemeni men, my husband was deeply unhappy about his wife working with men, for though teaching is accepted almost universally as a role for women, it is generally preferred that this take place in a gender segregated environment. Leisure time pursuits, undertaken in the exclusive company of women proved equally contentious however, for acting as a visitor and surrogate mum at the girls’ prison in Sana’a for example, I was mixing with ‘immoral women’ and concern was expressed that this might reflect negatively upon his honour. The fact that my partner in crime, a highly respected doctor (a recipient of a scholarship to East Germany in PDRY days) and a high profile Islahi (member of the Islamist party Islah) to boot and therefore beyond reproach, did not mitigate my sins. Although I tried to be a good wife, doing all the housework, preparing three course meals from scratch despite working full-time, participating in the endless round of required visits and curbing my natural enthusiasm, it was hard for my actions to compete with the negative weight of crude stereotypes of Western womanhood that abounded at that time, and to which my mother-in-law enthusiastically subscribed. My husband bitterly resented the fact that I supported us financially, whilst seemingly content to spend his entire salary on qat and cigarettes, and my professional status, once a source of pride, came to be seen as chief amongst my shortcomings as a wife. My failure to fall pregnant simply underlined my lack of suitability for the role, and eventually was used as the face-saving explanation for our divorce. A divorce that the Personal Status law gave me no rights to initiate, and that in fact my husband only agreed to

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27 Qat is a mildly narcotic plant that is chewed by the majority of Yemeni men, typically in all male afternoon meetings that run in parallel with women’s gatherings or haflas. Much government and tribal business is conducted at qat chews and it is widely believed that qat is Qur’anically approved, despite its consumption being illegal in other Muslim states.
after an eight month long stand-off, that started after I locked him out of our house on Valentine’s Day.

1.4.8 A fresh start

Being a divorced woman does present a number of challenges in Yemeni society, not least the dilemma of under whose protection to live. Having lived with a family by choice previously, it was on this occasion the only way in which my honour and reputation could be safeguarded in the community. Having only just won my freedom, I was not to be allowed to exercise it, on a personal level at least, coming once more under male guardianship, on this occasion that of my live-in landlord, and his five sons. It was however, for me as for many Yemeni women, liberating professionally. I took on a great deal of extra work and was able to collaborate with agencies in, and travel to, different governorates to provide the type of teacher training that previously had only been available in the capital. Teacher development has always been a priority, as I believe that education is the primary route out of poverty and that an improved education system in Yemen would impact positively on many of its worst indicators, as studies indicate that even a primary education for girls reduces the rate of infant mortality, maternal mortality, malnutrition and prevalence of FGM (UNICEF 2013; HRW 2011; CSO 1998; UNICEF 1998).

1.4.9 Levelling the playing field

In a society where opportunities are available to, and availed of, disproportionately by men, I always insisted that women be included in the nominations for the INSET programmes that I provided to the Ministry of Education, but the willingness to comply varied significantly from governorate to governorate, and it was only in Taiz that women attending have ever outnumbered men. On occasion I attempted to initiate women-only courses but as training provided by external providers (particularly UK/US) is perceived to confer status, and is therefore of high value (de Regt 2007: 328), officials even if they had been sympathetic to my request, would have made themselves most unpopular should they have limited access to women only. In practice, as men are the gate-keepers, and will continue to play this role for many years to come, it is of vital importance that they receive the best training
available, and participating with women in the context of ongoing professional development programmes frequently forces them to re-evaluate their preconceptions and prejudices, with many eventually admitting to a (not-always grudging) respect for the knowledge and skills of their female counterparts. For the women, training with men often provides a confidence boost as they too get the opportunity to compare their professional practice, and discover that in no way should they be considered inferior to men or second class citizens in the classroom.

1.4.10 Teaching – for the birds?
That women should invest more heavily in their careers as teachers than men is hardly surprising given that for many men in Yemen teaching is a fall back option, badly paid and conferring limited social status, whilst for many women it remains the only religiously-sanctioned and therefore universally permissible job outside the home. Even so, certain sections of society view it as an occupation most appropriate for virgins and divorcees (i.e. sexless women), and frown on married women (sexually active and often demonstrably fecund) remaining in the classroom. Given that so many of the women with whom I work are married with children, and after a day at the chalk face are expected to pull off a domestic goddess act at home, running themselves ragged in the process to head off accusations of being a ‘bad’ wife and mother (Clark 2004: 122), why do they continue to teach?

1.4.11 Not for the money
Financial necessity is rarely the answer, for given the enduring custom of multigenerational family dwellings in Yemen, it has until recently been possible for a working man to contribute sufficient funds to the communal pot to ‘support’ his family, whilst his wife and daughters contribute their labour, often agricultural as well as domestic (86% of women in agriculture, only 8% of those women are paid). Pooled resources and labour have traditionally meant that only a few members of an extended family needed to be in paid employment for the whole family to survive, albeit often at subsistence level. This is still a common model in rural areas but increasing migration to the cities has resulted in the establishment of somewhat

28 All reputable sources suggest 40-50% of population live below the national poverty line (CIA 2014; UNDP 2013; WNC 2006).
smaller family units, although self-sufficient nuclear families are still far from the norm. In Islamic tradition, a woman’s money is her own to do with as she likes, and she is not required to support herself, but in my experience most teachers willingly contribute the lion’s share of their earnings, if not their entirety, to the family coffers. Whilst a sense of satisfaction at being able to assist the family is sometimes expressed, there is typically no desire for financial independence or even the creation of a fund for the purchase of luxuries, as women simply ask for money from the family funds if they wish to make a purchase. The vast majority of household purchases are communal, and most shopping, even for items which in the UK might be considered highly personal such as tampons and sanitary towels, is done by the male members of the family. Female teachers it seems enjoy the experience of earning money rather more than the money itself, which suggests that it is the validation of their independent professional identity that is meaningful, and worth defending.

1.4.12 Stories of a second self
The transformative nature of a professional identity for women in Yemen emerges readily in interviews and even casual conversations with female teachers. Again and again I have heard women explain how they ‘became someone else’ or a ‘different thing’ when they started teaching, and although such sentiments are often expressed by novice teachers (Cortazzi 1993: 135) the experience of ‘becoming’ seems to me to be profoundly marked for Yemeni women, as it creates a public identity and permits entry into a space where there is the opportunity to be known, and to be accorded recognition and respect for what they know, rather than what they are. As a result of dominant interpretations of Islam, ancient customs and a constitution that defines women in relation to men, the storylines available to Yemeni women are heavily gendered and usually dependent on a male for validation; good daughter, good wife, and good mother (Clark 2004: 122), and where an alternative storyline does exist it “tends to be an extension of their traditional roles” (Barakat 1993: 102). Whilst teaching is a religious duty and obligation for women, removing this

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29 Women and children traditionally receive gifts of money and clothes from relatives in celebration of the festivals of Eid Al-Adha and Eid Al-Fitr.
30 Although the constitution was amended in February 2001, Article 31 still states “Women are the sisters of men” and defines their obligations in terms of Shariah codes and legislation that mandates their obedience to men.
activity from the safety of the domestic sphere and placing it in the public domain has the potential to subvert this most sacred storyline. Many pious women who teach and may themselves be committed to the transmission of traditional and conservative values, by their very presence and activity within the public sphere demonstrate that women can conduct themselves modestly and make a contribution to society outside the home, thereby undermining the rationale for restrictions on women that their own teaching might help to perpetuate.

1.4.13 To be or not to be?

There are few comforts to be found in the education system, as the majority of Yemeni schools are in poor repair, many lack electricity, glazed windows and basic supplies such as stationery, which many teachers furnish from their own pockets. Teaching is essentially a solitary affair as there are no staff rooms or places for teachers to congregate, and there is no systematic provision of professional development opportunities or structured career path. Classrooms are generally overcrowded, the pupils often widely divergent in age and ability and the teaching materials provided outdated and often irrelevant to the concerns and priorities of pupils and their families, so there is no sense in which teaching is an easy option for women in Yemeni society. Yet the extent to which this professional identity is recognised and valued by the female teachers with whom I have worked is evidenced by the sacrifices they are prepared to make to safeguard it, some girls refusing to marry, older women leaving the family home to live with relatives, or accept the lower status of a second or third wife in order to guarantee that they can continue teaching, whilst others have turned down the opportunity to remain at home whilst still drawing a salary. I therefore devised the following questions:

- Do female teachers in Yemen experience their professional identities as emancipatory and transformative?

- How do women reconcile those professional identities with social and domestic pressures to be dutiful daughters, faithful wives and model mothers?
1.4.14 Respect

The longer I lived and worked in Yemen, the greater my respect for these teachers, and the thousands of others like them round the country, working to the best of their abilities in under-resourced and dilapidated environments grew. On trips to Europe I was confronted with media portrayals of “domesticated, subjugated and unenlightened” (Abdelrazek 2007: 69) Arab Muslim women for whom the only storylines apparently available were either downtrodden slave or worse a sort of Stockholm syndrome where an entire continent of women somehow collude with their oppressors. If a woman wears a veil she is the victim of oppression, worthy of our pity, unless she claims to be wearing it of her own free will in which case she has been brainwashed, is the victim of false-consciousness and deserves contempt (Mojab 2001; Toynbee 2001). Even more worryingly since the events of 9/11 in the United States and 7/7 in the UK, such women have also been positioned as posing sinister “threats to state security and the secular value system” (Piela 2013: 782). Nowhere in these pen portraits did I recognise my Yemeni sisters, and I am quite sure that they would not have recognised themselves. Over time I came to realise that it was not enough to advocate with and for women in Yemen, it was also necessary to challenge the misery pornification of their lives so prevalent in the Western media, and by repeated exposure to such images, in Western society.

1.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have provided a brief outline of Yemen’s history as the first of three frames for the lives of the women whose life histories are presented in Chapter 6. I have given a reflexive account of my own involvement and investment both personal and professional in Yemen, and with Yemeni women from which the research questions which shape this thesis originated. Having established the historical and cultural context of my study, in the next chapter I present the political context, that of feminism which provides the second frame.
Chapter 2

Her story: Being discursively, interactively and structurally positioned as ‘woman’

2.1 Introduction

I have many selves, professional, personal and social, but underlying the performance of ‘myselfs’ is the fact that I am a woman and I know as a woman, I am identified as a woman and responded to as a woman. I embrace my embodied subjectivity because to do otherwise would be to present my work as though it was conceived and conducted in a vacuum, a voice from nowhere. My knowledge and experiences are intricately tied up with my female form and my voice is both situated and positioned by that knowledge and by those experiences. In this chapter I discuss what it means to be a woman and a feminist, working with and on behalf of women who are doubly ‘Othered’. I first discuss the historical concept of sexual difference informed by Hellenistic philosophy and the monotheistic religions that has proved so influential in defining womanhood in male-voiced civilisation, before examining the ways in which feminists have attempted to reclaim the power to name, and to think differently in their struggles for a more just society in which women’s ways of knowing are acknowledged as both legitimate and generative. I then turn my attention to the widespread practice of defining Muslim women as de facto victims and explore Arab and Islamic feminisms. I illustrate with my own experiences of being and becoming a woman, a feminist and an activist.

2.2 Being/becoming a woman

Before I can explore the experiences of other/Othered women, I must first establish what it means to be a woman and ask as Simone de Beauvoir did in her seminal 1949 challenge to male hegemony The Second Sex “what is a woman?” (2011: 3).
2.2.1 Dethroning the Goddess

Worshipped as the mysterious source of all fertility “all the power of nature, and over nature, was theirs” (Miles 1989: 39) in primeval times, women were not only engaged in the rearing of infants and the gathering and cultivation of food, but took up spears and torcs to become queens, leaders and warriors from Babylon to Sparta and Celtic Britain. As populations expanded and started to settle, women’s horticulture was replaced by larger scale agriculture, and a more militaristic culture emerged as settled land needed to be defended and small scale raids were eventually replaced by all out wars (Belbin 2001: 55). It was customary to kill any surviving males on the losing side, resulting in cohorts of captured women forced into concubinage and slavery, a development which marked a fundamental change in the status of women. Their fall from grace was compounded by the discovery of the male role in the ‘miracle’ of birth, and the phallus swiftly replaced the womb as the object of worship. In Athens, a city which had been dedicated to the Goddess of wisdom Athene, Aristotle declared the female of the species defective by virtue of being a ‘deformed’ male and reduced her role to that of “merely the passive incubator of his seed” (cited in Miles 1989: 68) and the rise of the world’s monotheistic religions created new hierarchies anchored by patriarchy, subordinating both women and Nature to the will of men (Ruether 2006: 365; Booker 2004: 608).

2.2.2 A natural state of affairs?

Much has been made of the ‘natural’ state of woman’s subordination to man, Aristotle claiming that “the male is by nature superior, and the female inferior; and the one rules, and the other is ruled” (cited in Matthews 1986: 18). The Christian church elaborated further “she is physically subject to him in the same way as our natural impulses need to be subject to the reasoning power of the mind, in order that the actions to which they lead may be inspired by the principles of good conduct” (St. Augustine cited in Blamires 1992: 78) thereby reifying the mind/body and male/female binaries that saw women condemned to “a life sentence of second-order existence” (Miles 1989: 93) in perpetuity. Despite the historic and contemporary tensions between Judaism, Christianity and Islam, all have elevated the
status of the male; the Prophet Mohammed asserting that “Men are in charge of women because Allah hath made the one of them to excel the other” (Qur’an 4.34) and the Orthodox Jew still counting not having been born a woman or a slave amongst his blessings in daily prayers. As Mary Daly so succinctly suggests, “If God is male, then the male is God” (1973: 19).

2.2.3 Vagabond vulva, wandering womb

Despite the many recent advances towards a more equitable status for women globally, the default definition of woman remains not-man, and this distinction is made on the basis of the “presumed biological divide between male and female” (Connell 2009: 9) that reverberates throughout history and takes the reproductive organs as its starting point. Female genitalia, once esteemed as the source of life, became instead a source of evil, wickedness and temptation exemplified by Eve who led Adam into sin, and thereby condemned women to an eternity of odium, ignominy and pain, or so Tertullian decreed (Clack 1999: 50). Their life-giving menses were denigrated, becoming dirty, shameful, a source of contamination, seen as symbolic of the fall of Eve by Muslim scholars such as Imam Ghazali (Miles 1989: 95) in harmony with the Judaeo-Christian tradition (Kassam 2012: 408; İlkkaracan 2002: 61).

Women’s sexuality, manifested in her pudenda was often presented as something monstrous, the infamous “Devil’s gateway” of Tertullian (Clack 1999: 50) the “voracious-vagina-crack” (Sabbah 1984: 45) that terrorised the Arabic world or the globetrotting, castrating “vagina dentata” (Raitt 1980: 415). Even more threatening to patriarchy than a woman’s vulva was her apparently unlimited sexual appetite as testified by the Arab aphorism, “Three things are insatiable – the desert, the grave and a woman’s cunt” (Ley 2009: 48; Miles 1989: 103; Edwardes 1965: 55) itself a variation on a theme expounded in the Old Testament (Proverbs 30: 15-16) and promulgated by the publication of the Malleus Maleficarum in 1487. The association of the female with the physical, with animal passion, deficient not only in form but in reason and morality, popularised by the monotheistic religions, has meant that for

31 Despite ‘witch’ being a gender neutral term at the time of writing, and the fact that the masculine rendering Malleus Maleficorum would have encompassed both sexes, Dominican fathers and Inquisitors Heinrich Kramer and Jakob Sprenger chose the feminine case.
centuries women have borne the brunt of men’s often violent efforts to control nature, their own, and the planet’s (Lorentzen & Leavitt-Alcantara 2006: 522; Ruether 2006: 362).

2.2.4 Silence is a woman’s glory

The idealised woman of the patriarchal era is one who is passive, inert, and silent, submitting willingly to the pleasure of her lord and master, but most importantly only to him:

Beauties slept in their woods, waiting for princes to come and wake them up. In their beds, in their glass coffins, in their childhood forests like dead women. Beautiful, but passive; hence desirable: all mystery emanates from them…She sleeps, she is intact, eternal, absolutely powerless. He has no doubt she has been waiting for him forever. (Cixous 1986: 66)

This smacks of male fantasy, for if woman’s natural tendencies were so easy to tame and control, then philosophers, religious leaders and Enlightenment scholars would not have felt compelled to expend so much time and energy on shaping the sarcophagi within which they wished to entomb unruly womanhood. Asleep, a woman is an object, a possession, a living doll:

Just enough life – and not too much. Then he will kiss her. So that when she opens her eyes she will see only him; him in place of everything, all-him. (Cixous 1986: 66)

Although men have failed to permanently constrain what historically has been perceived as the ‘natural’ character of the female of the species, much effort has been expended to try and ensure her fidelity. Thus the monotheistic cultures made a ‘fetish’ of virginity with bridegrooms demanding “a vacuum-sealed, factory-fresh vagina with built-in hymeneal gift-wrapping and purity guarantee” (Miles 1989: 98) resulting in innocence being the most esteemed state for women, one which can never be regained once the hymen has been broken. Virginity tests are still a fact of life in many parts of the world as a bride is expected to be ‘virgo intacta’ on her

32 Sophocles (cited in Clack 1999: 43)
wedding night\textsuperscript{33} and can be repudiated or even killed if her husband suspects that not to be the case. Not content with establishing virginity, it became customary to restrict access to a woman’s genitals to ensure she remained faithful. Genital control took many forms, from the relatively benign chastity belt in use in Mediaeval Europe for five centuries to practices of clitoridectomy, excision and infibulation\textsuperscript{34} used in Africa and Arabia for millennia\textsuperscript{35}, with the explicit aim of making sex less pleasurable, often extremely painful in fact, to discourage pre- and extra-marital sex.

2.2.5 Embodiment

No woman then can fail to be aware of the gendered identity of her body, as in many cultures the treatment a female child receives is marked as different from birth (if indeed she survives) from the colour of the very first garments in which they are dressed to the type of mobile that may hang above their cot. Throughout childhood in most cultures the female body is protected, chaperoned and policed with much emphasis on what a ‘good’ girl does or does not do, in terms of posture, dress, gaze and speech. A girl will often be discouraged by parents, peers and teachers from joining in rough-and-tumble games in the playground and from taking part in more dangerous or risky activities in which boys are expected to participate. The creation and subsequent patrolling of these behavioural boundaries suggest that gender differences are neither innate nor natural, but social and cultural constructs negotiated in the process of ‘becoming’ men or women (Connell 2009: 5) for as de Beauvoir famously observed “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman” (2011: 293).

2.2.6 A map of possible roles

As children, we are exposed to and expected to internalise “the conditions of possibility – the discourses which prescribe not only what is desirable, but what is recognizable as an acceptable form of subjectivity” (Davies & Gannon (2006: 22). Such discourses often take the form of stories, acting as “a literature of social

\textsuperscript{33} Lady Diana Spencer was required to submit to a test before her marriage to Prince Charles in 1981 and the UK immigration services only dropped the practice of virginity testing Asian women arriving on fiancée visas after a public outcry in 1979 (Travis 2011).

\textsuperscript{34} Commonly referred to as female genital mutilation or FGM

\textsuperscript{35} Strabo noted the practice in Egypt on his visit circa 25BC (1857: 196)
instruction” (Byock 2001: 144) that provides “a map of possible roles and of possible worlds in which action, thought and self-definition are permissible” (Bruner 1986: 66). In every society what Ochs and Capps (2001) refer to as “cultural scripts” and “narrative templates” define “the range of canonical characters, the settings in which they operate, the actions that are permissible and comprehensible” (Bruner 1986: 66). Whilst these scripts perform the same function for men, they generally encompass a far greater range of roles and map out a much wider world than those created for women. There is often greater tolerance for men who do not conform or who break new ground, although that tolerance is usually predicated on the activity being suitably manly (Carlson 2011: 78; Connell 2009: 7). Not that much has changed it seems since Rousseau’s seminal treatise on education, Émile, was published in 1762 in which he explained:

A man has no one but himself to consider, and so long as he does right he may defy public opinion; but when a woman does right her task is only half finished, and what people think of her matters as much as what she really is. ‘What will people think’ is the grave of a man’s virtue and the throne of a woman’s. (1911: 328)

2.2.7 Contradictory desires

Growing up amidst “conventionalized and homogenized story lines” (Ewick & Silbey 1995: 208) the “canonical templates that structure daily life” (Ochs & Capps 2001: 223) are rarely called into question resulting in a ‘self’ that “is organized on the basis of affectively charged societal positions that become combined as elements of a personal construction” (Hermans & Kempen 1993: 118). Building on Bordieu’s concept of habitus, Arthur Frank claims that “the embedding of stories in bodies” creates “narrative habitus” which determines how individuals “feel conducted to do what they do; as they undertake their lives, the course that seems to flow most naturally” (2010: 52 emphasis in original). Women are called upon to conduct themselves in different ways in different spaces, to be ‘a lady in the living room and a whore in the bedroom’ to cite a common English aphorism and so the storylines that mandate their conduct often conflict (Lal 2011; Gergen & Davis 2003; Stanley & Wise 1993). Davies and Gannon suggest that these “lines of force” are not perceived as externally imposed for they “run through her and are taken up by her
as her own contradictory desires” (2006: 155) which she must forever try and reconcile (Middleton 1992: 23).

2.2.8 Non-unitary subjectivity
The Enlightenment enshrined the subject as “fully autonomous…and existing prior to and outside of language and social convention” (Armour 2012: 375) equating this unitary, reasoning being with masculinity “the rational, the not-female, and with the absence of emotion” (Davies 1992: 59). Women were thus once again essentialised as the ‘other’ being “made object, deprived of agency, and inscribed with patterns of desire that hold that oppressive cultural pattern in place” (Davies 1992: 59). Viewed through the lens of a humanist ideology founded on the concept of an essential self, one that is “purposeful, consistent, coherent…silencing…that which is contingent, chaotic, tangential to the true self” (Smith 1993: 8) women’s contradictory desires serve only to confirm their weakness and instability. As a result of “living with the pervasive hierarchical, patriarchal structuring of sexual difference through which women learn to internalize negative and conflicted ideas about what it means to live as a woman” (Bloom 1996: 178) women’s subjectivity is understood as fragmented and non-unitary (Carlson 2011; Munro 1998; Smith 1993; Davies 1992). In contrast to masculinity which “masquerades as a core essence of the self” and is assumed to be “a coherent, codified, singular subjectivity” Carlson emphasises the “non-committal, questionable, untenable” nature of women’s status that deprives them of “the comfort of achievement, the self-satisfaction of finality, or the confidence of a won cause” arguing that “the always-proliferating negotiation of one’s self-contradiction is the definitive characteristic” of being a woman (2011: 85). Such non-unitary subjectivity “always active and in the process of production” according to Bloom and Munro (1995: 99) does however allow women, with varying degrees of success, to engage with the complexities of identity and live with/in contradictory discourses.

2.3 My story: Becoming a woman
What of my own ‘becoming’? My socialisation as a woman was largely conducted by and through other women, and on reflection I can see various forms of disciplinary
power at work, schooling me to be a good Christian (compliant and sexually continent) a good citizen (productive and self-policing) and a good wife (passive and pleasing).

2.3.1 Sins of the mother

My mother’s loving but hyper-religious family gifted me with both original sin, and my mother’s accumulated ones, and battled valiantly to save this second generation black sheep. Having broken many of the family’s sacred storylines in her youth, my mother was somewhat estranged from religion herself, but offered no protection from the efforts of my aunts and uncles to rescue me. Once, memorably, she dragged me from a friend’s house where I was taking shelter so that I could be sent to an evangelical Christian summer camp. Surrounded by youth that spoke in tongues and sprang out of bed unbidden to kneel by the bed and pray at dawn, and most disconcertingly of all, wanted to be there, I took up with a charity case, a troubled and suicidal young woman. We bonded over our mutual distaste for the camp regime and liking for the music of BA Robertson and were quickly inseparable. Although she had been in trouble daily since her arrival, the company of someone likeminded meant participating in approved activities became more bearable, and by the end of camp she had even picked up a bible. Neither she nor I or the simple notion of friendship was to be allowed to take credit for this transformation, and it was announced publicly on the final day of camp that I, imperfect instrument though I was, had been ‘sent by God’ to save this poor unfortunate. Apart from instilling a lifelong suspicion of the claims to, and of higher authorities, this incident amongst others, contributed to the sense that my externally conferred black sheep status whilst marginalising, offered me the space to forge a different identity, and make my own way.

2.3.2 Education, education, education

My mother may have lacked the religious fervour of her family but she was on her own mission, determined that my ‘becoming’ should be the result of academic

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36 In the politically unaware terminology of the time, she was one of a handful of children in care who had been offered a free ‘holiday’ at the camp.
achievement. To which end she made sacrifices and fought for me to receive the best education, until I was of an age where I could compete myself, winning a place at grammar school initially and then scholarships and bursaries for fee-paying schools. She did however expect a return on her investment, and the punishment for making even the smallest error in my homework was to be locked in my room without dinner. I increasingly took refuge in my room and the world beyond that books transported me to, reading the classics, religion, history and philosophy and greedily gulping down the works of Graham Greene whole, often in all-night sittings. Affection was only ever displayed when I excelled and so I worked hard to retain my place on the top table, becoming a straight A student and bringing home armfuls of prizes, good conduct cups, and the *Victrix Ludorum*. I am very grateful to my mother for the education that I received, and passionate about education in my turn, but to this day I remain captive to that story of achievement, I do not know how to ‘be’, as I must always be in the process of becoming someone or something better.

2.3.3 Being a ‘nice gel’

More focused instruction on becoming a woman was on offer from my grandmothers’ generation. My impeccably turned out maternal grandmother Mutti, trim and elegant until her death in her 80s, explained that one should always have a bath, change into a clean dress, and put on lipstick and powder to welcome one’s husband home in the evening. She also initiated me into the seductive art of baking, for although my mother is a chef of great skill, it was from my grandmother that I inherited a passion for creating food that comforts, casting spells of contentment from elemental magic conjured in a fug of spices and flour.

For her part, Nana Brown took me to one side as I was negotiating puberty, and informed me in her sternest voice that “Nice gels always wear stockings” managing to imply that tights were the Devil’s own creation, and as at that impressionable age, I definitely wanted to be thought of as ‘nice’ I have worn stockings ever since – a discovery that has rarely failed to delight my suitors. As a teenager in love with an older man, whose occupation and reputation ensured that he was permanently surrounded by attractive and scantily clad women, I internalized expectations of grooming and presentation more appropriate to a model than a girl embarking on a
career in corporate finance. Looking back now on that heavily made up, perfectly coiffed and immaculately manicured ghost, scared to move before he arrived in case I messed anything up, I see a living doll (Walter 2011), passive, inert, waiting only for his kiss, Cixous’s Sleeping Beauty (1986: 66) made flesh.

2.4 Being/becoming a feminist

Having established some of the ways in which women are culturally and structurally constituted, and looked at several elements of my own process of becoming a woman, I now consider what it means to be a feminist in an allegedly post-feminist society.

2.4.1 Undoing Feminism…

Feminism is a concept “routinely disparaged” (McRobbie 2004: 258) in the UK media, where representations range from an outdated and irrelevant relic of less enlightened times to a virulent sex-hating prudery (Walter 2011: 14; Woodward & Woodward 2009: 21). By way of contrast, sexual freedom and choice are seen as central to post-feminism, which promotes a fictitious gender parity (Gill 2011; Press 2011; Walter 2011) negating “the need for feminism as a political movement or as a label that women can identify with” (Woodward & Woodward 2009: 14) because “women already can ‘have it all’ as there are supposedly no barriers to success” (ibid 2009: 28). No barriers perhaps, to the sexual freedom sought by second wave feminists since the 1970s, which has been co-opted into the hyper-sexualisation or ‘pornification’ of young women, who are encouraged to commodify their sexuality in ever more invasive and oppressive ways (Evans 2011: 608; Walter 2011).

2.4.2 Freedom?

The fact that young women in the UK can ‘choose’ to binge-drink, have casual sex with multiple partners, get naked in public, circulate graphic images of themselves to strangers and work in lap-dancing or pole-dancing venues is held up as proof of their emancipation and equality (Walter 2011; McRobbie 2004). Such a stance, apart from making women complicit in their sexual objectification in the name of self-
expression, not only conveniently neglects the very real inequalities that women still face, but risks their reinforcement where “exaggerated forms of regressive femininity, such as being silly and helpless” are adopted and combined with “modern freedoms such as smoking and casual sex” which are promoted as contemporary (Woodward & Woodward 2009: 28). Davies maintains that:

It is in fact her sex that names her, that subjects her to the story lines in which not only is she object but her desire and others’ desire for her is organized in terms of that object status. The naming and the story lines, through which that naming is made to make sense, are not an external clothing that can be cast aside but become the very subjectivity through which each woman knows herself. (1992: 65)

I believe that many young women may be reluctant to associate themselves with the struggles of previous generations of women, despite their own experiences of inequality, for participation in the so-called “new regime of sexual meanings based on female consent, equality, participation and pleasure, free of politics” comes at a price, for “to count as a modern, sophisticated girl” she is “called upon to be silent, to withhold critique” (McRobbie 2004: 260) and by so doing hopes to be seen as “ironic, sexy and liberated” (Woodward & Woodward 2009: 21). This sexual liberation however does not necessarily equate to greater fulfilment as studies (Kalish & Kimmel 2011; Armstrong, England & Fogarty 2010; Armstrong, Hamilton & England 2010) suggest that girls are increasingly likely to be pressured into a ‘cold promiscuity’ and while they may have escaped the prison of chastity that frustrated earlier generations, they find themselves in a new prison “in which repression of emotions takes the place of repression of physical needs” (Walter 2011: 101). Seen from this vantage point, I could argue that twenty first century woman has much in common with de Beauvoir’s depiction of women during Rome’s dying days, typifying “false emancipation, possessing, in a world where men are still the only masters, nothing but empty freedom: she is free for nothing” (2011: 106 emphasis in original). This is neither a moral stance on my part, nor the aforementioned prudery as I am sex-positive, and applaud the greater availability of contraception and abortion which have given women back control of reproduction, but fear that with traditional concerns of pregnancy or shaming now largely irrelevant, women have lost their remaining defences against being coerced ever earlier into unwanted sexual activity.
2.4.3 New sexism or new traditionalism?

Post-feminism has been characterized as a backlash against the achievements of second wave feminism (Byers & Crocker 2012: 4; Press 2011: 111; McRobbie 2009: 130; McRobbie 2004: 255) amongst which were the rewriting of laws on “domestic violence, rape, divorce and abortion” (Evans 2011: 609) as well as greater access to higher education and employment. Much remains to be done in the face of “continued violence against women, inequities in the paid and unpaid labor forces, imbalances in social and economic power, the orgasm gap” (Press 2011: 108) and the rise of both retro sexism “premised on fears about the collapse of male power” (Gill 2011: 63) and a “recent striking resurgence of images of the housewife” personified by the domestic goddess, Nigella Lawson and exemplified by the ubiquity of Cath Kidston’s aspirational brand of kitchen kitsch (Walter 2011: 223-224; Woodward & Woodward 2009: 28).

2.4.4 Time to get angry…again

To declare myself a feminist in the street or the blogosphere in this day and age of assumed equality is to court derision, and in many scholarly circles leaves me vulnerable to accusations ranging from bias and special pleading to intimations that I am “so overwhelmed and distressed by my own grievances against patriarchy that my research is a kind of manic revenge, rather than legitimate academic inquiry” (Morley 1996: 129). Why then, as a scholar who seeks a career within academia, would I wish to saddle myself with such a retrograde label and relegate myself to the margins? The answer lies in my belief that “as researchers and writers we cannot ‘speak from nowhere’ but rather always speak and write from a particular ‘speaking position’ which is always materially located” (Gray 2003: 111) because “what can be known is shaped as much by the researcher and what he or she is able to think as by whatever our ‘data’ might be” (Davies & Gannon 2006: 2).

I speak and write as a woman whose “body and its physical but also its intellectual, mindful experiences is a cultural text: its meaning and experience are irrevocably inscribed within a cultural (and thus political) frame” (Stanley & Wise 1993: 193) and from this I derive my particular speaking position, which being that of a woman, is
already marginal. Claiming membership of the category ‘woman’ is problematic in itself in feminist terms (Woodward & Woodward 2009; Bondi 2004; Mohanty 2003; Butler 1990) and I am aware of the dangers of reifying or imputing homogeneity to a discursively constructed group so disparate in race, class, sexuality and means, but argue as Lena Gunnarsson does that it relates to being positioned as a ‘woman’ by society:

Because of their enabling, constraining and motivating power, our structural positions make us able and inclined to act in specific ways and likely to suffer certain things. The position as woman will make its occupant apt to act in ways commonly understood as feminine and experience things that males do not tend to experience. (2011: 33)

2.4.5 Confined to the shadows

Historically, the knowledge and experience of women have been construed as deviant, because they do not mirror those of men, around whom our societies, laws and institutions have been built, for “knowledges, like all other forms of social production, are at least partially effects of the sexualized positioning of their producers and users” according to Elizabeth Grosz who calls for such knowledges to “be acknowledged as sexually determinate, limited, finite” (1994: 20) although there is little evidence of much progress to date as women’s ways of knowing (Braidotti 2011; Ribbens & Edwards 1998; Belenky et al 1997; Gilligan 1993; Smith 1993; Cooper 1991) are still far from being mainstream in academic terms:

Work by women of colour and marginalized groups or white women (for example, lesbians, sex radicals) especially if written in a manner that renders it accessible to a broad reading public is often de-legitimized in academic settings, even if that work enables and promotes feminist practice. (hooks 1994: 64)

Much of women’s history is absent from the annals, triumphs and trials simply never considered worthy of record, or if recorded often expunged later as transgressive or irrelevant, meaning that as women our educational experiences have “denied us this knowledge – alienated us from our own collective history, casting us adrift in alien seas of male knowledge which constitutes us as marginal, as other” (Middleton 1992: 46 emphasis in original).
2.4.6 Immasculation

Judith Fetterley describes the process whereby as “readers and teachers and scholars, women are taught to think as men, to identify with a male point of view, and to accept as normal and legitimate a male system of values, one of whose central principles is misogyny” as “the immasculation of women” (1978, cited in Schweickart 1986: 41-42 emphasis in original). In academia, that male system of values has often been understood to mandate the adoption of “the pseudo-objective position of the intellectual, above the humdrum banalities of reality, unquestioned and unquestionably in possession of the truth” (Gray 2003: 33 emphasis in original) and in such a context the constructed nature of both ‘truth’ and ‘reality’ are rarely contested for as de Beauvoir suggests “representation of the world like the world itself is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth” (1949 cited in Devereaux 1990: 340). Adrienne Rich insists that “masculine ideologies are the creation of masculine subjectivity; they are neither objective, nor value-free nor inclusively human” (1979: 207 emphasis in original) particularly where the essentialist mind/body binary (Gergen & Gergen 1993: 202) holds sway perpetuating the “distorted notion...that to be truly intellectual we must be cut off from our emotions” (hooks 1994: 155). Emotional engagement does not however equate to a deficit in intellect or ability, as influential models of intelligence from Howard Gardner (2008; 1983) and Daniel Goleman (2007; 1996) attest. Holland and Ramazanoglu go so far as to argue that one of the contributions made by feminism has been the attempt to make visible “the parts that experience, emotion and subjectivity play in the research process, rather than seeing these as weaknesses to be controlled” (1994: 130).

2.4.7 Intersectionality

Although in the early days the ‘grand narrative’ of feminism may have been that ‘women are oppressed’ with the blame laid squarely at the door of men, the essentialist and reductive nature of that claim has been challenged on multiple counts, leading to the fragmentation of what was originally a predominantly white middle class women’s movement and the proliferation of sexed, raced, classed and coloured feminisms. The highly influential notion of intersectionality originated in
Black American feminism’s concerns with the interaction of race, gender and class (Collins 1990; Crenshaw 1989) and how they shaped women’s experiences and identities in ways fundamentally at odds with those of hegemonic white women. Now widely adopted (Gill 2011; Ackerly & True 2010; Butler & Desai 2008; Ludvig 2006; McCall 2005; Burman 2003; Smith & Watson 1998) intersectionality “provides a platform for feminist theory as a shared enterprise” (Davis 2008: 72) and is understood as:

signifying the complex, irreducible, varied and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts. The concept emphasizes that different dimensions of social life cannot be separated out into discrete and pure strands. (Brah & Phoenix 2004: 76)

Intersectionality requires us to surface the multiple forms of oppression operating in any context by ‘asking the other question’:

When I see something that looks racist, I ask, ‘Where is the patriarchy in this?’ When I see something that looks sexist, I ask, ‘Where is the heterosexism in this?’ When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, ‘Where are the class interests in this?’ (Matsuda 1991 cited in Davis 2008: 70)

Painted with such broad brush strokes, intersectionality resonates with many otherwise antagonistic factions, making difference central to contemporary feminism according to Kathy Davis, for whom:

Intersectionality initiates a process of discovery, alerting us to the fact that the world around us is always more complicated and contradictory than we ever could have anticipated…it encourages each feminist scholar to engage critically with her own assumptions in the interests of reflexive, critical, and accountable feminist inquiry. (2008: 79)

2.4.8 The master’s tools

Not all feminist scholars however embrace feminine ways of knowing and writing, and it is perhaps no coincidence that the more theoretically or ‘scientifically’ inclined amongst them enjoy relative respectability within the academy “sitting inside the circle” as Stanley and Wise (1993: 180) would have it, leading to concern about an
ivory tower mentality that at times appears to prioritise theory over praxis, thereby distancing the inhabitants of the tower from the daily experience of injustice and inequality on the streets below (Mohanty 2003; Stanley & Wise 2000; Viner 1999). Despite the fact that philosophy remains a male-dominated discipline characterized by “a profound somatophobia” (Grosz 1994: 5) postmodern and poststructural schools of thought have proved highly generative for many academic feminists, and have influenced much of third wave feminism. Scholars such as Michel Foucault, Paolo Freire, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari whose theories have resonated so widely, have all had charges of misogyny levelled at them, leading some feminists to distance themselves in protest (MacLure 2004; Spivak 1993; Braidotti 1991; Skeggs 1991). Audre Lorde’s admonition that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (1984: 110) ringing in their ears perhaps, while others attempt to ‘unthink’ the theories.

2.4.9 Thinking differently

For her part, leading Deleuzean theorist Claire Colebrook claims that:

Feminism has always been more than a quibble regarding this or that value or prejudice within an otherwise sound way of thinking. Feminism at its most vibrant has taken the form of a demand not just to redress wrongs within thought, but to think differently. (2000: 2 emphasis in original)

That difference can be seen in the ‘active’ nature of questions often posed by feminists encountering theory, not asking “what does it mean?” but:

How does it work?’ What can this concept or theory do? How can such a theory exist or be lived? What are its forces? (ibid 2000: 8 emphasis in original)

Such a stance resonates with Stanley and Wise who argue that to avoid ghettoization, feminism “should remain open to, adopt, adapt, modify and use, interesting and useful ideas from any and every source” (1993: 31) to retain its vitality and viability. Maggie MacLure agrees, arguing that despite the “repulsion” of male theory “we should resist the impulse to keep our distance, since this would be to collude” (2004: 108) in the exclusion of living, breathing females from the inner
circles of academia, where “pimped for poststructuralism” woman “is put to work as a metaphor, to rescue philosophy from the exhaustion of logocentrism” (2004: 102). The Deleuzian notion of becoming for instance horrifies those in feminist circles for whom ‘becoming woman’ signifies a loss of identity:

"Because man has been taken as the universal ground of reason and good thinking...Man is traditionally defined as being: as the self evident ground of a politics of identity and recognition. Woman, as his other, offers the opening of becoming; and the girl thus functions as a way of thinking woman, not as a complementary being, but as the instability that surrounds any being. (Colebrook 2000: 2 emphasis in original)"

Others focus on Deleuze's celebration of creativity and his identification of woman as the source of infinite potential and life-affirming resistance to the deadening hand of history, which “only designates a set of conditions however recent they may be, from which one turns away in order to 'become' that is, in order to create something new” (Deleuze 1990: 231). Indeed Verena Conley draws attention to the parallels that exist between the work of Deleuze, Guattari, Derrida and feminist scholars like Cixous, pointing out that they all “write away from a unified subject for whom the other is merely a mirrored reflection of the self” rejecting the external imposition of identities that define and limit, searching instead for “ways out, in other words, for exits or sorties from the confines of a disciplinary society” (2000: 19 emphasis in original).

2.4.10 The end does not justify the means

Given the fractured and fractious nature of feminism, there are no uniquely feminist methods, according to Shulamit Reinharz, author of *Feminist Methods in Social Research* who argues that feminism:

"supplies the perspective and the disciplines supply the method. The feminist researcher exists at their intersection – feeling like she has a second shift or a double burden, or feeling that her research will benefit from the tension. (1992: 243)"

The method itself then is secondary to the fundamental principles that guide our actions as feminist researchers, and the ‘tension’ experienced in the attempt to
balance the ethical and moral obligations and the need to synthesize the political, analytical, theoretical and practical in our research (Stanley 2004). It is therefore the process that should distinguish feminist inquiry, an avoidance of exploitative so-called “rape research” (Reinharz 1979: xx) in favour of research designs that are at once “empowering and self-reflexive” (Lather 1988: 570) in order to explore women’s experiences “in a respectful manner that legitimates women’s voices as sources of knowledge” (Campbell & Wasco 2000 cited in Deutsch 2004: 888).

2.4.11 Male control of textuality

So how do you legitimate women’s knowledge in a male-voiced civilisation, where the vast bulk of the scientific and literary canon has been authored by men? Patsy Schweickart argues that in the act of reading, “literature is realized as praxis. Literature acts on the world by acting on its readers” (1986: 39 emphasis in original) whilst Judith Fetterly is not alone (Smith & Watson 1998; Heilbrun 1988) in her belief that the “refusal to recognize women as having stories denies women the experience it ensures for men – namely, reading as a validation of one’s reality and reinforcement of one’s identity” (1986: 152) suggesting that “male control of textuality” or appropriation of the universal, has the potential to drive women mad:

Forced to read men’s texts, women are forced to become characters in those texts. And since the stories men tell assert as fact what women know to be fiction, not only do women lose the power that comes from authoring; more significantly, they are forced to deny their own reality and to commit in effect a kind of psychic suicide. (Fetterly 1986: 159)

2.4.12 L’Écriture féminine

The limited canon and an uncritical acceptance of the limited sphere of women’s thought and influence historically has lead to “a long-standing tendency to read women’s writing dismissively, as literal, descriptive, confessional, parochial, sincere or artless – and therefore as textually naïve and theoretically impoverished” (MacLure 2004: 98 emphasis in original). A presumption of textual ‘innocence’ in women’s writing or perhaps the fear of “the loss of power and control which would accompany giving voice to that other” (Fetterly 1986: 159) means that what is recognised as “as rhetorical, disruptive and deconstructive” in the work of men is
read in women’s “as literal, descriptive and conformative” (MacLure 2004: 102). The problem is compounded for those attempting to write ‘as women’ by the discovery that “the world of female emotion seems to be colonized by imperialist cliché. Cliché defines like a corset the contours of ‘appropriate’ female feelings and desires” in the words of Frigga Haug, who goes on to assert:

This lack of an adequate language is not simply a function of the fact that not everyone can be a great writer; it is an obstacle to liberation. Women’s emergence of self-conscious from the shadows of pre-history – their movement into politics in particular – demands a conscious appraisal of our lives, it demands that experience be transformed into theory; it demands, in short, a language. (1999: 62)

Such a language is epitomised by the genre of women’s writing, l’écriture féminine associated with Hélène Cixous (1986; 1981), Luce Irigaray (1985a; 1985b) and Julia Kristeva (1984; 1982), which evolved as an oppositional practice to phallocentric discourse and culture (Connell 2009: 84), its complex nature both a repudiation of innocence, for “there are no pure texts, confessional or otherwise, and no innocent language that can represent without distortion women’s voices and ways of knowing” (MacLure 2004: 108 emphasis in original) and a reaction to the logic and language of the male text, for many female scholars are perhaps more accepting of “ignorance, ambiguity and uncertainty as the enduring truths of meaning” (ibid 2004: 104 emphasis in original) in their writing (Lather 2007) as in life for:

Writing is a transgression of boundaries, an exploration of new territory. It involves making public the events of our lives, wriggling free of the constraints of purely private and individual experiences. From a state of modest insignificance we enter a space in which we can take ourselves seriously. (Haug 1999: 36)
2.5 My story: Becoming a feminist

Having been socialised into a high maintenance and highly domesticated femininity, ‘Women’s Libbers’ with their dungarees, make-up free faces and penchant for camping in places without adequate sanitation like Greenham Common, were not obvious bedfellows in my youth. Although aware of discrimination, I rather naively believed that I could demand and receive equality, and it took many years, many disappointments and studying for a Master’s degree before I was able to embrace feminism unequivocally.

2.5.1 Superwoman

My mother I now realise was something of a feminist herself; she performed femininity in the sense of always appearing desirable, elegant and sophisticated, beautifully dressed, whilst embracing her profession as a chef, and prioritising it above and beyond the domestic. Much of the responsibility for the day to day care of my younger siblings devolved to me as a consequence as did most of the housework, and so I grew up with expectations of having a career, and first hand experience of domestic multi-tasking. It was after all the era of Shirley Conran and *Superwoman* (1975).

2.5.2 Working girl

I started my working life in investment banking in the City of London in the 1980s, where I discovered the existence of a ceiling that far from being made of glass was, in fact, fashioned from reinforced concrete. The only woman on a 12 ‘man’ dealing team, I found myself in an insanely testosterone-fuelled environment where the air was permanently tinged blue with obscenity, but I was supposed to personify fragrant femininity. Whilst my colleagues frequently arrived substantially the worse for wear, dishevelled, unshaven and hung-over, I was expected to be immaculately presented at all times and comport myself in a lady-like fashion, even, and perhaps especially when, I was the target of verbal abuse – a daily occurrence. In addition to being held to much higher standards of presentation and behaviour, I was expected to do my own job, and any and all other jobs that had been overlooked, ignored or
forgotten by other team members\textsuperscript{37}. My fellow junior regularly neglected his administrative tasks in order to focus on ‘getting ahead’ and if I did not do them in his stead, then we both got carpeted. When I made the mistake of pointing out that I had actually done my full complement of work and was therefore unhappy about being reprimanded in this manner, I was told that I was only complaining ‘because I was a girl’. My sex rendered any complaint I might have null and void, and was exploited to call into question both my ability and my commitment to the role.

### 2.5.3 Living the fairytale

On reading Bronwyn Davies \textit{Women’s Subjectivity and Feminist Stories} (1992) for the first time, I experienced the shock of recognition as I became aware of the extent to which I had unwittingly internalized the prevalent romantic storyline, in which “the most ordinary and flawed of men” (1992: 68) frogs, or ogres for that matter, are rescued by the love of a good woman and magically transformed into princes. Ironically I fell in love with and married an actual prince, but the reality was more Cinderella before the intervention of the Fairy Godmother than the ‘happily ever after’ in the palace of glass slippers that I might have dreamed of. My efforts to be the perfect princess and provide a loving and stable home for my husband, complete with cordon bleu meals on tap were doomed to failure because not only did the other characters populating my life and narrative not share my understandings of this particular storyline, but because I was in the wrong story, one in which my imposed identity seemed to explicitly deprive me of agency.

### 2.6 Researching Other/ed women

Having outlined some contemporary understandings and iterations of feminism in the West, and identified several staging points on my own journey towards feminism, I now look at the Othering of the Arab Muslim woman and consider what it means to be an Arab feminist.

\textsuperscript{37} On occasion, the demands went well beyond my professional remit, such as the Chief Dealer’s expectation that I should kneel at his feet in the dealing room to stitch up the hem of his trousers!
2.6.1 Culture of colonialism

Arab Muslim culture is often perceived as “monolithic” in the west (Abdelrazek 2007: 89) “occupying an unchanging ahistorical time and space” (Teo 2005: 396) and this ‘fixity’ “connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and demonic repetition” (Bhabha 2004: 94) helping to sustain negative stereotypes, which in their turn affirm the otherness of that world and its occupants. From this perspective, western culture is seen as fluid, producing “autonomous liberal subjects…able to step in and out of culture, to have culture” in stark contrast to the essentialised Muslim world in which “their others are governed by culture” (Scharff 2011: 131 emphasis in original). This attitude underpins the comfortable fiction that inequality for women resides elsewhere, in the Middle East and Asia, the suggestion being that ‘they’ are not like us, being ‘victims’ of their culture and in need of rescuing (Abu-Lughod 2013; Gill 2011; Scharff 2011). This “construction of Muslim women as powerless victims of patriarchy facilitates the repudiation of feminism as unnecessary in western countries” (Scharff 2011: 128) making it “easier for women in the west to believe that they are not oppressed” and therefore more difficult to critique “the violence and other forms of structural inequalities they face” (Khan 2005: 2027). Transnational feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty captures the conceit brilliantly:

This average Third World woman leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being ‘Third World’ (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc.). This, I suggest, is in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions. (2003: 22)

In the media, the ‘victims’ are always brown women in need of rescue from brown men as Gayatri Spivak (1988) so famously declared. Kristín Loftsdóttir, drawing on Stoler’s (2008) concept of the “political life of imperial debris” argues that “the social classification of people in terms of skin colour is one of many tangible remains of the colonial period that continues to inform current realities and practices” and stresses the way in which “gendered ideas of the present are embedded in a past colonial context” (2012: 42 emphasis in original).
2.6.2 Muslim woman: The ultimate Other?

Since 9/11 the plight of oppressed Muslim women “cowering creatures demanding and expecting violence and victimization” (Toynbee 2001) has been pressed into service by politicians and pundits to demonize the Arab male and justify the War on Terror waged in and against the Muslim world (Abu-Lughod 2013: 29; Ahmed 2011: 222; Haddad 2007: 255; Abdelrazek 2007: 70). Demand for misery porn of an Arab flavour soared after 9/11 and many of these ‘veiled best sellers’ (Whitlock 2007: 94) depicting Islam as “vile, violent and above all abusive of women” (Dabashi 2006 cited in Ahmed 2011: 225) have become international sensations (Hirsi Ali 2008; 2007; Nafisi 2004; Khouri 2003). Muslim women are depicted as passive, unidimensional victims, a whole continent of sleeping beauties in need of liberation by the chivalrous knights of the West, but in these modern versions of the fairytale a discreet veil is drawn over the fact that this particular ‘kiss’ bestows death and destruction, rather than the breath of life. It is perhaps no coincidence that the “arguments of these authors read like a blueprint for the neoconservative agenda for regime change in the Middle East” according to Saba Mahmood (2008: 88-89) who notes that all of these individuals have links to neoconservatives in the United States and Europe.

2.6.3 Visible difference

The hijab has become a totemic symbol of women’s oppression in popular culture “more than an instrument of persecution, it is a public tarring and feathering of female sexuality” (Toynbee 2001) leading Arab American poet Mohja Kahf (2003: 58) to demand that Westerners “Untangle your hands from my hair” for:

My body is not your battleground
My hair is neither sacred nor cheap,
Neither the cause of your disarray
Nor the path to your liberation
My hair will not bring progress and clean water
if it flies unbraided in the breeze
It will not save us from our attackers
if it is wrapped and shielded from the sun

In this poem Kahf is perhaps alluding to the conflation of Islam and the patriarchal cultures in which it is practised in the Western mind, for the veil, “real or imagined,
functions like race, a marker of essential difference that Muslim women today cannot escape” according to Cooke (2008: 91). Rather more starkly, Tim Mackintosh-Smith claims that:

The veil is indeed a potent symbol, but a symbol of the unwillingness or inability of the West to understand the Arab world. The Iron Curtain has been and gone; the muslin curtain still hangs, and probably always will. (1997: 18)

Such attitudes towards the veil and the monolithic ‘Muslimwoman’ behind it prevents identification with those Muslim women “articulating new ways of being strong religious and gendered persons…newly empowered women who live their sexuality, their sex and their religion in sometimes unexpected ways” (Cooke 2008: 94).

2.6.4 Arab feminism

There is a common misconception in both East and West that feminism is a Western creation, but there is evidence to suggest that Arab feminism evolved independently, first emerging in Egypt in the 1860s (Abu-Lughod 2013; Karam 2012; Badran & Cooke 2004). Like its Western counterpart, Arab feminism consists of multiple and competing discourses, but despite the first wave being dubbed secular, religion is a fundamental element of all feminist movements in the Middle East. Margot Badran and Mariam Cooke, who compiled the first anthology of Arab feminist writing Opening the Gates (2004) argue that early Arab feminists were inspired by the tradition of *ijtihad* “the free and independent investigation of religious texts, incumbent on Muslims in order to access the deeper meanings and principles of their religion” (2004: xix). Early interpretations of the Holy Qur’an, heavily influenced by Christian and Biblical tradition in their hostility to women (Kassam 2012: 408; Bewley 2004; Ahmed 1992: 239) became set in stone in the tenth century, when it was announced that “the gates were closed”. This was an injunction that female scholars have only recently felt able to challenge (Karam 2012: 209) in much the same way as feminist theologians have lately been challenging petrified interpretations of the Bible that were themselves only periodic updates in a tradition
of ongoing reinterpretation as what began as “a method of revitalizing earlier texts became inert and unchangeable” (Schibanoff 1986: 91).

Official, textual Islam is considered by many women to be the enemy within, and taking the Prophet’s own life and actions as the starting point, and supported by linguistic analysis, scholars such as Amina Wadud (2006) and Hadia Mubarak (2004) have offered female interpretations of the Holy Qur’an, challenging some of the most contested surahs, such as a man’s right to beat his wife for disobedience (4:34). An English language version of such an interpretation The Sublime Qur’an by eminent Islamic scholar and editor, Laleh Bakhtiar became available in 2007 but has yet to displace more established interpretations and can not compete with the bestseller status of some of the misery porn titles above such as Hirsi Ali’s Infidel (2008).

Many of those participating in what from a research perspective is feminist discourse might not lay claim to the label themselves, so toxic has this symbol of Western pollution become in certain Arab circles, but “a consciousness that women are oppressed in many ways” and “actual attempts to rectify or deal with this oppression” permeate the writings of many Muslim scholars (Karam 2012: 201). Building on these themes, Badran and cooke contend that the writing of Arab feminists demonstrates an awareness “that as women they are systemically placed in a disadvantaged position” a rejection of “enforced behaviours and thought” and activism in their “attempts to interpret their own experiences, and then improve their position or lives as women” (2004: xxvi-xxvii).

2.6.5 Feminism and religion

Early secular feminism “a complex gender discourse invoking religious, nationalist, and human rights” (Badran & cooke 2004: xviii) arose in a religious era and coincided with newly available books and reading material. Arab feminists have been arguing for more than a century for girls to be “crowned with the rubies of knowledge and adorned with necklaces strung with pearls of learned understanding” (Al-Taimuriya 1894/5 in Badran & cooke 2004: 130) and women’s magazines of the period, such as Al-Fatah, express profoundly modern and highly political stances, with their intentions of providing space for the:
flowings from the pens of women and gems of women writers’ thoughts, with scientific subjects, historical episodes, literary selections and amusing anecdotes. Its sole principle is to defend the rights of the deprived and draw attention to the obligations due. (Nawfal 1892 in Badran & Cooke 2004: 218)

The first word in the Holy Qur’an is the injunction ‘Read’. An educated woman therefore is only threatening to patriarchal cultures, which is why so-called religious or Islamic feminists claim that all guidance can be found in the Holy Qur’an which addresses both men and women equally:

With a healthy respect for the role of faith in empowering and liberating women and men, religious feminists…emphasize new and evolving interpretations of doctrine…maintaining that no discourse of women’s rights that rejects religion can achieve its objectives in contexts where such a religion is the pervasive *lingua franca* of the masses and the politicians. (Karam 2012: 203 emphasis in original)

### 2.6.6 Islamist feminists

The resurgent Islamist movement “characterized by an almost exclusively political engagement” (Karam 2012: 204) has produced its own brand of feminist thought known as Islamist feminism, or conservative sharia-ism, “linking piety with politics” (Cooke 2008: 95). For those in this camp, the oppression of women and current “social, political and structural problems” are “explained in terms of society’s lack of adherence to Islam (or to God) and to the demands of that faith in general” (Karam 2012: 202-203). In making public displays of religious observance and piety these women are at once both traditional and modern, and while their designation as ‘moral custodians’ may seem limiting, the family is seen as “a mini-state, and women, as leaders of that mini-state, become important political actors” in the service of *din wa dawla*, religion and nation (Karam 2012: 207).

### 2.6.7 Besieged?

Arab feminists of any affiliation face the unenviable task of fighting on two fronts, against the very real inequalities perpetuated by patriarchal institutions and conservative cultural scripts on the one hand, and the stereotypical views held by many in the West, including feminists, in which “all Muslim women - their
motivations, their beliefs and their aspirations – are generalised, despised or simply denied legitimacy” (Merali 2006: 176) on the other. Not only are such women denied a platform “to express their transformative ideology” in a supposedly liberal society, but “their ideas of liberation are characterised as self-deluding narratives” (Merali 2006: 176) to boot.

2.7 My story: Becoming an activist

Conscious of my own liminality from an early age, I became aware as I grew up of the many injustices perpetuated by institutionalised systems and often unthinking habits of discrimination at work in society. I struggled with hegemonic and normative discourses that denied things that I knew to be true, for “ways of knowing are forged in history and relations of power” (hooks 1994: 30) and by virtue of nationality, gender and religion I had often been on the wrong side of those relations. My mother’s family has a proud tradition of adopting ‘lame ducks’ with service being a central orientation, so whilst uncomfortable with the religious framework\(^{38}\) in which it was couched, I have always embraced the defence of the underdog, and activism seemed a natural development.

2.7.1 The personal is political

As a teenager I was very politically engaged, the General Strike of 1977 having raised my awareness of just how dependent the population was on the political class for taken-for-granted necessities such as electricity and food. Nights spent reading by candle light, and the daily pilgrimage to the shops to buy the rationed allowance of bread and sugar, left an indelible impression and created a store-cupboard mentality that has stood me in good stead in times of shortage and conflict in Yemen particularly. Margaret Thatcher was something of a role model for me, a strong woman who worked from a clearly articulated set of beliefs and was prepared to fight for those beliefs, earning me the nickname at school of ‘Mini-Mrs T’. Ironic then, that unlike so many of my apathetic peers, I was not to be permitted to vote,

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\(^{38}\) A large number of family members have been involved in overseas missionary work, about which I have long been ambivalent, despite it being ‘a good thing’. My aunt and uncle even attempted to convert my husband to Christianity on our wedding day and I now realise it was cultural imperialism that was the cause of my discomfort.
the wrong half of me being British. I was denied a UK passport and citizenship, on the basis that ‘only’ my Mother was British, and permitted ‘indefinite leave to remain’ on sufferance\(^{39}\).

### 2.7.2 Crossing the line

Usually comfortable with my otherness, I do not expect to fit in when I am overseas, and have taken insults in China and stones in Yemen in my stride, but I was profoundly shocked by my experience of racism in the UK during my marriage. Although my husband suffered abuse when he was on his own, when we were out together, it was me that seemed to be the focal point of the verbal and physical abuse from assorted drunk and sober members of the public on the street and in bars and cafes. According to critical race theorist Kevin Hylton (2010a) this was when I ‘became’ white, and a hitherto unremarkable aspect of my genetic inheritance was conflated with my identity by those angered by my betrayal of my colour and apparent rejection of what they no doubt viewed as our shared culture. Once seeking emergency treatment for an arm injury, the doctor who examined me made his belief that my husband had assaulted me overt, and as I was being accompanied by him at the time, I had to restrain him from assaulting the doctor once he realised what was being implied!

Back in Yemen, things were if anything harder, lines were drawn all over the place and stark choices had to be made. Restrictions on my movements met with blank incomprehension by friends and colleagues in the diplomatic community and it proved to be a difficult balancing act, trying to hold on to some vestige of my identity as a European, whilst having essentially lost access to all the legal rights and privileges that that European self enjoyed. ‘Going native’ was taken a very dim view of at the Embassy, where unabashedly colonial attitudes surfaced occasionally, for instance not inviting my husband to events to which all other partners were invited, and refusing to acknowledge his presence or engage with us as a couple at those social events hosted by more liberal European diplomats. Already marginal, I had marginalised myself further by virtue of marrying the Other.

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\(^{39}\) The status was and is, in the gift of the Home Office and can be withdrawn at any time. During my childhood the legacy of Enoch Powell’s assault on immigration made the experience of that status rather more precarious than it is today.
2.7.3 A segregated society

As a woman in Yemen, much socialising was done in the company of women at tea parties or *haflas* and whilst the idea of afternoon gatherings with nothing stronger than cups of cardamom spiced tea and cookies might sound rather staid, nothing could be further from the truth. Such protected and precious women-only spaces evoke the much misunderstood *harem* of years gone by, that far from the personal brothel of celluloid fame, was in fact the family's private living quarters which often offered sanctuary to divorced and dispossessed women of the extended family (Andrea 2007; Mernissi 1996; Ahmed 1982). Despite the arranged marriages, many of the women of my acquaintance were clearly adored by their husbands, and where marital relations were not so cordial, the segregated yet communal nature of life in a Sana’ani household40 meant that wives could minimise contact with their husbands and had a built-in support system. Some women in my circle attended *haflas* on a daily basis, dressed in all their finery, their long and beautifully patterned robes cinched in with belts made of 24ct gold, and their faces elaborately made-up. Conversation ranged from the habitual (husbands, clothes and gossip) to the sacred (Qur’anic exegesis or *tafsir*) and the practical (matchmaking and fundraising).

Whilst I found the domestic parameters of my life as a Sana’ani wife stifling, and yes, ‘oppressive’ I was nonetheless inspired and motivated by the example of the strong and inspirational women who offered moral and practical support to each other and their communities from the limited space they called their own. I therefore resolved to help women in Yemen access education and through it their rights, by working with and within women’s understandings of Islam.

2.8 Conclusion

In this chapter I have articulated my understandings and lived experience of what it means to be a woman and a feminist in Western society. I have also offered a perspective on observant Muslim women and their own distinctive feminist praxis, at odds with stereotypical media depictions of the oppressed or deluded ‘Other’, as the second frame for the lives of the women presented in Chapter 6 (the third, 40 In Sana’a a man may not enter his own house without alerting the occupants to his presence by calling ‘Allah, Allah, Allah’ as he crosses the threshold, and again as he moves between floors. This is to provide enough time for any unrelated women inside to cover up.
analytical frame is to be found in Chapter 5). Having positioned this study both historically and politically, in the next chapter I situate it within the paradigm of critical qualitative inquiry.
Chapter 3

Working the Hyphens\textsuperscript{41}: Interrogating the space between self and other

3.1 Introduction

My doctoral research endeavours were always conceived of as an intervention. I undertook research because I wanted to make a difference, not limited to the addition of another tome to the university library, to the lives of the living, loving, laughing women with whom I worked in Yemen and to the often negative attitudes of those with no firsthand experience of veiled women. In this chapter I situate my work within the paradigm of qualitative inquiry, specifically the research-as-advocacy cluster, championed by Norman Denzin (2009; 2005; 2003) and his associates. I explore the role of narrative in advocacy in general, and life history in particular. I address the contextual and constructed nature of a life story, and trouble notions of truth, memory and voice. I then explore possible criteria for evaluating such research in the absence of universally agreed criteria for qualitative inquiry.

3.2 A commitment to a better world

I situate my work within the tradition of critical qualitative inquiry (Denzin 2009) guided by principles first articulated by Yvonna Lincoln and Egon Guba in the 1980s, of respect for the researched, learning for all involved, the sharing of knowledge and the fostering of social change (Lincoln 2002: 330). These principles - and the commitments to “new” relationships with the researched, the taking up of unashamedly “professional, personal and political” stances towards research and “a vision of research that enables and promotes social justice, community, diversity, civic discourse and caring” (ibid 2002: 330) that accompanied them - resonate powerfully with me and chime with feminist concerns about the process of research as well as its outcomes. Indeed, Denzin advances a feminist ethical framework for research which “demands of any action that it positively contribute to a politics of

\textsuperscript{41} Michelle Fine (1994a: 70)
resistance, hope and freedom” (2009: 49) which Ron Pelias so poetically describes as “a methodology of the heart” (2004). As a feminist, activist and researcher, I finally felt that I had come ‘home’ in 2009 when I discovered in the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (ICQI) a community of scholars dedicated to the pursuit of social justice, gathering where a blurring of boundaries was taking place, and creating an interdisciplinary space in which the only orthodoxy was advocacy. It was in this liminal and heuristic space that I came across, in both print and person, the scholars, Art Bochner (2012; 2007; 2001), Carolyn Ellis (2009; 2007; 1995), Norman Denzin (2009; 2008; 2005; 2003), H L ‘Bud’ Goodall (2012; 2010; 2008) Patti Lather (2007; 1991; 1988), Yvonna Lincoln (2002; 1993), Liza Mazzei (2009; 2008; 2007), Ron Pelias (2011; 2007; 2004), Laurel Richardson (2002; 2001; 1994) and Elizabeth ‘Betty’ St Pierre (2011; 2000; 1997) to name a few, who were to have a profound influence on what I believed it was possible to do, be and become in academia.

3.2.1 Research and politics

According to social psychologist Michelle Fine, a founding member of this research-as-advocacy community:

The raison d’être for such research is to unsettle questions, texts and collective struggles: to challenge what is, incite what could be, and help imagine a world that is not yet imagined. (1994b: 30 emphasis in original)

Such a formulation of the research endeavour reflects the influence of both critical theory and postmodernism on this strand of qualitative inquiry and has been sharply criticised by scholars nominally within the qualitative research tent such as Martyn Hammersley, who claims that the replacement of “the impersonal stance of science by a celebration of acknowledged subjectivity and ethico-political engagement” (2008: 7) is not only “damaging” and “indefensible” but threatens the very existence of qualitative research (2008: 11). Critical theorists Joe Kincheloe and Peter McLaren have long believed that such research is “dangerous” but argue that it is essential precisely because it produces “the kind of information and insight that upsets institutions and threatens to overturn sovereign regimes of truth” (2003: 433). Critical ethnographer D. Soyini Madison claims that we should seek “not only
to speak truth to power but also to put power in peril, in jeopardy, to endanger it” (2009: 190)

Although as Art Bochner notes “no single, unchallenged paradigm has been established for deciding what does and does not comprise valid, useful, and significant knowledge” (2000: 268) the suspicion persists that “one’s scholarship is less trustworthy, tainted by advocacy, commitments, passion or responsibilities” (Fine et al 2003: 197) even within some feminist circles by those who “cling to the guardrail of neutrality” (Kincheloe & McLaren 2003: 453). Daphne Patai has been an outspoken critic of work which “effaces any distinction between political agendas and the protocols of research” claiming that it “is in danger of suppressing - it already dismisses – any calm, reflective stance that sees some strength in the effort…to set biases aside” turning “feminist insight into extraordinary blindness” (1994: 62). Patai appears to be arguing for a retreat to the confines of the ivory tower and the more traditional role of the disinterested and distant observer, ignoring the claims that “what passes for objective research is a search for what elites want knowledge about” (Wall 2008: 49) and that “it is power, rather than the facts about reality, which makes things true” (Hall 2006: 167 emphasis in original).

3.2.2 Power?

The recognition of the ways in which researchers are privileged and the differing ways in which power is experienced and invoked in research relationships is a central concern in advocacy work, for:

we are caught in the paradox of attempting to investigate and deconstruct power relations even as we are ourselves engaged in a project that creates and re-creates power accruing primarily to us. (Cannella & Lincoln 2009: 57)

Critical theory requires us to be aware of how we have been institutionalized, and to trouble our understandings of the systems within which we live and work. It requires us not to take our own stories and those of others at face value and to critique them, to subject them to robust and rigorous interrogation, and to be reflexive about that critique:
By critical perspectives we mean any research that recognizes power—that seeks in its analyses to plumb the archaeology of taken-for-granted perspectives to understand how unjust and oppressive social conditions came to be reified as historical “givens”. (Cannella & Lincoln 2009: 54)

Language is the medium through which “social organization and power are defined and contested and the place where our sense of selves, our subjectivity is constructed” (Richardson 1994: 518 emphasis in original). It constrains and contains thought and to an extent dictates what it is possible and permissible to say, as it both “gives form to ideologies and prompts action, and consequently, is deeply complicit in power relations” (Cannella & Lincoln 2009: 55). Language therefore is not merely a reflection of “social reality, but produces meaning, creates social reality” (Richardson 1994: 518) and may be used to perpetuate inequality through the construction of epistemologies of ignorance such as those that construe Muslim women as victims of their religion or false consciousness. A number of recent studies indicate that Muslims in the UK are routinely presented in a negative light by the media (Baker, Gabrielatos & McEnery 2013; Murphy 2013; Al-Heijin 2009; Saeed 2007), implying at the very least that Muslim men lack empathy and Muslim women lack agency. Media representations are never innocent and are both created and co-opted by the powerful as justification for the pursuit of their own interests, the oppressed Muslim woman being “above all a political construct conjured into being to serve particular political ends” (Ahmed 2011: 231) such as the War on Terror. Arthur Frank warns of “the hypnotic spell” cast by such widely-disseminated narratives which may produce “an embodied assent that requires the incomprehension of other stories that fail to fit the underlying narrative of one’s own stories” (2010: 80-81 my emphasis). As I established in Chapter 2, the endless repetition of the tropes of the oppressed Muslim woman and violent Muslim man, bolster comfortable fictions of our own cultural superiority, suggesting that inequality resides elsewhere and reifying binaries in which ‘We’ are seen to be both ‘good’ and ‘right’ and ‘They’ are of necessity deviant, and all too often demonised for ill-defined difference (see Chapter 2. Section 6). Whilst stories often function to sustain and perpetuate hegemony, they are also a primary vehicle for the subversion of such grand narratives (Bruner 1996: 99; Ewick & Silbey 1995: 200) and can be
pressed into service and “used as a source of empowerment and a form of resistance to counter the domination of canonical discourses” (Bochner 2000: 271).

3.2.3 Troubling advocacy

Narrative then can be used for the work of advocacy, given its ability to “entice some readers into reconsidering comfortable attitudes and values and others into affirming latent perspectives not sanctioned by the dominant culture” (Barone 1995: 66) and thus has often been embraced by those working in emancipatory traditions. Whilst the notion of emancipatory narrative is seductive, Patti Lather cautions against succumbing to the “romantic aspirations” of advocacy (2009: 18) and D. Soyini Madison is not alone (Pelias 2007; Fine et al 2003; Brettell 1993; Measor & Sikes 1992; Stacey 1988) in highlighting the moral dilemmas inherent in such storytelling, for “the position of advocate and the labour of advocacy are riddled with the pleasure and burden of representation that is always already so much about ethics” (2009: 193). There is a very real danger that in the desire to speak for those understood as marginalised, social injustices become reified in their description (Alcoff 2009; Zingaro 2009; Olesen 2003; Goodson 1995; Denzin 1992) assuming monolithic and universal proportions, and obscuring the agency exercised in ways perhaps invisible to the advocate, for whilst every centre has a margin, every margin has a centre (Gergen & Gergen 2012).

Whilst I am a passionate advocate, I am also ambivalent about emancipatory claims, because just as we struggle to be free of the cultural and historical context of our making (Butler 2011; Kincheloe & McLaren 2003) we cannot in any meaningful sense liberate anyone else from theirs, not least because power is not something that we have to ‘give’ in any concrete fashion (Zingaro 2009; Hoskins & Stoltz 2005; Christians 2003). The idea of emancipation is also tainted by association with colonial attitudes and bound up with the western liberal tradition’s fetishisation of the autonomous individual (Abu-Lughod 2013; Armour 2012; Joseph 2012; Alcoff 2009; Gergen 2009; Gilligan 1993). Trying to avoid getting “stuck in the missionary position” (McWilliam 2000 cited in McWilliam et al 2009: 63) and accepting our own limitations does however open the possibility of working with and for others, to help them achieve their own goals and desires, however different their imagined futures.
might be from our own. As an Aboriginal activist group declared in the 1970s, “If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together” (Hylton 2010b). This suggests a different kind of power that can be exercised in research and life, one that is relational and reciprocal, “a relationship not of domination, but of intimacy and vulnerability” (Christians 2003: 233). Narratives that emerge from such collaboration offer the potential for growth and development for all those involved, whilst making alternative points of view accessible to an audience across “the cultural separations of place, language, custom, belief, social class and gender” (Makler 1991: 46). It is through the provision of new stories that we can help boundaries shift in tandem with understandings, for “stories have formed us all; they are what we must use to make new fictions, new narratives” (Heilbrun 1988: 37).

By working in a collaborative fashion with women of whom so little is known and so much is assumed in the West, I hoped through this doctoral study to make a contribution both to knowledge and to the lives of the women themselves, for:

if telling a story requires giving oneself away, then we are obligated to devise a method of receiving stories that mediates the space between the self that tells, the self that told, and the self that listens: a method that returns a story to the teller that is both hers and not hers, that contains herself in good company. (Grumet 1991: 70)

My search for a narrative mode of research that could be used in a fashion that was collaborative and reciprocal, and facilitate the emergence of the multiple subjectivities of my storytellers led me to life history. In the next section I define life history, establish the rationale for its use and elaborate on key concepts such as voice and the blurred boundaries between fact and fiction.

3.3 Life History

Beyond broad agreement that life history embodies a “biographical perspective” (Miller 2000: 73), there is little consensus over the exact definition of the term ‘life history’. Other terms including but by no means limited to; ‘life story’, ‘personal narratives’, and ‘biography’ are often used interchangeably in the literature of the social sciences. At its most concise, a life history is “an account of one person’s life
in their own words, elicited or prompted by another person” (Munro 1998: 8). This account is not the definitive story, but one of many stories that could be told given the “many different and divergent storytelling occasions that call for and forth contextually marked and sometimes radically divergent narratives of identity” (Smith 1998: 109). A narrative of a life then is a creative construct called into existence through the interaction of the individuals involved in a specific time and place:

A life lived is what actually happens. A life as experienced consists of the images, feelings, sentiments, desires, thoughts, and meanings known to the person whose life it is... A life as told, a life history, is a narrative, influenced by the cultural conventions of telling, by the audience, and by the social context. (Bruner 1984 cited in Hatch & Wisniewski 1995: 129)

Ivor Goodson extends Bruner’s distinctions in a manner I find persuasive, suggesting that the ‘life as told’ is in fact a life ‘story’ and that a life ‘history’ is created when “the life story teller and…researcher collaborate to produce an intertextual/intercontextual account” resulting in the following development “life as lived, life as experienced, life as told and life history” (1992: 236). For the purposes of this thesis then, I understand life history as a collaboratively constructed textual artefact of the type that I present in Chapter 6. I elaborate on the interviews used to elicit the life stories in Chapter 4.

3.3.1 From the centre to the margins

Life history has a distinguished pedigree in the realms of history and literature, dating back to 400 AD and Augustine’s *Confessions*, if not to Plato and Plutarch in Ancient Greece, and has traditionally been dominated by heroic tales of the lives of great men, the ‘monomyth’ (Gergen & Gergen 1993: 195). In the 20th century it was adopted by the social sciences, anthropology in particular and became synonymous with the study of the ‘Other’. Early studies focused on the lives of Indians, such as Geronimo (Barrett 1906) and Crashing Thunder (Radin 1926), and immigrants (Thomas & Znaniecki 1918-1920) whilst in later decades life history was used to explore deviant subcultures or the lives of “nuts, sluts and perverts” (Van Maanen 1988: 42). The marginal status of life history in the academy (Plummer 2001: ix) perhaps contributed to its appeal to those marginalised in society, for in the wake of postmodernism’s unsettling of grand narratives, gender and sexuality studies (Weiler
& Middleton 1999; Middleton 1997; Plummer 1995; Connell 1995; Sparkes 1994; McLaughlin & Tierney 1993; Personal Narratives Group 1989) adopted the method, using it “to challenge the oppressive structures that create the conditions for silencing” (Tierney 1993: 4). It was also embraced with some enthusiasm in the field of education (Elbaz-Luwisch 2005; Simon-Maeda 2004; Johnson & Golombek 2002; Connelly & Clandinin 1995; Thomas 1995; Witherell & Noddings 1991) particularly by those interested in the gendered nature of teaching (Weiler & Middleton 1999; Munro 1998; Casey 1992; Nelson 1992) as the method “draws women out of obscurity, repairs the historical record, and provides an opportunity for the woman reader and writer to identify with the subject” (Reinharz 1992: 126). I chose life history because as a marginal practice that has been used to challenge hegemonic normative discourses and “the particular political destitution of women” (Cannella & Lincoln 2009: 56) it seemed an appropriate vehicle for the exploration of the lives of women Othered both by their absence from historical records, and what is commonly assumed to be their ‘absence of presence’ behind the veil.

### 3.3.2 Fact or fiction?

Life history problematises the “very nature of knowledge as objective and corresponding to any reality of the past” (Munro 1998: 5), and can only “represent a partial, selective commentary on lived experience” (Goodson & Sikes 2001: 16) blurring traditional distinctions between fact and fiction, representation and reality. It may seem counter-intuitive to challenge epistemologies of ignorance born of repeated exposure to images and words that reduce Muslim women to mere ciphers with more stories, rather than cold, hard facts. Surveys and statistics however fail to humanise the other, cannot capture or indeed convey the meanings made of events or the motivations behind actions, the strength that might be found in adversity or the joy found in duty, by the individuals concerned. Stories highlight the multiplicity of selves, realities and experiences (Chase 2005) and their value lies not in their factuality but in what they can reveal about an individual’s subjective reality, for the “truths inherent in personal narrative issue from real positions in the world – the passions, desires, ideas, and conceptual systems that underlie life as lived” (Josselson 1995: 32). A story is always already an interpretation, and “the representation of process, of a self in conversation with itself and with its world
over time…not records of facts, of how things actually were, but of a meaning-making system” (Josselson 1995: 33). Atkinson believes that the value of a story lies in the unique perspective (2001: 124) it provides and suggests that it is “more important that a life story be deemed trustworthy than that it be true” (2001: 134 emphasis in original). This echoes the call to feel and think with a story (1995) by Arthur Frank who argues that a:

story performs the truth of making a situation real because it is now narratable. An opening is created. Something has been spoken that previously was not fully acknowledged, and no one can say they have not heard it. (2010: 92 emphasis in original)

The key here is in the telling and recording of the stories, for “[w]here there are no sentences, there is no truth” (Rorty 1989 cited in Bochner 2007: 205).

3.3.3 Memory work

So whilst there may be ‘truths’ to be had in narrative, stories are works of memory and “our memories shade, reconcile, and piece together; they delete, select, and edit” (Bochner 2007: 205) meaning that “the ‘evidence of experience’ is no longer treated as innocent or transparent but is seen to be constituted through language, discourse and history” (Davies & Gannon 2006: 2). Bochner offers a vivid description of the “inadequacies of language” in memory work:

When we attempt to fit language to experience, we learn that there is always a cleavage between experience and words, between living through and narrating about, between the chaos and fragmentation of living a life and the smooth orderliness we bring to it when we write. (2007: 197)

Our efforts to recall our lives are further complicated by the fact that when we “tell ourselves stories of our past, make fictions or stories of it…these narrations become the past, the only part of our lives that is not submerged” (Heilbrun 1988: 51 emphasis in original) or as Ellis suggests you “become the stories you write” (2007: 22). Ken Plummer ventured the suggestion that mankind should be renamed homo narrans (1995: 5) given the ubiquity of stories and the way in which our identities are constituted in and by our stories, not once but repeatedly for:
identities are malleable and are altered as we narratively reflect on life events. In this way autobiographical memory both guides and is guided by narrative. Both are in flux, ever subject to reformulation. (Ochs & Capps 2001: 255)

3.3.4 Liminal spaces and shared realities

Whatever the limits of memory, a life history can open a discursive space in which storytellers, researchers and readers become critical participants, for whilst a story is less than the life, a story:

is also more than the life, the contours and meanings allegorically extending to others, others seeing themselves, knowing themselves through another’s life story, revisioning their own, arriving where they started and knowing the place for the first time. (Richardson 2002: 45 emphasis in original).

A life history written “in an interesting way, saying things that readers can believe to be true from some perspective, and saying things that help readers to see the world in new ways” (Rosenblatt 2001: 906) may constitute an effective way “of talking to each other across boundaries” (Connell 2009: 49). In this way the text “becomes the language that enables us to move across groups, to include rather than exclude” (Tierney 1998: 55) and such dialogue across difference suggests the possibility of entering into “a shared reality where all partners in the dialogue come to understand each other’s position, even if they do not entirely agree with it” (Shady & Larson 2010: 83).

3.3.5 Voice

Life history has been valorised in some feminist and educational circles for ‘giving voice’ to those who have been trapped in “the paralyzing position of being the spoken” (Gwin 1988 cited in Lather 1991: 28) for, “our stories enable us to be heard, recognized, and acknowledged by others” (Atkinson 2001: 125), the ability to tell such a story implying both power and choice (Plummer 1995: 26). However, as Linda Alcoff points out “how what is said gets heard depends on who says it, and who says it will affect the style and language in which it is stated” (2009: 122) for “the discursive context is a political arena” (ibid 2009: 123). The psychologist Carol Gilligan believes that women speak “in a different voice” (1993) one that has been
muted or silenced in a male-voiced civilization which has de-legitimised emotional and subjective forms of expression, prompting Carolyn Heilbrun (1988: 40) to ask how women can create stories of their lives “if they only have male language with which to do it?” (see Chapter 2. Section 4.11).

Despite the potential of voices and stories as “bona fide reflective research data” (Goodson 1997: 111) Maggie MacLure notes that voice “always evades capture” and that “[s]omething is always lost in translation” (2009: 98) which brings to mind Madeleine Grumet’s observation that our “stories are the masks through which we can be seen, and with every telling we stop the flood and swirl of thought so someone can get a glimpse of us, and maybe catch us if they can” (1991: 69). This elusiveness and the unstable, transgressive quality of voice has led to it being characterised as both deficient “weak and powerless” and yet “excessive” lending voice research “a distinctly feminine demeanour” (McLure 2009: 105). Denounced as representative of “the dark side of the postmodern” (Hargreaves 1994: 251) from which research needs ‘rescuing’ (Young 2000) some scholars are apparently uncomfortable with their inability to discipline voice, which defies domestication and drapes itself in “poststructural eroticism” (Mazzei 2009: 46). This “shifting, uncertain, uncontainable voice” (ibid 2009: 45) is situated on the borders of what can be understood and imagined and invites us to engage with the multiple, fragmented and perennially shifting subjectivities of the Other and risk “getting lost” (Lather 2007) in the process. It was the promise of this potential “to produce different knowledge and produce knowledge differently” (St Pierre 1997: 175) that led me to adopt the voice-centred relational method of analysis used in this thesis (see Chapter 5 and Appendix D) and to weave my own narratives of being and becoming throughout the text.

3.4 Evaluating Qualitative Inquiry

It has been argued that narrative is “a mode of inquiry that should be judged not so much against the standards and practices of science as against the practical, emotional and aesthetic demands of life” (Jackson 1989 cited in Ellis & Bochner 1992: 99) and although there is little in the way of consensus on criteria for
qualitative inquiry, there is broad agreement on the inappropriacy or illegitimacy of using criteria drawn from the quantitative paradigm, or “Catholic questions directed to a Methodist audience” (Guba & Lincoln 2005: 202). Whilst many eminent scholars (Bochner 2000; Schwandt 1996; Lather 1994) are dismissive of the “cult around criteria” and the pursuit of universal standards, they also acknowledge the very real danger that qualitative studies and “theory-building will suffer from a failure to protect our work from our own passions and limitations” (Lather 1991: 69) in the absence of paradigm specific criteria. Sarah Tracy argues that criteria “serve as shorthand about the core values of a certain craft” (2010: 838) and can be used to “encourage dialogue and learning amongst qualitative methodologists from various paradigms” (2010: 839).

3.4.1 In pursuit of a critical consciousness

As I situate myself within the critical qualitative inquiry paradigm, I look to eminent scholars within it for inspiration. In keeping with his commitment to social justice, Norman Denzin believes that researchers “must make their own moral and political values clear, including the social constructions, values and so-called objective facts and ideological assumptions that are attached to these positions” (2009: 159) and suggests that texts should be analysed in terms of “epistemological, aesthetic and political criteria” (2009: 151). Clifford Christians talks of ‘interpretive sufficiency’ which “means taking seriously lives that are loaded with multiple interpretations and grounded in cultural complexity” (2003: 228). Such sufficiency is achieved when an account “represents multiple voices, enhances moral discernment, and promotes social transformation” (ibid: 228-229). This requires “that amount of depth, detail, emotionality, nuance and coherence that will permit a critical consciousness…to be formed” and the absence of “racial, class or gender stereotyping” if “representational adequacy” is to be achieved (Denzin 2009: 157).

3.4.2 Body and soul

Carolyn Ellis desires a narrative that is meaningful, one that is useful and convincing which has the potential to promote dialogue or stimulate action, that offers complexity and nuance (2000). Like Frank (1995) she wants “to feel and think with
the story” (2000: 273) hoping that a text will engage, evoke or provoke her, as she seeks a connection with its “narrative soul” (2000: 74). Art Bochner urges the creation of “interesting, innovative, and evocative texts, works that seek to nurture the imagination not kill it” (2000: 268). He looks for rich detail, in complex narratives, which demonstrate ethical self-consciousness and display “the self on the page” (2000: 270) in stories which move “my heart and belly as well as my head” (2000: 271). Laurel Richardson too, wants to see texts that are “artistically shaped, satisfying, complex, and not boring” (2000: 254) that have an impact on both an emotional and intellectual level, are highly reflexive and convey “a fleshed out, embodied sense of lived-experience” (2000: 254) and ultimately make a contribution to the understanding of lives, our own and those of ‘Others’.

3.4.3 The poetic, political, ethical…and scientific

From the above it seems there is an emerging consensus within the ICQI community centred around core qualities such as ethical engagement, reflexivity, impact, resonance, complexity and aesthetic merit. The poetic, political and ethical criteria above all resonate strongly with me but for the purposes of this thesis are perhaps insufficient, for as Richardson remarks:

Creative arts is one lens through which to view the world; analytical/science is another. We see better with two lenses. We see best with both lenses focused and magnified. (2000: 254)

A model which in my opinion offers the combination of the scientific and the literary advocated by Richardson, and addresses the need to develop “flexible and contextually situated” criteria (2010: 838) has been proposed by Sarah Tracy. She identifies the following as markers for high quality qualitative research “(a) worthy topic, (b) rich rigor, (c) sincerity, (d) credibility, (e) resonance, (f) significant contribution, (g) ethics, and (h) meaningful coherence” (2010: 839) and this is the framework I have adopted to both guide the process of my research and evaluate my thesis (see Chapter 7. Section 3).
3.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have situated myself within the paradigm of critical qualitative inquiry and positioned this thesis as a work of narrative as advocacy, realised in the life histories presented in Chapter 6 and their interpretation. I have briefly outlined life history’s history, provided a rationale for its use in my study and explored key issues such as the subjective and constructed nature of a life story and the affordances and limits of voice. I have also reviewed criteria appropriate for the evaluation of a work of critical qualitative inquiry such as this. Having now established the historical, political and paradigmatic parameters of this study, in the next chapter I tell the story of designing and conducting a research project informed by feminist ethics.
Chapter 4

The undoing of the Doctrine of Immaculate Perception\textsuperscript{42}: A story of research unravelled…

4.1 Introduction

In Chapter 3, I elaborated on critical qualitative inquiry within which paradigm I situate my work and in this chapter I describe the “unruly, conflict ridden and always problematic” (Van Mannen 1988: 139) process of research and the production of the collaborative life writing artefacts presented in Chapter 6, mindful of the words of leading qualitative methodologist, Elizabeth St Pierre that “the following attempt to unfold the methodological processes of this project is limited and partial and a bit absurd, like all attempts to capture the real” (1995 cited in St Pierre 1997: 180). I start with the preparations for my study, before considering the ethical implications of research relationships in qualitative inquiry and describing the process of story gathering. I then elaborate on the messy and often hidden processes of translating lives as told in private to lives as text in the public domain, further complicated by the ethical constraints of feminist research on re-presentation and the demands of genuinely collaborative research. Finally, I describe the changing focus of the study and the additional narratives that I collected as a result. Whilst an overview of the data analysis process might typically be included in a chapter such as this, I have chosen to present it in Chapter 5 (and Appendix D) where I offer a treatment of the method and interpretations of the data.

4.2 Getting started

In the words of William Tierney, we are all “complicit, involved and framed in the making” of any research endeavour, and so “must at least struggle” with “where we as authors and researchers fit in the pictures” (1998: 53). I therefore begin with my epistemological and ontological stance, before presenting my research questions and the contribution I hoped this study would make. I then consider my chosen method,

\textsuperscript{42} Van Mannen (1988: 73)
the life history interview and the factors involved in the choice of storytellers for this study.

4.2.1 Epistemological and ontological stance

In Chapter 2, I explored the ramifications of being a feminist researcher in an emancipatory tradition, working and writing against Othering. As a feminist, I believe that individuals and knowledge are unavoidably situated, and that as such, it is necessary to be explicit about our positioning. In Chapter 3 I established that I subscribe to a social science in which we see “the displacement of an objective scientific reason by a consciously political and social reason” (Lather 1991: 33) committed to “change, empowerment and social transformation” (Lincoln 1993: 31). My motivation is both political, emerging from a deep desire to advocate with and for those denied the right to education, opportunity and self-actualisation in private and misunderstood and misrepresented by epistemologies of ignorance in public, and social, committed to the building of a more just and equitable future for all. I am conscious both of the seductive allure of the ‘white knight’ storyline and the perils of assuming the role of the Grand Theorist or “master of truth and justice” (Foucault 1977: 12). Following Lather, I believe that by a process of self conscious reflexivity and interrogation of our beliefs and assumptions researchers can resist positioning ourselves in this way and move “toward creating a space where those directly involved can act and speak on their own behalf” (1991: 164) surfacing what Foucault describes as “subjugated knowledges” (1980: 81). Although there exists the danger of reifying, or indeed “romanticizing the subject” (Lather 1991: 137) of such de se (first-hand) knowledge, I believe that identity is a social, cultural and locational construct that cannot be understood in isolation but needs to be ‘troubled’ (to use Lather’s term) in the context of the systems of knowledge that produced it. I have a particular interest in ascribed social identities, roles and relationships as a result of my own experiences and de se knowledge of being a woman, being a woman in Yemen, and being a Yemeni wife. Like Frigga Haug, a key proponent of feminist collaborative biography, I am interested in:

identifying the ways in which individuals construct themselves into existing structures, and are thereby themselves formed; the way in
which they reconstruct social structures; the points at which change is possible, the points where our chains chafe most, the points where accommodations have been made. (1999: 41)

4.2.2 Moving beyond maternal mortality and misery porn

As a teacher educator, working with teachers around the country, I had repeatedly been told by women that they ‘became someone else’ when they started teaching (see Chapter 1) and as a Yemeni wife, I had access to women-only spaces, largely untapped and potentially rich sites in which to explore these ‘sister selves’. I therefore formulated research questions as follows:

- Do female teachers in Yemen experience their professional identities as emancipatory and transformative?

- How do women reconcile those professional identities with social and domestic pressures to be dutiful daughters, faithful wives and model mothers?

At the outset, working closely with the Ministry of Education, I was hoping to collect data that could be used to promote the benefits of women participating actively in society through employment, and identify factors that prevented wider participation in the workforce and civil society. I also wanted to make a contribution to the literature available on women’s lives, for in this isolated corner of the world as much as anywhere, women are missing from history (Spongberg, Caine & Curthoys 2005; Leyser 1996; Fontana & Frey 1994; Reinharz 1994). There is a dearth of information in the public domain about the lives of Yemeni women beyond the cold, hard statistics available on maternal mortality, discriminatory malnutrition and illiteracy (UNDP 2013; UNDP 2010; Ouis 2005; UNICEF 1998; Myntti 1979) and a handful of sensational memoirs in the misery porn genre (Ali 2010; Ali 2002; Muhsen 2002; MacDonald 1988). I hoped to offer accounts that might permit readers to see

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43 As my professional circumstances and the political climate changed, I was no longer in a position to provide data to the government as originally hoped, and as my research progressed my focus, aims and questions gradually evolved (see section 5.9). This is appropriate in a heuristic undertaking such as this according to Tierney for “Everyone in the field needs to reformulate questions once we have learned a bit about a group or an individual” (1998: 54).
beyond the cultural differences that so often act as barriers to empathy and understanding, and reveal the spirited women leading purposeful and fulfilling lives behind the veil.

### 4.2.3 Method

As I was interested in creating textual artefacts from the material collected, rather than merely mining the data in order to see how women’s awareness of their professional identities permeated their understandings of other aspects of their lives, I chose a holistic method of investigation, the life history interview. Tierney argues that the “collection of these texts and our engagement with those whose lives we have recorded is [an] act of resistance” for “we collect life histories as a way to document how we live now so that we might change how we live now” (1993: 4). I planned to conduct several interviews with each of my storytellers, as multiple interviews offer the opportunity not only to check understandings of what has already been said but to access thicker, richer data (Opsal 2011: 145; Reinharz 1992: 37). I wanted those interviews to be relatively unstructured, so that I could hear the stories that they had to tell at that moment, rather than focusing their attention on issues of importance to me (Acker, Barry & Esseveld 1983: 427). However, my previous story gathering exercises in Yemen (Halldórsdóttir 2005) suggested that scaffolding of some description was often necessary or desirable, so I decided to adapt the ‘life as a book’ approach (McAdams 1993: 253) to use as a prompt in the initial interviews:

I want you to tell me a story of your life in your own words.

Some people find it easier to think of their life as a book and maybe divide it into chapters. If that appeals to you, if you like that idea you could talk about your life as a book.

Otherwise you might just want to start at the beginning and see where we go.

*Figure 1. Life as a book prompt*
For the purposes of this study, I conducted four interviews with two English language teachers in August and November 2007, in Sana’a and Aden, and followed those interviews with the collection of written narratives of critical events from the same women between November 2009 and May 2010.

4.2.4 Selecting storytellers

A key consideration in qualitative research of this nature is the selection of storytellers. Whilst suspicion lingers in some quarters with regard to those who self-select (Clough 2004a: 52) on the assumption that greater authenticity or objectivity comes from those who have to be persuaded, in qualitative inquiry in general, and a feminist project informed by relational ethics in particular, willing and even enthusiastic participation is desirable. Interest and enthusiasm are especially important in longitudinal studies such as this, where goals may shift over time and consent may need to be renegotiated a number of times (Miller & Bell 2012: 69). This can potentially jeopardize the study as it provides multiple junctures at which consent may be withdrawn, something that is less likely where the research interaction is underpinned by friendship, although this does raise ethical dilemmas of its own, which I shall elaborate on later in this chapter.

In many contexts participants are accessed via gate-keepers, whose relative position of power, however limited, can exert subtle pressures on participants and the research process itself (Miller & Bell 2012: 62). My earlier attempts at accessing women in Yemen via gatekeepers resulted in my being denounced in the mosque, and women boycotting the social and professional events arranged for story gathering (Halldórsdóttir 2005). I decided therefore for both practical and ethical reasons that I would only interview women with whom I already had a strong, pre-existing relationship. My work as a teacher educator and advocate for women’s participation in society meant that I had access to a pool of female English language teachers and inspectors across the country, and a particularly close working relationship with those participating in the FCO funded curriculum reform programme that I led from 2006 – 2010. All of my Yemeni colleagues were aware of my ongoing research activities, and I routinely invited expressions of interest from women who attended the INSET courses that I ran, many of whom indicated that
they were willing to be interviewed, but there were practical issues of access, location and opportunity to grapple with.

4.2.5 Access

The women with whom I worked most frequently and had the greatest access to were the three female inspectors supervising the programme in Aden, Sana’a and Taiz. The Adeni inspector Noor, was of particular interest because she typified Western stereotypes of the oppressed Other in appearance, but confounded those stereotypes, being a veritable powerhouse, one of the most effective, energetic and reform-minded individuals on the programme. I was delighted and not a little surprised (my own prejudices surfacing?) when Noor agreed to participate in the study. In the end it was not possible to interview the other female inspectors, the Sana’ani being happy to discuss her life in confidence but unwilling to go on record, possibly because she was married to the official overseeing my programme at the British Embassy, with whom I was in regular contact. The Taizi inspector was in the process of being divorced by a much-loved spouse, a subject that she was reluctant to elaborate on even in all-female company, and so was not willing to share her life story at that painful juncture.

4.2.6 Location and opportunity

Being based in the capital, I could theoretically have selected from the team of teachers working there, but Sana’a being one of the most conservative regions in the country, where women’s chaperones often insisted on remaining inside the training hall, despite a layout that clearly segregated the sexes, militated against the active participation of any of them in the research, although a number of them confided in me and solicited help in solving problems, marital and professional. My next option was to consider women from a national team of 36 mentors that I had assembled, a group that consisted of the inspectors actively supervising the programme, inspectors who had participated in all the training with the teachers, and teachers who I had identified as potential trainers and inspectors on the basis of their participation in a number of INSET programmes over a period of years. I selected Hana’a, the only female Hadrami mentor, for reasons both scholarly and
professionally pragmatic, as not only was I interested in her perspective as a working 'single' mother, but I also wanted to keep her connected to the programme however peripherally, as she had originally been part of the Adeni team, but had moved to Hadramawt, where the reforms had not been implemented, and were not scheduled to commence for a number of years. This meant I had 2 storytellers, and whilst a text such as this might typically include a larger number of participants, Frigga Haug argues that “the uniqueness of experience” is “a fiction” given that the “number of possibilities for action open to us is radically limited” as we “live according to a whole series of imperatives: social pressures, natural limitations, the imperative of economic survival, the given conditions of history and culture” (1999: 43 - 44). Following the arguments of Haug and others (Abu-Lughod 2013; Gergen 2009; Gergen & Davis 2003; Williams & Burden 1997; Tierney 1993) that our lives and experiences are collectively constructed, I believe that there is indeed something to learn about ‘Us’ in the study of the lives of ‘Them’ however limited the number, for what “we perceive as personal ways of adapting to the social are also potentially generalizable modes of appropriation” (Haug 1999: 44 emphasis in original).

4.2.7 Liberating language?

As my working relationship with Hana’a and Noor revolved around the development of English language education, and beyond exchanging formulaic pleasantries in Arabic we always spoke English to one another, I chose to conduct the interviews in English, with a smattering of Arabic. My Arabic, whilst sufficient for the routine nature of daily transactions, is insufficiently fluent to permit me to conduct narrative interviews in that tongue, and I also speak a different dialect (the archaic Sana’ani) from my storytellers (Adeni), which has on occasion caused far greater confusion than the use of English44! Language exerts a powerful influence on how we experience and articulate identity (Richardson 1994: 518) and the medium of English not only provides ways of conceptualising that identity that may not be readily available in Arabic, but much of the personal and professional development in these women’s lives has been experienced in the context of English, through English.

44 It is quite common on Arabic television channels for Standard Arabic translations to be provided so that viewers can understand what Sana’ani speakers, such as the late Parliamentary Speaker Sheikh Abdullah Al-Ahmar, are actually saying.
From my own experience speaking a second language can also be liberating, allowing you to express thoughts and ideas that may get strangled in your throat in your native tongue, allowing you to break free from stories of yourself that have “hardened” (Conle 1999: 18) or in which intimate or authoritative others hold you captive.

4.3 Ethical considerations

In feminist research predicated on relational ethics, the relationship between the researcher and the researched assumes a fundamental importance. Researchers are required to be fully present in relationships with the researched, “to act from our hearts and minds, acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and take responsibility for actions and their consequences” (Ellis 2007: 3). Here I elaborate on three elements that underpin an ethical research relationship; rapport, vulnerability and intimacy before considering an issue central to my own ethical commitment to the researched, that of collaboration.

4.3.1 Rapport

Much has been written about the importance of rapport in the successful conduct of qualitative interviews (Ceglowski 2002; Fontana & Frey 1994) and Stanley and Wise argue that “the researcher is always and inevitably present in the research…whether openly stated or not; and feminist research ought to make this an open presence” (1993: 175, emphasis in original). In his seminal text *InterViews*, Steinar Kvale talks about the interviewer becoming “a research instrument, drawing upon an implicit bodily and emotional mode of knowing that allows a privileged access to the subject's lived world” (1996: 125). Such rapport, however desirable and/or necessary depending on your stance, is open to manipulation (Bennett 2004; Acker, Barry & Esseveld 1983; Denzin 2009) and concern has been expressed about the “tyranny of intimacy” (Kvale 2006: 492) that prevails in the “interview society” (Atkinson & Silverman 1997) prompting disclosures of a highly personal and potentially compromising nature through “faking friendship” (Duncombe & Jessop 2012; Mauthner et al 2002) in the hope that “the bond of the intimate stranger” (Reinharz & Chase 2001: 229) might emerge. I would argue that virtual reality shows
and confessional programmes have played a significant role in the ongoing process of “deprivatization” (Gubrium & Holstein 1995) altering what many people in Anglophone societies believe is appropriate for public disclosure (Denzin 2009; Lievrouw 1998).

4.3.2 Vulnerability

Anthropologist Ruth Behar is critical of a stance in which “We ask for revelations from others, but we reveal little or nothing of ourselves; we make others vulnerable, but we ourselves remain invulnerable” (1993: 273) and such an exploitative approach is anathema to those working in an advocacy or emancipatory tradition, premised on relational ethics (Tracy 2010; Etherington 2007; Slattery & Rapp 2003; Tierney 1998). Early in her career, the autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis, wrote of the promiscuous, illiterate and smelly residents of a fishing community (1986) and of the racist nature of her home town (1995) with no expectations of her work being read in either locale, and with hindsight, regrets not having:

looked deeper and considered more fully what needed to be said, who needed to hear it, who might want to speak back, how I was implicated, and how best to explain others’ lives given the cultural context in which the events occurred. (2009: 311-312)

In the Yemeni context, where the appearance of propriety can be a matter of life and death for women, my research would have been impossible without the strong pre-existing bonds of a personal and professional relationship based on mutual respect, trust and affection. Even without the elevated stakes that accompany such “risky” research (Stewart et al 2009: 198) in a society where privacy is jealously guarded, working with friends and loved ones is never without its ethical dilemmas (Bruce 2010; Ellis 2007; Tillmann-Healey 2003) and attended by the danger that “such closeness may create certain kinds of blindness in the researcher” (Acker, Barry & Esseveld 1983: 432). As researchers we do have ethical obligations to anyone who participates in a study, and whilst I am keenly aware of the additional constraints of not wishing to upset or offend a friend (Bruce 2010: 202), I feel that if such a situation makes us tread more carefully and consider more deeply the things
we wish to say, “which secrets to keep, and which truths are worth telling” (Ellis 2007: 26) it can only contribute to the ethical rigour of our work.

4.3.3 Intimacy

The very nature of the work that we did together, and the emotional labour (Hargreaves 1998) it entailed, meant that even if I had wanted to, I was not in a position to hide “behind the cloak of alleged neutrality” (Fine et al 2003: 169) as I had already made myself vulnerable to them by sharing deeply personal experiences, fears and failings before and during the period in which the interviews were conducted\(^5\). Such disclosure was considered a self-evident good by pioneering feminist interviewers such as Ann Oakley who claimed that there could be “no intimacy without reciprocity” (1981: 49) but self-disclosure in research has been disdained by some as self-indulgent or pornographic (Denzin 2009; 1995; Baudrillard 2007) and problematised by others (Birch & Miller 2012) concerned that such a mantra is no longer broadly applicable or appropriate in the now greatly enlarged sphere of feminist scholarship. Early feminist scholars tended to focus on those perceived as powerless and self-disclosure was used as a way of engineering a more egalitarian relationship between researcher and researched. Decades later, the researched may well have greater professional standing or influence than the researcher (Warren 2001; Armstead 1995; Cotterill & Letherby 1993) may hold views that are abhorrent or antithetical to the researcher (Tillmann-Healy 2003; Sikes 2000; Tierney 1998) or be individuals for whom aspects of ethnic, religious or sexual identity for example, may be more salient to their lived experience than that which they apparently ‘share’ with the researcher (Bhopal 2010; Collins 1998; Plummer 1995).

4.3.4 Collaboration

The collaborative tradition requires researchers to involve participants in the various decisions that guide the research process and/or the production of artefacts from that process (Gergen 2009; Angrosino 2005; Bishop 2005; Lawthom 2004; 45 The course they were attending was part of an intensive mentoring programme, based on materials from Randall & Thornton (2001) and Malderez & Bodcszky (1999) which require a high degree of metacognitive awareness and troubling of long held beliefs and attitudes.)
Denzin 2003) so that instead of being objects the researched “become the agents of the stories which are produced and consumed about them, and the agents and instruments of their own change processes” (Lincoln 1993: 43). It must be said that working in a collaborative fashion with your storytellers is something of a double-edged sword as it places the researcher in a particularly vulnerable position, particularly in the case of a high stakes publication such as this thesis, and “while democratic in its ideals, may in fact pose an additional burden for the participants who are already juggling multiple roles or feeling overworked and undervalued” (Armstead 1995: 631). Not all of those who participate in research wish to take a more active role, and the literature suggests that the majority do not see research as relevant to, or important in their lives (ibid 1995). Feminists like Shulamit Reinharz (1992; 1979) Angela McRobbie (1982) and Patti Lather (1991; 1988) have been expressing concern for decades about the ways in which researchers ‘interfere’ in their participants’ lives even, or perhaps especially, when the research is intended to be transformative or empowering, as the “heart of the idea of empowerment involves people coming into a sense of their own power, a new relationship with their own contexts” according to Fox (1988 cited in Lather 1991: 4).

Those dismissive of feminist researchers’ attempts to engage their participants in this way (Josselson 2011; Atkinson, Coffey & Delamont 2003) claim that participants are incapable of reflecting on their own lives and that such activity is “outside their own horizons of understanding” (Josselson 2004: 20). However, I believe we do our collaborators and ourselves a grave disservice if we do not try to honour the fundamental principles of respect for the researched, learning for all involved and the sharing of knowledge (Lincoln 2002: 330) without which there is little real prospect of meaningful social change. That said, I am conscious that not all participants may wish to actively analyse their own experiences, and indeed have the right not to be involved (Duncombe & Jessop 2012). Researchers need at all stages of the process to be mindful of what Griffiths and Whitford (1988 cited in Doucet & Mauthner 2012: 123) term the “ethical dimensions of knowing” and as a feminist researcher I remain committed to working with and for, rather than on women.
4.4 Constructing stories, constructing selves

Stories are not inanimate objects lying around as Tierney playfully points out, they “do not await us, hiding in ethnographic caves or on qualitative mountaintops” (1998: 67), stories are co-constructions, determined to a large extent by the relationships that underpin the interactions in which they are created. Beyond the relational, physical aspects of the interviewing process such as location have to be taken into consideration as they exert considerable influence, facilitating or inhibiting sharing in the interview. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson believe that “site” encompasses both the locational, and what they term the occasional, defined as “a moment in history, a socio-political space” (2010: 69) affecting “the contexts of both autobiographical subjectivity and the kinds of stories that can be told” (2010: 71). In this section I describe the various decisions made with regard to the timing and location of both rounds of interviews and offer an account of the interview experience itself.

4.4.1 Time and place

Although standard research protocols encourage interviewing in neutral, public spaces, to try and interview Yemeni women in plain sight would violate a number of cultural and social norms, and stigmatize any woman who agreed, placing her in considerable danger. Such interviews therefore need to be conducted in women-only environments where women feel secure. Having previously interviewed Yemeni women in their homes, or the homes of ‘respectable’ friends, I was very much aware of the ways in which familial, social and religious expectations seemed embedded in the very fibres of those domestic locations, often weighing heavily on the women involved. Hoping to facilitate less circumspect conversation, I conducted the initial interviews in what I hoped was the relative neutrality of my home in Sana’a in August 2007, when Noor and Hana’a travelled to the capital to participate in an intensive mentoring course that I was delivering. The week prior to the interviews, they had attended a traditional hafla with all the other female course participants at my house, so it was an environment that was familiar and one that hopefully held happy memories. In this way I was able to create a less constrained, yet still culturally and socially appropriate context for the interviews (Warren 2001: 93) and
offer customary hospitality in the shape of a variety of freshly baked cakes and treats.

4.4.2 Initial interviews

I conducted the first interview with Noor in August 2007, several weeks into the course and a few days later interviewed Hana’a. The first interviews lasted several hours each and it was the first time that either of them had ever been invited, or indeed had the opportunity to talk about themselves in this sustained fashion. Despite our close relationship, Noor found the interview situation and talking about herself alien and quite overwhelming, and was quickly moved to tears. Within minutes of starting the interview she told me that she was “embarrassed and frightened” and so I switched the tape recorder off and suspended the interview and this happened several times. Such emotional distress is well documented (Duncombe & Jessop 2012; Carter et al 2008; Corbin & Morse 2003; Gilbert 2001) and considered to be a characteristic feature of the unstructured interview by veteran researchers, Michele McIntosh and Janice Morse who claim that “Qualitative research is intimacy work, and affect, emotion, and the senses are critical components. Indeed...emotion is the essence of qualitative research” (2009: 85). For women in particular, it is not uncommon for such an interview to be an extraordinary experience (Goodson & Sikes 2001; Reinharz & Chase 2001; Rosenblatt 2001) and all the more so when it is a woman “whose culture, religion, community, family or work situation prescribes her silence in one way or another” (Reinharz & Chase 2001: 225) as is arguably the case in Yemen. Despite the extraordinary nature of the experience, and the moments of distress and tension there was much laughter in the interviews, which I interpreted as a positive sign for like Heilbrun, I believe that women “laugh together only in freedom, in the recognition of independence and female bonding” (1988: 129).

4.4.3 Follow-up interviews

By the time the initial interviews had been conducted, it was nearing the end of the course, and it was only possible to fit one further interview in. As I would see Noor when I visited Aden later in the year, but was unsure as to exactly when I would
next see Hana’a, now based in distant and often dangerous Hadramawt, it was agreed by all that I should interview her for the second time while I had the opportunity. The second interview was conducted a week after the first, and like the first, took place at my home, involved the consumption of copious quantities of coffee and cake, and lasted three hours.

I interviewed Noor again whilst I was conducting an inspection and training visit to Aden in November 2007. The schedule was an intensive round of observations, meetings and workshops, made more frantic by the British Ambassador’s last minute decision to conduct school visits, creating a logistical, bureaucratic and security nightmare. The resulting time constraints prevented me from interviewing Noor in her home, as that would inevitably have entailed an extended visit, starting with lunch and lasting many hours in the traditional manner of Yemeni hospitality. Interviewing Noor away from the family home however was something of an affordance, as sites of narration “perform cultural work…organize personal storytelling…establish expectations about the kinds of stories that will be told and will be intelligible to others” (Smith & Watson 2010: 69) and above all, I wanted an audience to be able to identify with these women.

Noor agreed to be interviewed at my hotel, but even though it was a respectable family establishment, the Elephant Bay Beach Resort, which did not permit unaccompanied men onto the premises, she required a chaperone to visit me. As is common in Yemen and elsewhere in the Arab world (Mernissi 1996), the chaperone was her son, Omar, who at that juncture was 11 years old. I have always struggled with the concept of a younger male (often an infant) ‘policing’ an adult female, and indeed objected vehemently to being chaperoned myself by my brother-in-law. There are however many practical reasons why women might have a child (or children) with them when they leave the house, and if their errands and motives are innocent, why would they not wish to be accompanied? A woman appearing in public with a younger male chaperone is apparently doubly worthy of respect, first because the assumption is that she is the mother of a son, and second because she is behaving as ‘good’ women should. Despite the presence of her son, attending to his needs from time to time, and being perched on plastic chairs in a crumbling if
picturesque chalet in fading light, with only bottles of rapidly warming water to hand, the second interview lasted more than two hours.

4.4.4 The interview experience

Whilst I found the ‘life as a book’ approach generative, steeped as I am in Western understandings of autobiography, and having grown up with television shows such as This is Your Life (BBC 1955 – 2007), a chronological celebration of celebrity, it may not have been the most pertinent prompt in a society where the concept ‘book’ equates most readily to the Holy Qur’an, which is anything but linear in its narrativity. The prompt did not seem to resonate with Hana’a or Noor, whose immediate response was ‘Do I need to organise what I need to say?’ Although they both started with details of their birth and early childhood as requested, they rapidly moved onto issues of more contemporary concern, and illustrated those concerns with descriptions of critical incidents, heavily leavened in the case of Hana’a with social commentary. Their storytelling tended towards the episodic and had a
relational logic of its own, Noor moving from her childhood to her mothering of her children at the outset for example. This is a feature characteristic of women’s narration (Tuval-Mashiach 2006; Jelinek 2003; Haug 1999; Kvale 1996; Cotterill & Letherby 1993; Heilbrun 1988) and one that seems to cross most cultural and national borders (Grossman 2008; Beaulieu 1999; Mernissi 1996; Suleri 1991). The initial interviews thus provided very rich data in terms of their current priorities and preoccupations, but left numerous lacunae in terms of establishing a more chronological life history.

Although I approached the second interviews with an idea of the territory that I hoped to cover, I did not explicitly ask for that information or direct the discussion at the outset. Instead I asked my storytellers to pick up from where they had left off in the first interview, which meant asking Hana’a to continue elaborating on her thoughts on men and Noor on the ways in which religion had impacted on her life. Although the women did both take extended turns as before, there was more of a conversational flavour to our interaction, as in addition to clarifying details as and when topics of specific interest were raised, and asking them to elaborate on statements made, I responded, often at length, to the many personal questions they asked me. Noor was noticeably more relaxed in the second interview some three months after the first, and considerably more emphatic in the assertion of her views. By the end of this second interview I felt that many of the ‘gaps’ in her story had been filled, all the while aware of the limitations of focusing on such superficial completeness, as silences have an eloquence of their own (Mazzei 2009).

4.4.5 Choosing what to tell

My existing relationship with these women not only facilitated, but will have influenced, the stories that they chose to tell me on those particular days, in those particular places, and it would be both naive and arrogant to imagine that they were not making choices about what to disclose and what to withhold (Bhopal 2010: 193; Sikes 2010: 18; Hammersley & Atkinson 1979: 120). It was interesting that both women talked so little about their professional lives per se. Was it because they thought that I knew so much about it already, having a working relationship with them? Or was it because they view that professional identity as an affordance rather
than as central to their existence? Maybe they just wanted to take this rare opportunity to talk about their personal lives in a way that the normal patterns of interaction in Yemen rarely permit? Whilst we did discuss in detail and at great length, certain aspects of their private lives, a discreet veil was drawn over matters of an intimate nature. Such reticence is often encountered in Muslim societies (Al-Nakib 2013; Cohen-Mor 2005; Golley 2003; Ilkkaracan 2002; Meneley 1996), and it could also be argued that whilst Hana’a and Noor trust me, our ongoing professional relationship in particular would militate against the sharing of anything that in their estimation might damage my regard for them, or complicate that relationship.

4.5 From lives-as-told to lives-as-text

Having collected the interview data there are numerous ways in which it could be prepared for analysis, and in this case, crafted into an artefact to place in the public domain. In this section I describe the process of transcription, my concerns about mediating the text for an audience far removed from the context of the study, the reader-response exercise I conducted and what I learnt from it.

4.5.1 Keeping it real?

Before I started the process of transcription, I listened to all of the recordings in order to record my first responses for:

> When you listen to the tape for the first time, but only for that first time, a flood of memories and thoughts will be provoked…the tape will always wait patiently to be transcribed; the ideas that spring from you as you write will vanish quickly. (Wengraf 2001: 209-210)

Not only did I ‘stop and memo’, capturing my responses to the interviews, whilst listening for the first time (Glaser 1978), but whenever I was working with the recordings and the transcripts that were eventually produced (Saldana 2013). As I regard the recordings of the interviews as my primary data, I have tried at all times to work with those recordings, to keep the environs, emotions and events fresh in my mind. I use them to “evoke and revive the personal interaction of the interview situation” (Kvale 1996: 168) to hear again the laughter, the sharp intake of breath
and the emphatic assertion against the backdrop of the street hawkers’ cheerful noise and the muezzin calling the faithful to *maghrib* (sunset) prayer. Transcripts were necessary however as an aid to analysis and a stepping stone to the creation of life histories. Transcription inevitably entails interpretation, as it involves multiple decisions as to what to record, as well as how to record it (Frank 2010; Poland 2001; Kvale 1996; Mishler 1991). Alldred and Gillies believe that transcription “is one of the least problematised parts of the research process, not generally recognized as an act of representation or embodying representation” (2012: 151) and Mishler fears that a purely mechanical approach “has tended to detach the process from its deeper moorings in this critical reflection on the intractable uncertainties of meaning-language relationships” (1991: 260).

4.5.2 Transcription as translation

Kvale warns of the dangers of the “decontextualised” and “detemporalised” transcript becoming “an opaque screen between the researcher and the original situation” (1996: 167) and I wanted to retain as much of the immediacy of the interview as possible. I decided that the interviews should be transcribed verbatim, word for word, including all false starts, reformulations and repetitions. I wanted emotional responses such as laughter and giggles to be noted as well as emphatic intonation, for any number of statements in the interviews cut loose from their emotional and contextual moorings might suggest the opposite of the meaning with which they were imbued in the original interaction (Alldred & Gillies 2012: 152). Transcription is after all “not a technical and transparent process” according to Wengraf (2001: 221) who suggests that “any translation is also a betrayal (*traduttore tradittore*)” (ibid: 219) echoing Kvale’s assertion that “translators are traitors” (1996: 166). I started transcribing the interviews myself, but my one-finger typing meant that progress was rather slow, so I asked a colleague to create rough transcripts for me. The unfamiliar accents, the Arabic vocabulary, and the softness of Noor’s speech in particular made the task a challenging one, but she transcribed verbatim what she could make out, which I then amended and augmented as necessary.
4.5.3 Re-presentation

As I began working with the interviews and thinking seriously about their re-presentation as texts, issues of audience loomed large:

Because all stories, in their writing, reading or telling, are cultural products, embedded in the specific personal, political and social contexts occupied by the author, the characters and the readers, the impact of any story on prospective readers is difficult to envisage. (Moore 2004: 182)

Having spent so many years in Yemen, and married into Sana’ani society, I shared many understandings with my storytellers that are not widely available in the West, but in the borderlands that I inhabit, it is not always easy to identify or disentangle the strands that I weave my ‘knowing’ from. I was also becoming increasingly aware of the danger of these stories, which are essentially liberatory in nature, being read in a blinkered fashion and being used to confirm the patriarchal status quo for:

The task of generating feminist story lines that have the power to disrupt and displace the old is extraordinarily complex...new stories are always at risk of being interpreted in terms of the old. (Davies 1992: 66)

There seemed little point in placing these stories in the public domain, if they only serve to reinforce stereotypical perspectives and prejudices, prejudices that are evident not only in the media and Western culture generally, but also within many feminist circles. Western feminists have historically been complicit in the continuing subjugation of the exotic Other (see Chapter 2. Section 6) and even when seeking to empower, have often been guilty of Othering or depriving of agency precisely those whom they seek to liberate, because they fail to engage with indigenous or ‘Third World’ women (Mohanty 2003; Tuhiwai Smith 1999) on their own terms or in their own contexts as Leila Ahmed discovered:

They were women who were engaged in radically rejecting, contesting, and rethinking their own traditions and heritage and the ingrained prejudices against women that formed part of that heritage but who turned on me a gaze completely structured and hidebound by that heritage; in their attitudes and beliefs about Islam and women in Islam, they plainly revealed their unquestioning faith in and acceptance of the prejudiced, hostile, and often ridiculous notions that their heritage had constructed about Islam and its women. (2000: 292-293)
4.5.4 A question of perspective?

Often overlooked when white women, like me, discuss brown women, like them, and their subjugated status is that they may have no interest in the narrowly defined and individually constituted ‘freedom’ that is a taken for granted facet of democracy in the West. In more than a decade spent in Yemen, for example, never once did a woman envy my freedom or independence, and more often than not they pitied me. “Poor Tanya”, they would say “you have no-one to look after you, no-one to provide for you, no-one to keep you company or share the chores” and the multi-generational households in which the majority live do provide child care arrangements that would be the envy of many a parent in the UK. These women, as a general rule, do not appear to take issue with the religiously defined parameters of their existence, but then how many of us in the West actually challenge the Judeo-Christian foundations of our own societies in our daily lives? What they do seek in my experience, are the rights and freedoms granted by Islam, but denied to them by those who cling to seemingly fossilised interpretations of that religion and the hierarchies, both patriarchal and matriarchal, that dominate the social, tribal and familial structures within which they live.

4.5.5 Mediating the story

My concern then, was how, and to what extent, I needed to mediate the stories for a readership that inhabit different cultures, different societies and different contexts, for:

As feminist researchers one of our roles is to translate between the private world of women and the public world of academia, politics and policy. The dilemma remains of how we do this without reinforcing the stereotypes and cultural constructions we are challenging. (Standing 1998: 193)

Interpretations of a text are likely to be as diverse as the members of its audience, and as all interpretations are underpinned by ideological foundations, I feared that some of those standpoints might well obscure an understanding of these women from their own perspectives, mindful of Nawar Al-Hassan Golley’s warning that “language is an instrument of power; but one is also overpowered by one’s readers,
wherever they come from” (2003: xiv). I was committed therefore to presenting these stories in a way which enabled the reader to catch one of Grumet’s glimpses (1991: 69) of the inner world of the narrator, “that others might access something of the raw truths of their lives” (Clough 2004b: 184).

I therefore decided to see what sort of responses a short extract, with a minimum of contextualisation would elicit. I chose to elicit responses from a relatively homogenous group of people, doctoral candidates in Education and Counselling at the University of Manchester, to try and establish the range of similarities and differences in responses from an outwardly and apparently similar cohort. I opted to use the least contentious details of one story, a couple of paragraphs (see below) about the early life and childhood of Hana’a, a period that all readers have personal experience and presumably memories of, and should therefore be able to readily relate to.

Yes, in the beginning I am the second daughter in my family. I have got four siblings, two sisters and two brothers. My father is a teacher of Arabic language and my mother is not an educated woman, but she can write and read well. I lived in Ma’alla in Aden for thirty two or thirty years and I was spoilt I think by my father. I was very close to him when I was a child, I taught, no I learnt from him teaching and I like to be a teacher since I was a child. Yes, because my father was encouraging me to help him, and in his work as a teacher, and I was collecting my neighbours, the children to teach them. I have a board, blackboard and chalks and I have also a notebook to write the marks and maybe every day I used to teach my neighbours and the children who visited us.

I got in the secondary school and I was very active in the school. I was in the first or second place, yes, in the school. My dream is to be a teacher or a doctor and after I graduated from the secondary school, I thought about the university and I wanted to join the university. In the beginning my mother she said “Oh no, you have to marry and the university will maybe delay your marriage”. And then I insist to join the university and my father encouraged me. I joined the department of English, English department in the college.

Figure 3. Extract from Hana’a’s first interview transcript
I received and analysed 13 responses in total (see Appendix B) and even in that small set of respondents there was a considerable range and variety of responses, which suggests the extent to which our personal experience and knowledge influences our reading of a text, however superficially banal it may appear. On initial analysis, the responses received seemed to fall into two broad camps, one characterized by what could be construed as ‘learned’ responses to the Arabic woman, such as seeing oppression in place of privilege, and the other by empathy and engagement.

4.5.6 Empathy

Those men and women who engaged affectively with the text for the most part embedded a variety of explicit emotional reactions in their responses. Approval was expressed at the father’s enabling role in her continuing education and there was a clear recognition of the gate-keeping function performed by men in this context. The role of women in maintaining the status quo, and thereby perpetuating discriminatory practices was highlighted by most, being “difficult to stomach” for someone who identified herself as a feminist and prompting reactions such as “a sense of anger”, “great sadness” and “my heart did sink” from the men.

There was admiration and respect expressed for her determination, “I respected her struggle to get what she wanted and her real sense of vocation” and “It must be difficult to be told what to do with your life, and even more difficult to ignore that and go your own way. I say Well Done Hana’a”.

A number of people empathized with the story in such a way that it acted as a catalyst for the recounting of personal preoccupations, such as their own relationships with children or parents or the status of women in higher education, and for these respondents Hana’a was functioning more as a symbol for totems in their own lives, demonstrating the ease with which we read our own understandings and positionings into the constructions of others. Concern might be expressed that these readers were identifying with the text to an extent that could potentially cloud their judgement, and deny them the kind of critical distance that permits engagement in what is considered to be a meaningful interpretative fashion (Flynn 1986: 268). It seems to me however that these readers were open to the text and the woman
within, finding much to engage with in these few short paragraphs and it is this recognition, the finding of sameness-in-difference that I was hoping to achieve.

4.5.7 Resistance

Amongst those who resisted any identification with Hana’a, detachment was evident most strikingly in the following from a male respondent: “I have no connection or indication as to the relevance of the story and as such, I am unable to comment” so for some the notion of shared experience as a result of our common humanity: birth, childhood, family is not a sufficient basis for engagement, nor I suspect one that would be considered legitimate by that particular respondent.

It was not only male respondents however who denied Hana’a subject status, an example of which is the woman who claimed to be “sceptical about how honest the girl was, especially about her performance, I wasn’t sure if her being first was a result of her father pushing her to over perform”. As this particular respondent is a highly educated young woman herself, I was reminded of Heilbrun’s assertion that some women demonstrate the “inability to imagine for other women, fictional or real, the self they have in fact achieved,” because she:

is as lost in her creative imagination as she is in life for a knowledge of the process by which a woman could achieve identity, or of what the result might be if she did. Her creative imagination will fail her even when life, in her own case, does not. (1979 cited in Crawford & Chaffin 1986: 23)

A number of others, all non-native speakers of English themselves, were highly critical of linguistic infelicities “must be a foreigner and not a very advanced speaker of English. I caught myself picking on errors” and it was evident that some were not hearing the story because of a focus on surface elements of presentation. This is not an uncommon response “as the more a text reflects the oralness of speech, the less transparent” or more “alien” it becomes where readers are unaccustomed to seeing such features (Bucholtz 2000: 1461). Interestingly, only a few of the native speakers mentioned irregularities and then only in passing as a marker of difference when they were searching for similarities.
Where the biographical facts in the text deviate from an expected order of presentation, annoyance was expressed by some, “I felt quite confused”, “I did not know what to think” so it would seem that the masculine monomyth in all its chronological glory still influences expectations of what a biography should be. The respondents who expressed this type of annoyance and confusion were all apparently interrogating the text, and by extension Hana’a as a linguistic object, and this proved an effective barrier to any kind of empathy or engagement. The respondents above all found reasons to resist the text, refusing to acknowledge or hear Hana’a, effectively rendering it and Hana’a voiceless.

4.5.8 Lessons learnt

I drew several lessons from this exercise, the first being that idiosyncratic language and non-linear narration can be barriers, alienating rather than engaging some readers and the second being that I should search for ways to make the women’s agency more overt. I wanted to avoid speaking for Noor and Hana’a (see Chapter 3. Section 2), with all the colonial baggage that entails, but without mediation it would appear that some audiences are likely to create new cages for these women, instead of seeing how they have broken out of existing ones, for as Standing cautions, it is “the ways in which we represent and interpret the women’s voices which reinforces hierarchies of knowledge and power” (1998: 190).

4.5.9 Revisiting my research questions

My original intention, as reported in Chapter 1, was to establish the emancipatory nature of a professional identity in an environment where the dominant storylines were those of dutiful daughters, faithful wives and model mothers (Clark 2004: 122; Barakat 1993: 102). As my research progressed, and I immersed myself more deeply in the lives and the stories of these women, it became apparent that education per se rather than the profession (despite its affordances) was seen as the primary enabler. I was also becoming increasingly aware of the extent to which storylines influence not only the worlds we imagine and the stories we tell of ourselves, but the stories others tell about us. I therefore reformulated my research questions, reducing the
two to one, and turning my attention to how these women engaged with the storyline themselves. Specifically I wanted to investigate:

- How educated Yemeni women understand and inhabit the storylines available to them?

4.6 Lives as praxis

Having initially been satisfied with the goal of raising awareness of the spirited and often inspiring individuals living behind the veil, the audience response exercise described above galvanised me into the adoption of a more proactive stance, that of actively challenging the dominant stereotypes of Arab Muslim women in the West. In order to do this, I believed that I needed my storytellers to articulate their subjectivities more overtly and be more explicit about their self-actualisation. I felt that if I could make their stories and their sense of agency more accessible it would increase the potential for empathy and engagement on the part of the audience, so I decided to collect more stories from Noor and Hana’a.

4.6.1 Event and Telling Narratives

Having decided to return to my storytellers and get them to tell me more stories, I wanted to use a different medium, one in which they would have even greater control of the tales told, and the when and where of their telling, trusting that given time and space, they would articulate their agency in no uncertain terms. Shortly thereafter I came across self-defining memories as elaborated by McLean and Thorne (2006) who were using the method to explore superficial aspects of identity or ‘identity-light’ but I saw potential to explore far deeper issues and decided to experiment.

First, I asked them to write about three events in their lives that would help explain who they are, these are known as Event Narratives. Then they were asked to write Telling Narratives, or memorable episodes of having described each event, and finally they were asked to reflect on why they had told the memory, whether telling the memory had helped them to better understand it, if they felt comfortable
sharing it, and whether and how they would tell it differently to another audience. Each part was written separately, and the process of collecting these narratives took up to six months with each woman, and I asked them not to look back at what they had written previously, as they composed the second and third parts. Although it took some time to collect these narratives, I believe that allowing the women to write, and do it over a period of time elicited a fuller and broader response and one that is more detailed and reflective than using the questions in a face to face interview situation might have been (Nespor & Barber 1995: 56). I would like to illustrate with Noor’s narratives about her concealed pregnancy – in her own words, of course:

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**Event Narrative**

My pregnancy and delivery of my youngest daughter is one of my memorable memories. Nobody knew about it till I was 6 months pregnant, and delivering her was the easiest; I gave her birth in 15 minutes.

I got pregnant while my mom was away. She left for the USA to attend the graduation of my youngest sister, who was getting married in the same year in Aden. When they were back I was 4 months pregnant and I didn’t want to disrupt them with my pregnancy, while the whole family was busy in the preparation for the wedding. Being the eldest, my mom depended a lot on me.

Time passed; I became 6 months pregnant, my abdomen grew a little bigger, but I was able to hide it by wearing loose clothes. It happened several times when I felt dizzy or nausea, that I disappeared till I was OK. But on the whole, pregnancy symptoms didn’t show on me and that helped me to keep my secret for a longer time.

One month was left from the wedding; I had to be ready with suitable gowns. Insisting on buying bigger gowns made everyone wonder, so I had to tell them about my story. I became the talk of the family.

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46 Noor is a married woman who lives in her own home on her parents’ compound. Her husband works in a different city and visits regularly.
Because I didn't take care of myself, I got anaemic and needed an urgent blood transfusion. However, having my new baby girl made me forget all of my previous suffering and that incident made her very special to me. She's celebrating her 8th birthday next week.

**Telling Narrative**

I wasn't intending to tell them about it, but I felt I had to as they were discussing issues related to women. It happened early this month, while I was at the office that two inspectors were arguing about the capability of women in working. One of them started talking respectfully about his wife, appreciating all what she did inside and outside the house (she's a teacher).

He told us how hard she works and for long hours to keep her job and to support her family. **Al-hamdulillah**, both of them thought highly about women. I felt so proud being a mother with a full time job. Their talking stimulated me to talk about women’s natural ability to multi-task. Then I found it a good opportunity to emphasize my words by telling them about my own experience in keeping my pregnancy quiet for about 6 months without telling my family, because I didn't feel it was the right thing to do. My friends at work didn't notice my pregnancy as I kept working till the last day before my delivery.

I noticed mixed signs of surprise and admiration on their faces; they wondered how come I could manage to do all this without complaining. They considered me a super-woman. In fact, I don't see myself like this when I know that a huge number of women are able to do great job under low living conditions. I understand it's a male society, and no matter how good a man is, he won't admit that men are nothing without women.

**Reflection**

Sharing the memory of my pregnancy with two male inspectors at the office was a bit weird. I had had to tell it to support the idea that women are patient and capable of handling more than one task at a time. And since those guys were in favour of women, my memory came in its time. It was realistic evidence which emphasized their idea. Sharing this memory with them, I was in high spirits. I felt proud being a woman and to be precise to be a working mother.
I discovered myself after that incident. I found that I'm stronger than I thought. I didn't think I would have that stamina for such a period of time. I realized that if I make up my mind on doing something, it could be done.

Wondering whether I gained anything by hiding my pregnancy, I realize that I've gained myself. It was a personal matter that I didn't want to bother anyone with, especially that we were busy with the preparation for my sister's wedding.

I like telling this memory exactly as it happened. Sharing it with others was done the same way with different persons.

Figure 4. Noor's Event and Telling Narrative

4.6.2 Initial analysis

In my initial analysis of this text, I focused on the fact that Noor had gone from being a woman who found the whole process of talking about herself so alien and overwhelming in the original interviews, that she was moved to tears and required frequent breaks, to one who would directly relate tales of herself and her own life and struggles to men, and feel that in so doing she was speaking out on behalf of other women. I believed that having her life made a focus of attention had helped Noor develop a sense of her own value and contribution, both personal and professional. I thought that in trying to make the worlds of Noor and Hana’a more accessible to a distant audience, I had helped those women to take ownership of their actions, and develop greater self-knowledge and self-worth as a result, and so felt that I had been able to give something back.

4.6.3 Further thoughts

On reflection I feel I may have given myself too much credit, for whilst I believe both women did benefit from the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences in this way (a rare luxury in busy lives), the strength of the agency in evidence in these stories was surely there all along, and my modest contribution was to provide them with the opportunity to articulate it in a more focused fashion. In conducting this
experiment however I discovered for myself that the act of telling is profoundly political, as it implies a platform or space in which to speak, an audience and something to say (which presupposes the realization that you have the right to make that contribution and/or that it is necessary). Telling provides possibilities for staking claim to (new) territory: it can be a hugely empowering act, to own your own story and it can be an opportunity to testify, not necessarily for yourself, but on behalf of those with no voice or platform. I chose to work with stories because I believed that they were valuable, but until that point I had not understood that telling stories can be powerful not only because it can allow your voice to be heard, but because it can allow those so heard to start valuing their own voice, gain confidence in themselves, their identities and what they have to offer, which can then lead to a more public assertion of themselves, their identities, and their right to be recognized and respected, for how else “may new narratives for women enter texts and then other texts and eventually women’s lives?” (Heilbrun 1988: 38)

4.6.4 Getting out of the way

I had wanted Hana’a and Noor to forcefully articulate their own thoughts and feelings, allowing me “to get out of the way” as Lather (2000: 295) would have it, to minimize the mediation required, but I was also ‘getting in’ my own way because clear statements of agency were already present in the original interviews. Once I had read and indeed re-read their narratives, I engaged with the interviews differently and could see that with careful re-storying I could get out of the way again. These reflections functioned to sensitize me to the agency writ large in the original interviews but they also make fascinating reading in their own right, so I have included them (Appendix C).

4.6.5 Re-storying

Although my original intention had been to present the women’s words largely as they had been captured, I also wanted to limit the need for overt mediation but stories rarely speak for themselves (Maynes, Pierce & Laslett 2008; Fontana & Frey 1994). The negative reaction of some of the respondents in the reader response exercise detailed above suggested that some readers might be distracted by overly
idiosyncratic texts, and thereby distanced from the storytellers and their experiences. I therefore made the decision to remove the following features typical of Yemeni discourse:

- Circularity
- Repetition of whole phrases and individual words for emphasis as a matter of routine, saving them for really emphatic statements
- Routine use of the religious phrases insha'allah and al-hamdulillah, restricting their use to matters of obvious importance to the teller
- The use of the male pronoun to refer to either gender

As some readers had commented unfavourably on the unpolished language of the text, for the sake of readability I also:

- Corrected grammatical and syntactical errors (primarily related to tense, collocation and word order)
- Removed reformulations and self-corrections common in speech
- Changed a very limited number of words to make them more comprehensible to readers (survive to support for example as in 'support myself and my daughter') but restricted myself to those words already present in the teller’s active vocabulary

| I considered myself a lucky person, al-hamdulillah because I have a nice and kind headmistress and she can understand my life and that I am alone and my family... and that I have no one to take care of my kids. So she allows me to come early in the morning and to leave at 10 o’clock, yes al-hamdulillah it was only for me al-hamdulillah. I have a good relationship with her. |

**Figure 5. Extract from Noor’s first interview transcript**
I considered myself a lucky person, because I had a nice, kind headmistress. I had a good relationship with her. She understood my life and the fact that I was alone, my family was in Aden, and I had no-one to take care of my kids. So she allowed me (only me!) to come early in the morning and to leave at 10 o’clock.

Figure 6. Extract from Noor’s re-storied text

I removed all my prompts and contributions to the conversation (Atkinson 2001: 131) from the transcripts and all references to the circumstances and the occasion of the interview, although there are those who argue they should remain for the sake of transparency (Wengraf 2001: 213; Bucholtz 2000: 1461) or to exemplify the co-constructed nature of the endeavour (Poland 2013). I divided the remaining text into paragraphs, numbered them and then labelled them thematically; childhood, school, university, marriage, motherhood and so on. This left me with seventy or more chunks in the case of Hana’a, and so I printed out the texts and cut them up. I gathered together all the chunks on each theme and then attempted to assemble what, in the Western tradition, might be considered a ‘coherent’ life story, from the pieces spread out like a jigsaw puzzle on the floor. Some stories had been told 3 times but each telling was different and added new information, or a new perspective, and I wanted to try and retain the richness and complexity of the multiple tellings. So eventually I organized the chronological story vertically on the floor, but added depth to the themes horizontally. Once I felt I had all the pieces of a specific section of the puzzle, I returned to the computer and attempted to stitch the composite pieces together, removing repetitive detail and redundancy as I did so. I then returned to the carpet to wrestle with the next chapter of the story, and so on until I had woven most of the chunks into the text. There were inevitably pieces that did not fit readily with the broadly chronological format that I had adopted for this particular telling, and whilst I considered all of this information to be of interest, ultimately I chose to incorporate those details that I felt shed light on Hana’a, her understandings of Yemeni society and her position within it, rather than those that just shed light on Yemen per se.
4.6.6 Negotiated Narrative

Once I had completed the first drafts I sent them to my storytellers to read and comment on (Atkinson 2007: 237; Johnson 2001: 116; Poland 2001: 644). Apart from asking them to check that I had rendered times, names and locations accurately, I asked if they would like anything removed or restored and whether the story ‘felt’ like it was theirs, as like Atkinson, I believe that the “person telling the life story should always have the last word in how his or her story is presented in written form” (2001: 131). In keeping with this principle, I suggested that they might like to choose the pseudonyms by which they and the rest of the characters that people their lives would be known in this text, and also checked that they felt comfortable with specific geographical locations being used to situate their stories. I hoped to retain these markers because place is significant in terms of identity formation and lived experience, and it has exerted a strong influence on the affordances and limitations encountered by Noor and Hana’a. Although it is standard practice to change or omit place names in the interests of anonymity (UKDA 2014) in this instance because of my professional relationship with the storytellers, it would be impossible to hide their identities from those who knew and worked with us closely i.e. the other female members of my mentoring team, but details of women’s lives being so closely guarded means that beyond this inner circle, they should not be readily identifiable (Wengraf 2001; Kvale 1996).

4.6.7 Hana’a and her story

Hana’a chose names for all the people in her story, and took ownership of the text, adding and deleting words, phrases and larger chunks of text, and even amending punctuation. Where she added words or phrases they were generally to provide a more specific temporal anchor for the events or feelings described, and on several occasions she added hedging language to statements that had been emphatic. Hana’a did not remove any of the story elements (plot, people, and places) but often reduced the level of detail in her retelling of an event, and there was a notable cooling of the emotions described, particularly those related to her marriage and her experiences in her husband’s hometown. She also removed much of the direct speech, reducing it to the bare minimum, substituting indirect speech or a
descriptive phrase. The largest chunk removed described her family’s illustrious history, perhaps in keeping with her belief that “people should be judged by their actions more than by their ancestors”.

Many of the families in Hadramawt, As-Sa’ada families like ours, can trace their origins all the way back to the sons of our Prophet. Some people think that if you are Sayyid you should be respected and you are better than other people and things like this.

I don’t think it’s something to be proud of, but it means that you have a responsibility to behave well and be worthy of respect. I believe that people should be judged by their actions more than by their ancestors, maybe because I grew up in Aden. In the North of Yemen you are judged by who you are, not what you do, and I think in Hadramawt in the past, As-Sa’ada were like that. They didn’t work, they stayed at home, they had many properties and businesses overseas in places like Singapore and families such as (family A) and (family B) were rich and famous. Now things have changed and they have discovered that they have to be educated and work.

Figure 7. Extract from Hana’a’s re-storied text

Many of the families in Hadramawt, As-Sa’ada families like ours, can trace their origins all the way back to the sons of our Prophet. Some people think that if you are Sayyid you should be respected and you are better than other people and things like this. I don’t think it’s something to be proud of, but it means that you have a responsibility to behave well and be worthy of respect. I believe that people should be judged by their actions more than by their ancestors, maybe because I grew up in Aden.

Figure 8. Extract from Hana’a’s negotiated narrative

The interviews were conducted in the midst of great personal upheaval for Hana’a, so it is entirely possible that her sensitivities were heightened at the time, with all events and experiences coloured by that adjustment, or maybe as time has passed

47 Hana’a chose to retain the phonetic transcription ‘As-Sa’ada’ rather than the transliteration ‘Al-Sa’ada’.
she just feels less strongly about those events, now seen in a different context, so
the emotions as expressed in the interview were an accurate reflection of her
feelings at the time, but her ‘truth’ is now different, and the emotions no longer
resonate as they once did. The need to adapt in order to be happy and productive
was mentioned a number of times in the interviews, and these changes are evidence
perhaps of successful adaptation.

Another issue is that of audience, for she told her story to me, as a friend and
confidante, and whilst she was aware of the fact that these interviews were for
research purposes, she addressed herself to me and our shared understandings
throughout. Presented with a text that was intended for wider circulation, there
might also have been anxiety, resulting in a degree of “impression management”
(Goffman 1959) for once in print “the possibility of sensitive material being made
available to others seems to be highlighted” (Poland 2001: 644). Hana’a might also
have felt that aspects of the story kept her “stuck or frozen” (Conle 1999: 21) in a
place (emotional, intellectual or physical) that she has moved beyond and wants to
leave behind. So whilst I was a little disappointed at the loss of certain colourful and
emotive details, I was both delighted and in all honesty relieved that she had agreed
to share so much of her story with a wider audience, losing very little of the
intimacy of the original telling, and I believe none of its power in the process.

I think our neighbours were very bad, I didn’t like sitting with them because they
were always talking about other people and they liked to interfere in people’s
affairs. They asked me ‘How does your husband treat you? How does your
mother-in-law treat you? How many brothers have you got? How much was your
teaching salary?’ Very personal questions. I was very surprised, why were they
asking me such questions? I hated those people and I really didn’t like going
from house to house visiting them and when she wanted to punish me, my mother-
in-law would say ‘Hana’a you have to stay at home today. It is a punishment
because you told me that I’m bad’ and I was very happy that I didn’t have to go!

Figure 9. Extract from Hana’a’s re-storied text
I think our neighbours were very bad. I didn’t like sitting with them because they were always talking about other people and they liked to interfere in people’s affairs. They asked me ‘How does your husband treat you? How does your mother-in-law treat you? How much is your father’s salary?’ Very personal questions. I was very surprised, why were they asking me such questions? I didn’t really like going from house to house visiting them, although my mother-in-law thought it a punishment to prevent me going!

Figure 10. Extract from Hana’a’s negotiated narrative

4.6.8 Noor and her story

Noor took even greater ownership of her story than Hana’a, the most dramatic change being the reduction in the length of the text by more than a third, from more than 5,000 words to a little over 3,000 words. Like Hana’a she chose the pseudonyms by which she and her family members should be known, but she removed nearly all the identifying features that anchored her story geographically, names of places and schools, even cities, despite the fact that the events of her life have unfolded in two key locales. Noor did not conceal those locations but removed enough of the references to make the text somewhat disorientating, as her story is not told chronologically, and so it is unclear at times exactly where events occurred and for audience purposes this important element of story grammar may have to be restored by footnotes or other additions.

Noor removed historical and contextual details that she may have considered redundant or unnecessary but which offer greater insight into the lives of women in Yemen for those unfamiliar with this society. Other information lost concerned her relationship with her husband, her family and her emotions. Most of the key contradictions of her life and loves have been excised leaving relatively speaking something closer to the career-oriented monomyth associated with men and high-flying women than the fragmented and competing subjectivities that characterize most women’s life stories. Unlike the monomyth however, Noor seemed keen to downplay her exceptionality, removing much evidence of her agency and the extent of her responsibilities.
Noor also changed the order in which information concerning her children was presented, and altered a number of statements concerning her oldest children, possibly in anticipation of the response of an audience. These actions were contradictory in themselves, as initial statements that might have met with disapproval in the West, despite describing behaviour that was common place in Yemen, were obscured/made opaque whilst other assertions that might well have been considered positive were completely removed or amended to reflect local sensibilities.

Noor also engaged to a far greater degree with the language in which her story was expressed than Hana’a had done, changing informal vocabulary to more formal lexis (e.g. tough to hard), and substituting politically correct terms for words with pejorative connotations in English (e.g. servant to maid). She also improved the syntax and flow of some sentences, whilst leaving others oddly truncated where details had been removed.

| I want to be successful. I don’t want them to say that Noor is not working hard or that she’s lazy. I do many things. I never stay at home, I work the whole week. I know that some of my friends and my colleagues stay at home and fill anything in on their timetable or whatever, but it is against my principles. Either be in it or leave it helas. I am not less than any of the men, I feel myself much better than them, yes – aiwa no really! |

Figure 11. Extract from Noor’s re-storied text

| I want to be successful. I work the whole week. I know that some of my friends and my colleagues stay at home and fill anything in on their timetable but it is against my principles. Either be in it or leave it. |

Figure 12. Extract from Noor’s negotiated narrative

The overall effect of the changes is a more formal, modest and considerably more distant portrait of Noor than the one that emerged in the interviews and was
represented by the re-storied text. Perhaps this is a version of her life and many selves that she feels is more fitting for public consumption in the context of Yemeni social and cultural mores, but it is interesting that the selves she has attempted to repress are situated at the extremes of the continuum, suggesting perhaps an internal “argument about identity” (Smith & Watson 2010: 63). Noor has excised much of her intimate, emotional life, traditionally considered the preserve of the female, as well as evidence of her agentic self, with its connotations of masculinity. In this approved and to an extent sanitised version of the text, it could be argued that she embodies the ‘third sex’, and this is therefore a textual representation of her liminality within Yemeni society.

4.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have told a story of this study, from my motivation for undertaking such research, to how I operationalised my understandings of the feminist relational ethics that underpinned it, both in the process of data generation, and the production of the collaborative life writing exemplified here. In the following chapter I discuss the process of data analysis and present detailed interpretations of the interview data, which provide the third and final frame for the life histories presented in Chapter 6.
Chapter 5
Being, doing, knowing: Our stories

5.1 Introduction
In her analysis of Arab women’s autobiographical writing, Abdelrazek argues that women “aspire not only to find themselves, define themselves, and name their own experiences, but also reach out to others, building bridges” (2007: 69) and I hope that my analysis and interpretations of the interview data, in tandem with the stories of Hana’a and Noor themselves, will lay down additional planks on those rickety spans of cross cultural understandings. The purpose of this chapter is two-fold, in that it both presents my chosen method of data analysis, and provides an analytical frame for the life histories that follow in Chapter 6. I describe the voice-centred relational approach (VRDA) that I used to analyse the original interviews and lay out the multiple interpretations derived from that method. These interpretations are offered at length in order to orient my reader to the subjective realities of Hana’a and Noor’s world, allowing me to ‘get out of the way’ and minimise potentially intrusive mediation of the stories themselves.

5.2 Dances with Data Analysis
I present Hana’a and Noor’s lives holistically and in accordance with their own desires and reputational concerns in Chapter 6, but am conscious that without mediation a reader unfamiliar with their context might overlook their agency. Commonly associated in the western liberal tradition with autonomy and independence, the agency expressed by these women is couched in primarily religious and relational terms. In order to bridge the gap between these different ways of being in, and viewing the world, I returned to the original data from which their life histories were constructed and through analysis and interpretation of the whole, have attempted to draw out understandings of their agency which might be more accessible to a reader.
As some of these understandings are based on material which Noor and Hana’a chose to edit out of their stories, I could be accused of betraying their confidence. Unlike Josselsson, I do not defend my actions by insisting on the need to take myself “out of relationship with my participants in order to be in relationship with my readers” (2011: 45) nor do I “write over, or voice over” (Kitzinger & Gilligan 1994: 411) their voices. Mindful of my ethical duty of care to the people and agendas in my study, the relationships without which this research would not have been possible, and the readers without whom such ‘new’ stories cannot be told, I chose a voice-centred approach to analysis. This particular protocol “provides a rich and detailed analytical reading” (Lawthom 2004b: 153) which identified features salient to the purposes of this study that were deemed unremarkable or unimportant by the women themselves. As someone who moves between the two very different worlds of my storytellers and readers, belonging at once to both and neither, part of the warrant for my research is my ability to reflect back to each world something of the ‘Other’ in terms that are locally comprehensible. In this way, I believe I have kept faith with all those involved in this study, bringing depth and complexity to my depiction of the ways in which educated Yemeni women experience the storylines available to them.

In this section I describe the VRDA protocol that I have adopted to analyse the original interview data, working with both the verbatim transcripts and the recordings themselves. The detailed exemplification of the process of applying this protocol to the data can be found in Appendix D.

5.2.1 A voice-centred relational approach

The voice-centred relational approach to data analysis (VRDA) - also referred to as voice relation method (VRM) - originally devised by Lyn Brown and Carol Gilligan (1992) at Harvard University, “arises from a long feminist tradition of engaging with women and for women” (Lawthom 2004a: 116). Underpinned by a relational ontology, an understanding of human beings as interdependent rather than autonomous, self-sufficient and rational individuals, it positions “voices as relational within the analysis...to understand lives in and on their own terms, and thus to ground
theory in women’s own experiences” (ibid 2004a: 117 emphasis in original). Voice-centred methods:

attempt to translate this relational ontology into methodology and into concrete methods of data analysis by exploring individuals’ narrative accounts in terms of their relationships to the people around them and their relationships to the broader social, structural and cultural contexts within which they live. (Mauthner & Doucet 1998: 126)

This is achieved by analysing a text in a multi-perspectival fashion, creating a number of readings which potentially afford the reader the opportunity to engage with the multiple and sometimes conflicting subjectivities of a storyteller (see Chapter 2). Analysing data from different vantage points offers a layered interpretation and where the same issue surfaces across readings, it clearly indicates priorities and preoccupations of the individual concerned.

VRDA has been interpreted and utilised differently by a number of feminist scholars across a range of disciplines and the version that I present here is based on those outlined by Natasha Mauthner and Andrea Doucet (1998) and Rebecca Lawthom (2004a). They propose four readings as follows:
A voice-centred relational approach

1. Reading for plot and our responses to the narrative
What are the main events, the protagonists, the subplots?
Which words, images and metaphors re-occur?
How am I located socially in relation to the storyteller?
How do I respond emotionally and intellectually to the story?

2. Reading for the voice of ‘I’
“How she speaks of herself before we speak of her” (Brown and Gilligan 1992: 27-8)
How does the woman experience, feel and speak about herself?
When does she use I, we, you?

3. Reading for relationships
How do women speak of their relationships, with husbands, parents, children, colleagues and friends?
Which are apparently sources of support and comfort, which are perceived as negative?

4. Reading to place people within cultural contexts and social structures
How do women experience the particular social context from within which they are speaking (this includes dominant and normative conceptions of women’s roles)?

Figure 1. Voice-centred relational approach to data analysis

In Sections 3 – 6, I elaborate on each reading in turn and then offer the resulting interpretation of Hana’a’s interview data, before proceeding to the next reading, and so on. Having completed the cycle with Hana’a’s data, I present the interpretation of Noor’s data without the gloss on method in Sections 7 – 10. A detailed exemplification of the VRDA process is provided in Appendix D. I have taken the decision to offer the interpretations before the stories for several reasons, the first being to provide the reader with an orientation to the women’s own understandings of their life and society, so that the life histories can be presented without the
support of copious footnotes or distracting boxes, and the second because the interpretations are the result of the analysis of the interview data in its entirety, and not limited to the artefacts collaboratively fashioned from that data which follow in Chapter 6.

5.3 Reading 1: Plot and personal responses to the narrative

In this initial reading, the first task is to identify the plot, the main events, protagonists and subplots and the second is to engage reflexively with the text and record our responses to it. Whilst focusing on the plot, guided by Mauthner and Doucet, I “listened for recurrent images, words, metaphors and contradictions in the narrative” (1998: 126) and recorded them to help me focus on issues of importance to my storytellers and alert me to tensions within their self-portraits or conflicting subjectivities. The second step was to consider my own responses to the stories told, as by naming “how we are socially, emotionally and intellectually located in relation to our respondents we can retain some grasp over the blurred boundary between their narratives and our interpretations” (Mauthner & Doucet 1998: 127). Those who make use of voice relational methods believe, as I do, that “our intellectual and emotional reactions to other people constitute sources of knowledge; it is through these processes that we come to know other people” (ibid 1998: 128). Ultimately, for the sake of transparency, given the “perspectival nature of knowledge” such reflexivity is necessary in order to “make explicit the theoretical basis of interpretation” (Alldred 1998: 162).

5.3.1 Plot

This is a story of growth and development, of opportunity and making your own happiness, all facilitated by education. It is a story of independence, ambition and growing awareness that leads to advocacy. Hana’a sees herself as a change agent, and explicitly stories herself as such. She participates actively in the communal life of women, and even while her status as a divorced woman on the one hand, and a working woman on the other means that she is doubly othered in conservative

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48 The transcripts are available on request for private viewing
society, it is this otherness (and fear for her daughter perhaps) that has apparently
galvanised her to become an advocate for girls’ education, delayed marriage and
later motherhood. Hana’a understands that women are not viewed as equal in
Yemeni society but she does not accept the ‘incomplete’ and ‘inferior’ labels nor
does she cut a subservient figure, bossing her younger brother around, mocking her
oldest brother and even risking her revered father’s wrath in order to assert herself.

The plot is a series of reversals of fortune, a happy and intelligent young girl, from a
caring and supportive home in a liberal and outward-looking Aden, has a university
education but is then plunged into the abyss of an arranged marriage. Falling
pregnant immediately, she is mistreated for 6 months and runs home to her family
who take her in, ‘adopt’ her daughter and permit her to pursue a teaching career. As
a successful professional woman, making a contribution to society in a modernising
and tolerant city, her agentic sense of self is strong until she is forced to relocate to
the ultra-conservative hinterlands of Yemen. There she experiences a loss of status,
freedom and autonomy and adjusts slowly to the new constraints, before resuming
her career and resolving to raise awareness amongst women of the benefits of
education and perils of early marriage.

These reversals of fortune were all a direct result of doing her duty and are re-
presented as opportunities, her failed marriage gave her a daughter, and the ‘excuse’
perhaps to have the career that she’d always dreamed of. Moving to Tarim meant
she had to fight to continue her career and make a meaningful life for herself, and
this increased the time she spent in the company of women leading to evangelism in
terms of girls’ education and delayed marriage “When the people recognize that girls
have the right to learn, and be educated and work like men, maybe it will change”.

5.3.1.1 Subplot

The subplot of Hana’a’s story is difference, primarily from other women, as a result
of her elite status, her education and socialisation. She often usurps masculine
privilege, deferring marriage until she has completed her university studies, walking
out on her husband and insisting on pursuing a career in a conservative environment
that militates against female participation in the professions.
5.3.1.2 Protagonists

Family dominates the cast of characters in Hana’a’s story, chief amongst them her loving father whose support enabled her to complete her studies, pursue a career and keep her daughter, the future happiness of whom is one of Hana’a’s chief preoccupations. The supporting cast is largely made up of family and friends and the sole agonist is her mother-in-law, although certain traditional practices in conservative Tarim assume monstrous form as Hana’a battles them.

5.3.1.3 I think, therefore I am...

The life of the mind is writ large in Hana’a’s story, and as the wordle49 below illustrates (see appendix D for exemplification of the analysis), she thinks a lot and whilst she retains an open mind, she knows what she likes and wants from life, which is to work as a teacher and help educate her society to improve the status and choices available to women and girls.

Figure 2. Wordle of Hana’a’s transcripts

As a mother of a daughter, Khadija and an educated woman Hana’a is particularly concerned by the very young age at which girls are married and become mothers...

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49 A wordle is a data visualization tool which “performs statistical analyses of the text and organizes it by word frequency” (Baralt, Pennestri & Selvandin 2011: 13) considered useful “for preliminary analysis and for validation of previous findings” (McNaught & Lam 2010: 642).
themselves, and discusses at length the inequalities between men and women in Tarim and Hadramawt particularly, although her immediate family and her father in particular are very supportive.

5.3.1.4 Contradictions

There appeared to be four key contradictions in Hana’a’s story, related to work and marriage, themes with which Hana’a is preoccupied. Hana’a claims to only be going out to work because her father is “a simple man” who can not afford to support them, but has stated several times that her “dream” is to be a teacher, and mentions in passing that her father is building a “very big house for us”. Having seen the foundations being dug for this house myself, I can attest to the fact that it is huge, and built on ancestral land, all of which suggest that working for the money is not strictly necessary. Likewise, her determination to work since the birth of her daughter means spending most of her time away from the child, whilst claiming that “she’s all my life…she’s the very important thing in my life”. On the subject of marriage, Hana’a states that women are respected in Tarim, claiming “I haven’t heard about women who are beaten or forced to be married” having just offered an extended account of women being pressured into marriage with men twice or three times their age, or being ‘given’ to similarly decrepit men, or men of poor character and reputation. I wondered whether this was damage limitation or wishful thinking, born out of fears for her daughter, who all too soon will be of an age considered marriageable in this context? Hana’a also says that she will try to think positively about marriage and men, but her ambivalence is evident as she maintains that girls “don’t know how life will be, how this man will behave towards her, that she will suffer when she gets pregnant and she will have a child that needs a lot of care”.

5.3.2 My response to Hana’a

The most striking thing for me as a reader was the description of the close relationship Hana’a enjoyed with her father, perhaps because my own father was (unwillingly) absent from much of my childhood, and I was something of a social handicap for my mother in the late 1960s when single mothers and divorcées were still stigmatized. Hana’a was spoilt by her father, who encouraged and supported her
throughout her education, even over her mother’s objections to her going to university. It was however my mother who made sure I had the best education, coming from impoverished gentility that greatly prized classical education and religion, and I was in some ways hostage to both, as penance for her sins perhaps. I find it interesting that Hana’a only mentions religion once in this account, used by others in defence of early marriage.

Her sense of purpose and achievement orientation resonate with me, doing well at school, being top of my class, winning cups and prizes, getting into grammar school, then winning scholarships and bursaries. Hana’a was supported and encouraged throughout her studies, by her father at least, but for me it was my way of trying to be visible, of getting attention from a couple for whom I was an inconvenience as they started their married life together, although I became increasingly useful domestically as my half-sisters were born. I had to achieve in order to be acknowledged, Hana’a perhaps achieved because she was acknowledged?

I very much identify with the way Hana’a has chosen to accentuate the positives, and come to terms with the failure of her marriage - she got her daughter out of it, just as I got a platform to help women - and her forced relocation to Hadramawt, where she is participating in society, engaging with women and trying to effect changes in people’s attitudes. I believe that she is playing a long game, and has hopes of a more independent life, possibly back in Aden at some stage in the not too distant future. I have always tried to look on the bright side myself, but do not think I coped so well with my forced relocation to the UK in 2010. Hana’a owned the decision to move, even though it might appear to be the result of duress and extended emotional blackmail, and had the comfort of doing the right thing by her much loved family. I was not ready to leave Yemen, I had not made the break emotionally or psychologically and left behind people I loved who I believe needed me, so it felt like a betrayal and the sense of loss was almost physical.

It struck me that although her parents both came from conservative Hadrami backgrounds, the family functioned on much more egalitarian lines than the rigidly hierarchical Sana’ani household I married into. It would have been unthinkable for my father-in-law to do shopping or run errands, even for his own daughters of
whom he appeared genuinely fond. If I needed something I had to ask my husband, and failing that my brother-in-law, and as my sisters-in-law were both reliant on him, he was often ungracious, usually tardy and resisted doing anything for me as he resented my presence in the house.

Hana’a and I experienced similar fates at the hands of our mother-in-laws. Both women seem to enjoy particularly close relationships with their sons, verging on the morbid in my husband’s case, and neither Hana’a nor I were considered ‘good enough’. This was entirely understandable in my case, as I was the polar opposite of the bride that my in-laws had planned for their eldest son and heir, but Hana’a has an impeccable pedigree, beauty, wit, intelligence and charm, although her age, education and feistiness would have been held against her. She also fell pregnant within a month of the wedding, so proved herself to be fertile – another area in which I failed miserably to live up to expectations. We both suffered verbal abuse and insults, and I was locked up on occasion (by my husband) to prevent his mother beating me, as she did both her daughters. I was not permitted to cook in case I tried to poison them, and had all my personal possessions confiscated, including my clothing, and had no option but to wear the gowns that my mother-in-law provided for me. I was also made to wear the matron’s hair covering and continuously berated for my inability to keep it modestly in place, or comport myself as a princess should. I was kept locked away, a shameful non-secret, whilst Hana’a was forced to go on endless rounds of visits. Our husbands both seemingly deferred to the wishes of their mothers (Mundy 1995: 144; Barakat 1993: 100), as whatever my mother-in-law did was accepted, and made acceptable by her position, whether that was beating her daughters black and blue or pretending to be on her deathbed in the hope that my husband would agree to her ‘dying’ wish and repudiate me. Similarly, Hana’a was supposed to “be patient” with a woman whose stated goal was to break up her marriage.

5.4 Reading 2: Voice

The aim of the second reading is to allow the woman to speak for herself by paying particular attention to how she “experiences, feels and speaks about herself”
(Mauthner & Doucet 1998: 128) or in my feminist poststructuralist terms, how she performs ‘herself’. The focus is on listening actively for the agentic ‘I’ and for shifts between the expression of that inner locus of control and recognition of external pressures or constraints be they familial, social or cultural. I did this by using different coloured pens to highlight the statements in which the personal pronouns I, we or you are used, and then examining the claims that they stake and the relationships and allegiances that they include or exclude (see Appendix D).

5.4.1 Reading for Hana’a’s voice

Hana’a presents herself in a very confident and agentic fashion, providing a more or less chronological, rather than “episodic and anecdotal” (Jelinek 2003: 265) account of her life, which resembles in many way the heroic monomyth more commonly associated with male autobiography (Caine 2010; Eakin 1999; Smith 1993). I have therefore followed her logic and explored her often conflicting subjectivities as she maps the journey she has taken and the challenges she has met along the way.

5.4.1.1 Childhood dreams

Hana’a starts the story of her life with her key facilitator “I was spoilt by my father, I was very close to him as a child” and her ambitions to follow in his footsteps “I learnt from him teaching, I have wanted to be a teacher since I was a child”. Acting on that goal, she describes how “I was collecting my neighbours …to teach them. I had a blackboard and chalk, I also had a notebook to write the marks. Everyday I used to teach my neighbours and the children who visited us”. Telling a story of achievement orientation, even as a young child, she goes on to explain that she worked hard and performed well at school “I was in the first or second place” which was important as “my dream is to be a teacher or a doctor”. She explains that “I wanted to join the university” and in fact “insisted on joining the university and my father encouraged me" despite her mother’s opposition.

In her first deviation from this heroic script, and apparent contradiction of earlier statements and those to follow, Hana’a confides “I was very shy, you can’t believe… I didn’t use to talk with people freely” because she claims “I had low self esteem, I didn’t
participate a lot in the classes”. References to shyness have frequently featured in the interviews I have conducted with educated women in Yemen, and whilst I believe it was performative, it may have been offered at this juncture to suggest modesty (Mahmood 2005) or indeed as a marker of just how far she has come. Hana’a then returns to the reporting of her endeavours “I was clever and I was active…my marks were high and when I graduated I was 4th in my year” continuing to focus on her performance and draw our attention to her considerable achievements, look at me, I’m a girl but I’m still top of my class! Setting her sights higher after graduation, Hana’a “dreamed of being a teacher in the university” but in the first limitation that she appears to recognize she says “I couldn’t do that because to be a teacher you have to teach without pay for two or three years [with no guarantee of a post afterwards]”. This is a common feature of government employment in Yemen, and undoubtedly a barrier for many talented and impoverished graduates, but her family is not poor, which suggests that she was not prepared to work unpaid for a few years rather than that she could not afford to. Presented as a concern about money and job security, in her social and familial contexts it struck me as a choice, an assertion of her value, her status?

Her education having delayed her marriage, as soon as Hana’a graduated “I was engaged and the person who I was engaged to was a stranger to me” and more traditional attitudes are in evidence here, for betrothed to a stranger, of whom she has no first hand knowledge, she feels there are no grounds to reject the match “I thought a lot but I had been told that he was a good man, and his mother was a good woman. And I knew nothing about him so how could I refuse?” The very fact that she “thought a lot” before accepting the offer however, suggests that despite the pressure being brought to bear she still believed it was her decision to make.

5.4.1.2 Marriage and misery

As she moves into a description of her arranged marriage, there is a noticeable shift in how Hana’a portrays herself, often as the ‘object’ rather than the agentic subject, and there is a sense of powerlessness here, far from home with her weak husband and wicked mother-in-law who “treated me very badly…she hated me… she shouted at me and insulted me”. However even though Hana’a “suffered a lot” the object is never
abject, and she sees her continued suffering as the result of her choice to remain, and evidence of her fortitude “I endured in the beginning, endured and endured”. Hana’a does however re-assert her agency, threatening to leave on several occasions “I decided to collect my clothes and said I’ll go to my family and I’ll not stay here and be insulted” agreeing to stay in order to satisfy the demands of the good wife and dutiful daughter-in-law storylines, but actually making good on her threat on the third occasion. When she does leave, she does so very much standing on her status, “I am from a very respectable family and you didn’t bring me from the street to be insulted and you have to know that I can go and have my life without you and your mother”. She is also confident of the support of her parents, which would not be the case for all women in a country where daughters may be thought of as ‘guests’ and it is often said that “After marriage, her father’s door is locked behind her” (Meneley 1996: 76).

Another interesting rhetorical move takes place as Hana’a tells the story of leaving her unhappy marital home to move back in with her family, as she unambiguously adopts a victim stance, “with my husband and his mother I suffered a lot, I was pregnant, I needed care and love but they only gave me insults and very bad behaviour”. Highly unusual in her performance, this ‘I’ is non-agentic, situating her as the passive, ideal female, the vulnerable, helpless recipient of kindness or cruelty, but this ‘helplessness’ perhaps combined with a guilt trip for her parents who married her to this ‘bad’ man, results in her rescue, and her continued protection, so is she role-playing here, or just falling back on storylines available to her? I wonder how much of this self-presentation might be manipulation, but I tell stories of my suffering at the hands of my husband as humorous anecdotes, possibly because I want to avoid acknowledging how very real my vulnerability and pain were, so perhaps this is just a very honest description of her suffering, and her sense of powerlessness in a life that otherwise she feels she has largely directed? Hana’a relates how for “the first year after the divorce I was very sad and I felt disappointed” pondering the reasons for her failed marriage “why did I fail with that man?” The use of the word ‘fail’ here suggests injured pride, for it is certainly the first failure in her life, and a very public one at that. The support of her family will provide limited protection against the gossip and the tendency to assign blame primarily to the female of the species (Darem 2010; Baobaid 2006; Meneley 1996). Her concerns are as much for her daughter as herself.
though for “I was thinking about my daughter, being without a father. She deserves to have the care of a father and a father’s family and I was sorry for her.” Life can be very precarious for a fatherless daughter in Yemen (Meneley 1996; Mundy 1995), she may be ‘sold’ by a brother or uncle, ‘swapped’ in a double marriage (with all the unhappiness that can entail) or live as an unpaid slave at the bottom of the family hierarchy wherever she is taken in:

I knew a girl, less than 20 who got married to a man who was 60. He's an old man and after five years I think he got sick and she had to take care of him, nursing him, imagine? That girl hasn't got a father, her father is dead and maybe her uncle or her mother’s new husband was taking care of her, so he gave her to that old man. You will see many women who are very young and their husbands are very old.

Fortunately Hana’a has an unusually supportive father who “promised me he’d take care of her and be her father” and his adoption of Khadija has given her daughter status in society.

5.4.1.3 Chasing the dream

After giving birth, Hana’a seems keen to return to the pursuit of her professional goals “I thought about going to work and I took computer courses. After that I worked in the University, in the Faculty of Medicine as a printer for a year” . Hana’a found that first year hard “because I had to work in the morning in the Faculty of Medicine and in an institute teaching English language in the evening and I was very, very tired, but I had to work to support my daughter and myself”. It is interesting that Hana’a repeats the obligatory form ‘had to’ when there was no such obligation from the perspective of the family or society to go out to work, the very opposite in fact, which suggests she is perhaps searching for a justification that would provide some defence against charges of unmaternal behaviour? Adopting the sacrificial mother role allows her to resume her participation in society, without jeopardising her reputation. Hana’a claims that her “father is a simple man, he is only a teacher, and he can’t pay for me and my daughter” and whilst her family is not wealthy, they are still very much at the top of the social tree. The suggestion that he is ‘only’ a teacher is perhaps disingenuous given the emphasis placed on education within the family, and her determination to follow in his footsteps, although it is fair to say that teaching is neither a high income
or high status profession in Yemen. Hana’a continues “I felt that so I challenged myself” which makes me think that she did this entirely on her own initiative, and was not required to earn her keep, it being incumbent upon men to support women in Islam (Qur’an 2: 228). There is also no mention of her father encouraging her in this particular endeavour, and his silence might suggest that he did not want Hana’a to feel that he was unwilling or unable to support her and Khadija, as the implication that he needed her financial assistance would have been shameful (de Regt 2007: 180; Meneley 1996: 65). In making a contribution to the finances of her bayt in this way, Hana’a can be seen to be establishing a degree of independence, and is possibly trying to make amends for the fact that her already late marriage ended so quickly and that she had come home pregnant, and then disappointingly produced a daughter (Molyneux 1991: 250) although her ex-husband would almost certainly have claimed a son, whereas daughters are sometimes dismissed as ‘water under the door’.

At this point in the narrative, the agentic ‘I’ re-emerges in a newly assertive fashion, she talks of growing “stronger” and claims that “I can learn a lesson from what happened to me and I can continue my life without the help of anyone” although I believe here that she means without a husband, as she is dependent on her father for her bed and board, and of course her honour, as living independently is not an option for women. The litany of competence continues “I can work, I’m an educated woman and there are many things I can do” and securing a teaching contract with the state “was a very, very big thing for me. I was very happy because as a teacher no-one can sack me or tell me to leave work.” Public sector employment is highly sought after as it offers a job for life, a monthly salary and maternity benefits (de Regt 2007: 332) and is therefore an important form of security, but Hana’a would never need to fend for herself, with a doting father and 2 brothers to take care of her, so I feel this is about her being recognized as an individual, as a professional, as a person in her own right – she is putting herself forward and saying this is me, this what I do and thereby submitting herself to scrutiny and evaluation. This shows a strong achievement orientation in a society where ascribed status is so important (Clark 2004: 121; Mundy 1995: 173), and by her own admission she already has the benefit of that status.
5.4.1.4 Coming into her own

With the job security, comes increasing confidence, “By the day I felt that I was getting stronger and stronger, I can make my life… I can depend on myself” and an awareness of her potential contribution “I felt that I’m very useful to my family and to my society, and to my daughter of course”. In her claim that “I can even help others” there is a sense of surprise, a realization of her agency and also of the possibility of making a contribution to the wider society, beyond her immediate family. It is as though she was asserting herself, trying to make herself heard or create ‘space’ for herself and then realized the truth of her assertions. Emboldened, she elaborates “I think I can enjoy my life, enjoy everything and help my family, help my society” before challenging the status quo in no uncertain terms “It’s not important to be married or not married, I do not need a man in my life” claiming that “I can depend on myself and I can take care of my daughter myself”. This is fighting talk in Yemen, because all women are presumed to be in need of male guardianship, and the man she is rejecting explicitly is another husband, because elsewhere she openly admits to being grateful for and in need of her male family members, her father in particular.

Having done her duty in agreeing to the marriage arranged for her, Hana’a now exercises her prerogative as a divorced woman to have a say in any subsequent marriage “I was asked for my hand in marriage so many times but I refused… because I hated men and marriage”. In the face of pressure to remarry however, Hana’a says she has “tried to think positively about life, about marriage and about men” as “my relatives and my parents told me that not all men are equal, you may find a man who is a very good husband and a very good father”. Appearing to acquiesce to the counsel of her elders, “I told them if I find this man, maybe I’ll think about marriage, maybe I’ll accept, maybe he will change my opinion about men and about marriage” but her repeated use of the term maybe, so different from her usual decisive language is telling. The likelihood of her finding someone “who is very kind and who will accept my work and my daughter and who will be open and flexible” within the limited pool of Sayyid suitors available to her, is almost non-existent, and so her adoption and amalgamation of dutiful daughter and sacrificial mother storylines here brings her a freedom of sorts. Whilst concern for her daughter is a key issue in her rejection of potential suitors “the most important thing is to be a father for my daughter” an equally
compelling priority is the retention of her professional role “I’m not ready to leave my work, to lose it because of a man, he should be persuaded that my work is very important for me”. For Hana’a, a supportive husband is key to being a working wife and mother “I think the woman needs the man who stands beside her, supports her and encourages her so she can be a good wife and successful in her job” and with such demanding criteria she can no doubt look forward to remaining a divorcée. Her understanding of marriage has an element of active partnership, which is unusual in Yemen, where men and women are generally believed to have entirely separate duties and responsibilities which require little or no communication between spouses, and where the husband assumes ultimate authority over and ownership of the body and being of his wife. We’re definitely seeing the ‘becoming’ of Hana’a here.

5.4.1.5 The greatest challenge?

Hana’a’s sense of agency is sorely tested by her father’s decision to move the family to Hadramawt which “was sad news for me” and made her “feel very angry”. Hana’a clearly fears the loss of her freedom and relatively liberal lifestyle, but her foremost concern is her career, “the thing that I feel is difficult for me is to be a teacher in Hadramawt, because I think that their point or their view towards the women teachers is not the same in Aden, men look at women as something not complete and you are less than them so I don’t like this view.” Hana’a put up a protracted resistance to the proposed move “I fought, I fought a lot but I didn’t succeed” finally capitulating in the face of her mother’s ill health and resuming the role of dutiful daughter “I wanted to obey my father and my mother”. In what appears to be her darkest hour, she does however take comfort in the fact that her sister Huda already works as a teacher in Hadramawt and “that’s the only thing that gives me hope”. Although Hana’a was initially “bored…angry and sad” in her new environment, she is soon framing the unwelcome move as an opportunity for growth and development “I don’t know how to adapt myself there but I’ll try insha’allah, I should prove myself”. This is one of only two occasions on which Hana’a invokes the will of God, which suggests the magnitude of the struggle she feels she is engaged in. Hana’a takes ownership of the situation, making it her mission to create a meaningful life “I saw it as a challenge, to live in Hadramawt, and adapt myself to life there” and protect her daughter from the local
practices of early marriage and motherhood “I’m trying to change this view that that the girl should marry at 14 or 15” in which her own family are complicit.

Despite the very real nature of the challenges which she faces, Hana’a retains a youthful enthusiasm, and optimism, that being transported to truly mediaeval Tarim has failed to dampen. Reflecting on her position she says “Women my age have married daughters, and they are grandmothers. Imagine me as a grandmother! I still feel like a child! I play and enjoy my life”. Whilst Hana’a is in fact a responsible and hard working teacher, she is also a favoured child, living in her family home, and working outside she has a much more limited burden of domestic work than would be typical, or indeed than she would have had in her husband’s family home (Mundy 1995: 141). Without the demands of a husband and multiple children, Hana’a does have far more quality time with her daughter than is usual, so she might “still feel like a child” because she doesn’t carry the usual burdens of Yemeni womanhood, and recognizing her fortune is keen to improve the lot of other women.

5.4.2 Reading for We

In contrast to her frequent use of I, Hana’a does not use we much, and when she does it relates primarily to her family and her social class, and suggests that boundaries for her in-groups are quite narrowly drawn. Her use of we is highly selective and very specific, and most frequently relates to her natal family, usually in the context of change and transition. When describing her arranged marriage to a stranger for example, she says “we knew his relatives in Aden and they told us that he’s a good man” and ultimately explains her acquiescence to the move to Tarim in a similar fashion “because we have no relatives here in Aden, I felt we have to be close to people who are our relatives”. She also describes the habits and customs of the Sayyid class as interchangeable with her family’s own practices and vice-versa, most often in the context of marriage. While discussing the dowry paid for her sister-in-law Muna, she explains “for us as As-Sa’ada, the payment is very cheap, because this top class don’t want their daughters to be married to other classes” and “As-Sa’ada say we are buying a man, we are not selling a daughter!”
In her description of her co-educational school days there seems to be an element of nostalgia “we didn’t look at boys as though they are boys and we are girls, no, because we were together till the 9th year so I saw them like my brothers and friends” and projection perhaps of her own personal and familial values on the entire cohort of female students “when we were in secondary school we were thinking about our study, what we want to be in the future” a paradise lost, perhaps? She uses we to encompass her generation when she compares the past “when we were young our life was very simple…we didn’t have the internet when I was a teenager…we were either studying or reading” to the present “we like the technology, we like the computer and internet and everything” and finds it, and the youth of today, wanting “they use it for entertainment only, not to benefit from it, from science, what is new now in the world, that’s why we are very late (as a society)”. 

5.4.3 Reading for You

Hana’a’s relatively frequent use of you can be divided into three more or less equal categories, those of appeals to shared knowledge, discussion of normative behaviour and reported speech. The appeals to shared knowledge typically prefaced by ‘you know’ concern Yemeni society in general “you know, the young girls like things like gold, make-up, things of women, yeah? They want to be women and so they admire these things” our joint endeavours within it “you know in Hadramawt it’s not normal to educate the girls” and our personal relationships “she’s like me, she’s very, you know, emotional”.

The majority of statements regarding normative behaviour relate to marriage “you will see many women who are very young and their husbands are very old” divorce “you can find divorced women who get married again to a married man, to be a second wife” and remarriage “so even if you have children you are told that you have to marry and you will find a kind man who will take care of your children”. The second most common category related to being part of the Sayyid class “some people think that if you are Sayyid you are better than the other people” although she believes that “if you are Sayyid, you have to be worthy of respect”. Another common topic was enforced dependence on men “if you need medicine from the pharmacy you should tell your husband or your father or your brother to bring it” and the segregated nature of the shopping
experience in Tarim “in the women’s souq, you can find clothes, shoes, decorations for the house, curtains, tea cups and nothing else, but in the men’s souq you can find everything, the electrical things and so on but you can’t get to the men’s souq, you can only get to women’s souq (laughs) it’s special!”

The final category was reported speech as Hana’a likes to illustrate her stories with dialogue, recalling conversations with relatives “oh you have to marry. It’s very late for you to stay without marriage (laughs) you are now 23 or 24 years old!” her husband “if you go to work don’t talk to a man, I don’t want men to talk to you” and mother-in-law “when she wanted to punish me, she’d say ‘Hana’a you have stay at home today. It is punishment because you told me that I’m bad’ and I was very happy al-hamdulillah (laughs) because I did not have to go” amongst others.

5.5 Reading 3: Relationships

The third reading places relationships under the spotlight, and once again I started by tracing all references with a highlighter pen, which in addition to identifying relevant passages, also provided an at-a-glance indication of the extent to which each woman understood her existence in relational terms. I was particularly interested in which types of relationships (familial, social or professional) were discussed and the roles played by those relationships in facilitating achievements and transitions or impeding self-actualization (see Appendix D).

5.5.1 Relationships with individuals

Despite her very agentic stance, after I completed the highlighting exercise, the pages of Hana’a’s transcripts were flooded with yellow ink, as her nuclear and extended family are apparently at the very heart of her existence. On those occasions when she is not discussing her personal relationships, much of the time is spent elaborating on the relationships between men and women in Yemen in general and Hadramawt in particular. As Hana’a expresses herself primarily in terms of agency it may appear somewhat contradictory that her discourse focuses largely on relationships, but as Hana’a makes clear repeatedly, members of her family have been pivotal in enabling her to achieve her ambitions and allowing her to be largely
independent “I think if there is no support or encouragement from my family and my mother and my father too, I would not able to work, to be what I am now.”

5.5.1.1 Hana’a and her father

Hana’a has an overwhelmingly positive relationship with her father, who she has been “very close to” since childhood, he “spoilt” and “encouraged” her and is positioned as the primary gate-keeper in her life. He is a teacher of Arabic, which suggests relatively high status and a conservative outlook, and Hana’a choose to model herself on him, rather than her stay-at-home mother, already appreciating the relative freedom and status conferred on teachers, perhaps? Hana’a was able to leave her marriage because of her father’s support, and not forced into a second marriage “I was asked for my hand in marriage so many times but I refused… I decided not to get married again” thereby protecting her daughter from being disposed of in an early marriage and allowing mother and daughter to remain together “I don’t want to leave my daughter with my parents, no she has the right to keep her mother, she was left by her father and it’s not fair to be left also by her mother”.

Despite being daddy’s little girl, or perhaps emboldened by their close relationship Hana’a fought against the move to Tarim, “in the beginning I fought, I fought a lot” apparently believing she could stop it. This does not sound like an empty protest but a real battle of wills, Hana’a not appearing fearful of losing her father’s favour, but fighting for her independence, her career and her freedom. She liked living in Aden “because women can do everything they want to do. They can work, they can go to the market, get everything from there but Hadramawt is different. Women there, most of them, and especially our relatives were housewives, they don’t work”. Again, after the move to Hadramawt it is her father who makes her life easier, performing services that would traditionally be devolved to the brothers or simply not get done at all because women are not permitted to enter most shops, even pharmacies, so they often end up waiting a long time for the most basic essentials, such as sanitary towels. The fact that her father shops and runs errands for her is an indication of the strength of the relationship, and her continuing ‘favourite’ status.
5.5.1.2 Hana’a and her mother

Hana’a is clearly proud of the fact that her mother is literate “my mother is not an educated woman but she can write and read well” and has a good relationship with her, but there does not appear initially to be the level of intimacy that she enjoys with her father. Hana’a seems to portray her mother as somewhat traditional, she is not educated, she objected to Hana’a going to university, and rarely features specifically, although there are several mentions of “my parents”. It was however her mother “who supported me to learn computer after being divorced and that helped me a lot in my work” and her mother’s health was the deciding factor in the move back to Hadramawt “when my mother got sick…I felt we have to be close to people who are our relatives and I said okay. I agreed in the end”. Her mother’s health may well have been better served medically by remaining in Aden, but the family support network available in Tarim trumped medical intervention. After the move to Tarim a more sympathetic picture of her mother emerges “I like my mother so much I want to make her happy” and is perhaps the result of spending more time at home with her, and a growing awareness and appreciation of her mother’s understated but stalwart support.

5.5.1.3 Hana’a and her daughter

At the time of the first interview Hana’a had never before been separated from her daughter “It is the first time I have left my daughter. I love her so much I couldn’t imagine that I could leave her for a month, a whole four weeks, twenty eight days. Since she was born I haven’t left her, I didn’t even sleep without her in the same room.” The ‘good mother’ is very much to the fore here “I think she’s all my life, besides my family of course. She’s the very important thing in my life and I think I’m also the very important thing in her life” suggesting a life revolving around her daughter, and the expectation that her daughter’s life similarly revolves around her. Hana’a describes her very engaged parenting style, with a focus on literacy “I used to take care of her, tell her stories before sleep, or sometimes not before sleep, maybe during the day, play with her, and teach her” but makes no mention of the time she spends away from her at work.
Despite the fact that Khadija has a very supportive grandfather, Hana’a worries about her being without a father “she deserves to have the care of a father and a father’s family and I was sorry for her”. Her genuine concern for her daughter’s welfare is exacerbated by the move to Hadramawt where “girls are educated only to the 8th or the 9th grade, and they have to be married after that, and I am afraid for my daughter really”. Wanting to prevent an early marriage for her daughter in order that she has the time and opportunity to become “a strong woman and depend on herself” Hana’a resolves “to educate my daughter and to get her a very good education” in effect, to enjoy the same protection that she herself benefited from. According to her proud mum, Khadija is “very enthusiastic in learning and she is very clever I think” and Hana’a believes that her daughter, in turn “is proud because her mother is a teacher, yes, an English teacher, especially”.

It is however her daughter who disrupts the harmony of her relationships with her father and her younger brother Ali. Her father apparently dotes on Khadija and takes her side in all arguments, and this is seemingly the only subject on which Hana’a does not challenge her father “the problem is with my father because he’s spoiling Khadija and I can’t, I don’t dare say to my father don’t do that”. This puts Ali at a disadvantage in battles for the remote control for example “sometimes my father shouts at him because of Khadija, she wants to watch cartoons and Ali wants something else” and creates tension between uncle and niece “she always quarrels with him” which in turn means “sometimes I quarrel with him because of Khadija”.

5.5.1.4 Hana’a and her sisters

Her older sister, Huda is an inspiration and a source of moral support for Hana’a after the move to Hadramawt, because having had a more traditional life “she got married after the secondary school and when she had three children she decided to complete her study because she wanted to work”. Huda “was fighting” to finish her education and train to be a teacher whilst juggling three children, an absentee husband and a home, but “she fought until she got the certificate of English...now she’s very, very happy and very enthusiastic and we are always talking about teaching”. Huda is also actively challenging the status quo in Tarim, “some of the girls in the class in the beginning they refused to take off their veils and she refused to teach them until they took
them off, she said ‘I'm a woman like you!’ because it is the tradition in Tarim that single ladies do not show their faces to married women’. Hana’a credits Huda with easing the transition to Hadramawt because she was already living there and in addition to making a career for herself, had found ways of making life more enjoyable, telling Hana’a that there were “many things to do in Tarim and there are many foreigners here, and you will be very happy because many of them want to understand the Tarimi people and many things about Islam and they do not find anyone to talk with”.

By way of contrast, Hana’a talks much less about her younger sister, Fatima, possibly because she is now married and living in Saudi Arabia. Hana’a explains that after her daughter was born and she returned first to her studies and then to work “my younger sister helped me a lot in taking care of Khadija because she was single at that time” and as a result there is a strong bond between aunt and niece “Khadija loved her so much and until now she remembers her and she says ‘I love Fatima’.”

Shortly before Hana’a moved to Hadramawt, her 29 year old brother Najeeb married the 15 year old Muna, and Hana’a “empathized with her and tried to teach her how things are in our house and I felt that I engaged with her”. At this point Hana’a was suffering from culture shock herself and inducting a new member of the family into ‘the house’ and the family’s rituals was perhaps a way of normalizing the new routine for herself as much as for Muna? It is evident that she feels protective of her cartoon-loving sister-in-law, “a very good girl” and is very conscious of her relative youth “I felt that she’s like my daughter, she’s a child” and the fact that she was forced to take on adult responsibilities overnight “I think that it is very injustice to have this young, very young girls to be married in this young age...these young girls have to grow up five or ten years after marriage yes. She has to be a grown up woman, a woman, not a child”.

In Hana’a’s concern for Muna I see reflected her fears for her own attractive, intelligent and headstrong daughter, approaching marriageable age with only the indulgence of her grandfather to protect her from a similarly early marriage and motherhood “The big problem is to have a child after a year of her marriage. That’s a very, very big problem because she herself is a child, how can she take care of a child?”
Hana’a’s maternal instincts are to the fore here, having had a difficult pregnancy in her mid 20s, she is clearly worried about the impact such an experience could have on girls only a few years older than her daughter, who is most likely ‘older’ in the sense of being better informed and educated than the average female child, yet also ‘younger’ as a result of being cosseted by her grandfather and avoiding the bulk of the domestic labour that most girls her age perform.

5.5.1.5 Hana’a and her brothers

Hana’a says very little about the older of her two brothers, Najeeb, beyond general comments about the support her family have offered her, except in the context of his young bride, Muna “he told me I have to go back twenty years because I have to play with her and talk to her”. The gently mocking tone she adopts when responding to his efforts to relate to his much younger bride “I laughed at him and I said oh, miskin (you poor thing)” does however suggest a strong bond of affection exists between the two. She talks far more often about her youngest brother Ali, who was finishing his studies in Aden at the time of the interviews “I am closer to him…and I can understand him”. She refers to him repeatedly as “nice, helpful, open and patient” and it is evident Ali offers very practical and concrete support to his big sister “he understands me and helps me if I face any problems” as well as acting as a visiting chaperone and chauffeur while Hana’a was staying in Sana’a “sometimes I need him, yes, and he’s helpful and here in Sana’a it’s very difficult to go with women only and he is patient because you know I want to go there and there and that shop”.

5.5.1.6 Hana’a and her conjugal home

Hana’a says very little about her husband, other than he was “kind” and “friendly”, although he did not defend her, or protect her from his mother, about whom not a good word is said, she was apparently: rude, aggressive, badly behaved, and shouted at her, insulted her, hated her. The abuse started immediately after her parents left after the wedding party, “his mother started to feel very, very nervous, angry with me, she was all the time shouting at me and insulting me” and continued unabated until Hana’a finally left six months later “I was frightened, it was a battle between me and his mother”.

5.5.2 Relationships with wider networks

While Hana’a is very close to her immediate family, her wider circle of relatives also feature at all stages in her story, particularly at times of transition “My relatives didn’t leave me, they are very friendly and that has made me less angry and sad”. She is also very aware of those times and situations when such support is absent “I didn’t find sincere people in Al-Shaher because we don’t know people there, we haven’t relatives there”. She describes herself as social “I really like to be with people” and considers herself popular “people also like to invite me” but no mention is made of specific friends, although general reference is made to family and friends helping her after her divorce “they encouraged me a lot and now I look at life from a very positive view”.

Hana’a also has an awareness of and curiosity about different ways of living “I think it’s a good thing to know how people think, how they behave, even their language. I like to listen to people and know their traditions” and is prepared to reconsider her beliefs and assumptions when presented with new evidence or novel experiences. Having spent her life in the South, a separate state until reunification in 1990 (see Chapter 1), Hana’a had had little opportunity to mix with those from the North until she was invited to participate in the Mentoring course that brought her to Sana’a in the summer of 2007 which gave her cause to reflect on her preconceptions “before I thought that all the men in the North looked at women very badly but I found them very respectful”. This approbation was extended only to the men attending the training programme however, for whilst travelling around the capital her brother mentioned the respectful demeanour of the men on the street, only to be told “Oh because you are with me only, you are a man, and if there are two women [alone] they will eat them!”

No mention of her colleagues at school is made, which is perhaps not surprising given the solitary nature of teaching in Yemen, where there are typically no communal areas available for teaching staff, no frameworks for Continuous Professional Development or tradition of critical friendship. The limited number of buildings available means that most schools operate on a shift basis, segregating children by gender and age, and fielding two sets of staff, creating huge pressure on time and space, and militating against efforts at collegiality or co-operative development.
There are a significant number of ‘theys’ in Hana’a’s discourse and rather than reflecting a mere recognition of the normative and dominant expectations of Yemeni society, Hana’a seems to be distancing herself from those understandings and expectations, and actively othering them. Although keen to improve the lot of women in Yemen, an ‘Us and Them’ stance to Hadrami women in general, and even members of her family is in evidence “Hadramawt is different, women there most of them and especially our relatives were housewives, they don’t work”. Beyond her dislike for the excessive amount of visits expected in Al-Shaher where the women “like to go out and visit their relatives and neighbours a lot – nearly everyday and they visit more than two houses and I didn’t use to go out everyday” Hana’a’s participation in the normal round of all-female activities is not much discussed, and perhaps taken-for-granted in her conversations with me, because of the highly ritualized nature of social interaction in Yemen (Pandya 2009; de Regt 2007; Clark 2004; Meneley 1996; Mundy 1995; Makhlof 1979). She is clearly often in social situations because that is when she is talking to women about early marriage “I’m trying to know, or to feel, to understand their thinking and to speak with them, especially with the old women, why do you get your daughters married so young?” Although this is Hana’a’s society, where few people even within her own family, question the practice of early marriage, she has an outsider’s perspective on it, possibly having married relatively late herself “girls who are not married are not allowed to wear beautiful clothes or to go to wedding parties with women or to wear make-up or to have their hair cut, they must cover their hair and stay at home taking care of children. So when they get married they have many beautiful clothes, gold, accessories, many new things and she will get her own room, a newly furnished room and so of course she will be happy, she’s a child!” There is a real sense that to Hana’a these women and Tarimi traditions are ‘Other’, and while her mocking is gentle, there is a suggestion of superiority, how can they fail to see the logic of her argument? There is a very strong sense of self, of stance, evident here. It is not just her curiosity about their thought processes that is motivating her, but her desire to effect change, to make a difference “I don’t know how to change these people, they don’t think but I’m trying and insha’allah I’ll try, I’ll try my best to convince these people”.


5.6 Reading 4: Cultural and social contexts

In the fourth reading, the focus is on “how individuals experience the particular social context from within which they are speaking” (Mauthner & Doucet 1998: 132) and the role of “institutions, structures and ideologies as providing strong enabling or constraining messages” (Lawthom & Stamford 2004: 134). This is congruent with the commitment in social justice research to making “nuanced explanations of behaviour” which requires that what “people think, feel and do must be analyzed within the relevant social contexts” (Charmaz 2005: 524).

5.6.1 Reading to place people within cultural and social contexts

Hana’a is very aware of her social status, “some people think that if you are Sayyid you should be respected and you are better than the other people” and women of this class are more likely to have access to education than others, but her ascribed status and privilege is not enough for her “I believe that people are judged by their actions more than their families or their fathers” and she desires a professional role. This is perhaps partly attributable, to having been born and educated in Aden (the largest city in Yemen at that point) during the Marxist regime, as Hana’a is aware “maybe because I lived in Aden” where on the one hand education was available to most (in the schools that the British had built) and women were routinely offered university scholarships in the Soviet Bloc in necessary fields such as medicine (hence the otherwise unlikely dream of being a doctor) and on the other, the Sayyid class (supported by the British as ‘client kings’) were repressed, and lost their prominence, their mansions and their power (and in some cases their lives). So a strong sense of self and history, allied with opportunity, and the Socialist emphasis on ‘being a new person’ (as enshrined in the PDRY family law of 1974) have probably contributed significantly to Hana’a’s insistence on ‘doing’. Hana’a clearly understands Aden as a place that is enabling and supportive of women “Aden is a very open area. I liked to live there because women can do everything they want to do” in stark contrast to the way she positions Tarim, her ancestral home where “They look at a woman as something not complete such as a man. She does not have the ability to work or to be educated or to learn like the man, there is a big difference there, he’s a man and she’s only a woman, miskina…”
The differences in schooling Hana’a identifies, such as co-education in small classes, are also a result of the political regime, and her focus on her own studies, in stark contrast to what she sees as the triviality of female concerns these days, is in the context where it was more routine for girls to go to school, and they had the option of training for professional careers that are no longer readily accessible to women. Hana’a seems to lay the blame on the current generation of girls though, “When we were in secondary school we were thinking about our study, what we wanted to be in the future, but the girls in the secondary school, most of them are thinking about when to get married” rather than acknowledging the political changes that have deprived the current generation of opportunities that hers took for granted.

At the time of the interviews, Hana’a is clearly grappling with culture shock, having recently moved one hundred miles inland and to the east, and one hundred years back in time perhaps to her family’s ancestral home, Tarim in Hadramawt, a small but religiously significant city with a mosque for every day of the year, despite a population of only 15,000. Although the majority of Sayyid families have been able to reclaim the crumbling shells of their once grand mud brick palaces, few have the money to restore them, or indeed have restored their own fortunes. The traditional respect for the Sayyid has however resurfaced in the years since the end of the Socialist experiment, and their historic practices continue.
This is an environment where as a woman Hana’a is not even permitted to purchase medicine for herself, the only goods she has access to are clothes, shoes and soft furnishings. Everything else is the exclusive preserve of men, and women are not allowed to set foot in these stores. It is considered immoral for women to drive, despite it being legal to do so, and it is almost impossible for women to own a business, or hold a professional role. Even teaching, widely accepted as appropriate for women is frowned on by many here, as it requires a woman to leave her home. Tarimi women with limited formal education and few opportunities to venture outside the valley (Wadi Hadramawt is 160 km long) are not necessarily conscious of the constrained structure of their daily life. For a woman used to the relatively liberal life of Aden, and a denizen of Yemen’s first ever shopping mall, Hadramawt was “a strange society” so alien to Hana’a that “every time I visited Hadramawt I told myself oh, al-hamdulillah I’m don’t live in Hadramawt, I live in Aden (laughs) but now (laughs) I live in Hadramawt unfortunately”. In this sheltered environment, the “life-enhancing, community-building, and empowering” (Pandya 2009: 63) company of women, always important in Yemen, takes on even greater significance and Hana’a
acknowledges the necessity of participating in order to build a fulfilling life for herself in Tarim.

Her major pre-occupation outside her working life is marriage, as girls are routinely engaged before they enter their teens here, with the marriages usually consummated between fourteen and fifteen. Hana’a sees herself very much apart from the local women who perpetuate these practices, and is apparently on something of a mission to get them to change their minds about the desirability of educating girls and delaying marriage, “Maybe one day the situation will change but I don’t know when and what will make this change. Maybe good education and maybe when people recognize that girls have the right to learn, and to be educated and to work like men, maybe it will change.” This is Hana’a’s battle cry – educate girls and let them work! Her phrasing is unequivocal “girls have the right” to an education, it is not a privilege but a right, according to her understanding of Islam. She acknowledges that this is an uphill struggle and believes that education is the key to changing attitudes, but with her cherished daughter steadily approaching marriageable age, her fears are clearly apparent, and every social gathering is an opportunity to effect change.

5.7 Reading 1: Plot and personal responses to the narrative

Having offered an interpretation of Hana’a’s interviews, I now interpret Noor’s data. Please refer to Appendix D for an exemplification of the method of analysis.

5.7.1 Plot

This is a story of the being and becoming of Noor, one in which since adolescence, she has tried to “find” herself and realise her potential in personal, professional and religious terms. Noor’s achievements are presented as the result of her own striving, and firmly grounded in her family (bayt) and her faith (iman), both of which she positions as pillars of strength and support throughout her life. Unlike those whose frequent invocation of ‘god’s will’ is used to avoid personal responsibility for their actions and fortunes, in Noor’s heartfelt “insha’allah” echoes the Augustinian ethic ‘pray as though everything depended on God, work as though everything depended on you’. Although Noor places much emphasis on her own hard work,
she recognizes her good fortune, referring repeatedly to how “lucky” she is, and being grateful for God’s gifts “al-hamdulillah”, tries hard to be worthy of them.

Noor acts from conviction according to her understanding of the ‘right’ thing in any given situation and whilst she has invariably demonstrated the greatest concern for propriety, her choices have not always met with universal approbation. Her decision to don the hijab at 18 in secular, Soviet-influenced Aden brought her into direct conflict with the university authorities and threatened to derail her education. Accepting her husband’s marriage proposal despite the disparities in class and education was a bold step reflecting her understanding of ‘all Muslims being equal’ that in Yemen is usually only honoured in burial rites and on the hajj pilgrimage, births and marriages being subject to myriad hierarchical traditions (Mundy 1995). Going out to work when her husband was unable to support them would have been viewed as shameful by certain sectors of society (Molyneux 1991: 253) and seized upon as further evidence of the inadvisability of marrying down, but Noor frames it as a matter of pure practicality. Similarly, when she judged her husband incapable of protecting his family in Taiz, Noor put the welfare of their children first and announced that she was moving to Aden, with or without him, to many a shocking dereliction of her wifely duty50. Seen from an Islamic perspective it could be argued, and Noor probably would, that given his failure to fulfil his obligations, there was no shame in seeking the protection of her father and brother, who would not shirk their responsibilities (Qur’an 4:34).

5.7.1.1 Subplot

Difference is a key subplot of Noor’s story for whilst softly-spoken and mild mannered, the devout Noor does stand out from the crowd, demonstrating an awareness of her ‘self’ as one of a kind, and insisting on the right to self-determination. Her pre-occupation with the choices of eldest daughter Salma suggest that she is keen that her daughter follow in her footsteps, making decisions in accord with a conscience informed by bayt and iman rather than prevailing custom, which is in itself a fairly unique position in a society where what other

50 Ironic given that Yemeni husbands frequently absent themselves from the family home for months or years at a time, working elsewhere in Yemen or away in the Gulf States.
people think can be a matter of life or death. Her garb does however lift her above suspicion and allows her considerable licence, but as she behaves with the utmost propriety at all times and in all public places, she protects herself and those she associates with. Although worn out of religious conviction, and as an assertion of morality, Noor views her hijab as an affordance, enabling a relatively independent lifestyle in which she enjoys the best of all worlds, she lives alone but has help with cooking and cleaning, she drives her own car, she has a career that she finds very fulfilling, and is widely respected.

5.7.1.2 Protagonists
Noor’s parents and children are the chief protagonists in her account of her life, and she is constantly weaving connections between them, positioning her mother and father not only as parenting role models, but exemplars of the faith. She foregrounds her mother to whom much gratitude is owed, and her oldest daughter Salma, of whom she has great expectations.

5.7.1.3 Family, faith and education
As the wordle below illustrates, much of Noor’s discourse revolves around family with a particular emphasis on her role and responsibilities as a mother and her love of children. Her description of her childhood features education prominently and it seems important to her personally to be seen to come from such a literate background, and key events in Noor’s life relate to the notion of school. Noor first experienced her uniqueness on joining a public school because she could speak English, she started wearing her hijab whilst studying at university and adopted progressively heavier hijab as a teacher at an Islamic institute in Taiz, where she was at work when the burglary that changed her life took place while her children were at home alone. The centrality of her faith and the support she feels she derives from it is evident in the frequency with which she thanks God, al-hamdulillah.
5.7.1.4 Contradictions

The contradictions that struck me as I read and reread the transcripts were to do with Noor as a wife, mother and Muslimah\(^{51}\). Despite living apart, Noor is apparently conscious at all times of the duties owed to a husband by a loyal wife, and sets great store by public enactment and acknowledgement of her virtue. She acknowledges that her husband is “open-minded” and “trusts me” going on to explain “he doesn’t mind me driving, or talking to men, some of my colleagues phone me at home, and it is okay” because “he knows that it’s Noor”. However she is unwilling to ask him for money because to do so would compromise her independence and freedom. By not taking his money she is demonstrating that she has no need of him, and this allows her to maintain the integrity of her home “my house” to which he comes “as a guest” and whilst under her roof is required to follow her rules. This means “he is not allowed to smoke at home” because “I don’t want his smoke in my house” and whilst “he does chew qat in front of Omar” Noor reminds them both repeatedly that chewing qat is “a waste of money, a waste of time” and her son at least “gets it”.

Noor, whose love of children underpins every “dream” she possesses (motherhood, opening a nursery and a prosperous future for her happy, well-educated offspring)

\(^{51}\) Although Muslimah literally connotes a Muslim woman, I am using it here to describe an overtly observant woman.
and whose maternal persona is much in evidence in her professional life, talks relatively little about her own children, and is not defined by the relationship despite her stated desire “to be a good mother for my kids”. Although she claims that “if I had a real chance to stay at home, yes I would prefer to stay at home” and admits to feeling “guilty” sometimes, she “won’t ask” her husband for the support to which she is entitled and “won’t accept” her brother’s offer to support her “actually I can stay at home and he will pay for me” because “I want to work”.

Noor is a super-observant Muslimah, whose appearance and public comportment conforms to the most prescriptive interpretations of Islamic modesty yet eschewing purdah which some maintain to be the apogee of respectability, she drives and works in mixed company. While Noor is happy to maintain close ties with a woman who does not adopt modest attire “she has never covered, she has her hair cut, she drives a car, she goes out in a skirt and whatever, but still she’s my best friend” despite her ardent belief that hijab “is a must”, she has “stopped visiting” those of her closest friends who “got into the habit of chewing qat” and it seems odd given Noor’s extreme observance that she would retain ties with the woman breaking religious rules, rather than the women who break a social and class convention whilst being religiously observant.

5.7.4 My response to Noor

I strongly identified with growing up in a highly literate environment, although Noor evidently had the benefit of a rather nurturing relationship in contrast to my achievement-oriented one. Similarly, whilst I was also taught by Catholic nuns, I was locked up and caned for being the infidel in their midst, while Noor was treated nicely by the infidels who taught her. The nuns who taught me in the Home Counties however occupied a time-honoured and largely uncontested space in society, whilst Noor’s teachers occupied a highly marginalised and dangerously

52 This is a serious social sanction in Yemeni women’s circles (Meneley 1996: 53).
53 Whether or not it is acceptable for women to chew qat varies from region to region and between classes. Elite women in the northern highlands for example often chew (as a mark of status) whilst lower class women might denounce the practice where much of the family’s income is consumed by the husband’s chewing. Although qat is widely regarded as ‘haram’ elsewhere, it is an integral part of life in Yemen and many clerics have historically condoned the practice.
liminal space, in which they were tolerated for the narrowly defined education they could offer.

Like Noor, I travelled overseas regularly as a child, and by the time I was in my early teens was spending extended periods of time staying with family friends or the families of friends that I had made on my travels in Europe. Having to integrate (however temporarily) into foreign households intensified my interest in other cultures and customs, nurturing a curiosity that has in many ways defined my life. Travel being an education in itself, I believe that Noor’s tolerance and openness, inculcated since birth by her parents was further fostered by exposure to other ways of being a believer, Muslim or not, and underpins her quiet self-determination, making informed choices, in full knowledge that other options exist, at home and elsewhere.

I also relate to supporting the family when the ‘man’ is unwilling or unable to do so. Noor has a husband who takes no responsibility and who pays no bills but appears to ‘trust’ her and lets her do her own thing, although as she lives in close proximity to her family she is unlikely to compromise his honour. Whilst I too paid all the household bills, I was neither trusted to interact independently with society nor permitted to pursue my own goals and pastimes without constant surveillance. Again however, Noor was a woman of unimpeachable virtue from a wealthy and respectable bayt, and I was the morally dubious (by virtue of nationality and religion) wife of a high status and overtly observant man. Noor had been married for ten years and had given her husband a son (and a daughter) before they separated, so face was and is preserved on both sides.

5.8 Reading 2: Voice

Please refer to Section 4 or Appendix D for an exemplification of the analysis.

5.8.1 Reading for the voice of ‘I’

Despite Noor’s nerves during the interview process, a strong and agentic woman emerges in her account of her life, one in which Islam and education loom large.
Given the absence of linearity in Noor’s telling of her life story, and its exemplification of her positioning of herself as ‘I-in-relation’ I have chosen here to focus on 3 of Noor’s most distinct, albeit parallel and overlapping, subjectivities, Noor as a *Muslimah*, mother and professional thereby honouring the logic of her self-representation.

5.8.1.1 Noor the *Muslimah*

Although Noor asserts her distinct identity first in terms of her education “I was kind of unique because when I joined the school I could speak English, and I could write English” and mentions “I was the youngest one in college because I started my study early” graduating with a BEd at just 20, her agency is writ largest in her decision to don a headscarf at 18 “I was unique because I was the only one who started wearing hijab” explaining that at the time “I wasn’t completely covered, I was just covering my hair”. Noor took the decision to cover because like some of her closest relatives “I felt that it was a must” although she is at pains to point out that “I wasn’t pushed by my mother or my relatives...no-one” affirming emphatically that “I did it on my own, I decided to wear it and I wore it and no one told me to because it was my own decision”. It was 1982, and under the Marxist regime in Aden such overt symbols of Islamic piety were actively discouraged “I was not allowed to wear it, because it was against the Communists” but Noor was not to be deterred despite the fact that “they threatened me” and said “they will give me reduced marks because I am wearing the hijab”. In fact Noor proved to be something of a trendsetter, claiming “it became something ordinary, many girls started wearing it after me” leading Aden University to attempt to ban neo-Islamic dress in 1985.

On completion of her university education, Noor moved north to Taiz in the Yemen Arab Republic with her family and discovered that “society is more conservative than in Aden” and that a headscarf was no longer sufficient for “it was impossible to [go out] without a veil”. Having adopted the veil out of necessity, Noor voluntarily adopted increasingly conservative dress after she started teaching at an Islamic Institute in Taiz where “my hijab54 became heavier and heavier” and continues to wear “the kind of

54 This use of hijab denotes Islamic attire rather than the headscarf.
hijab they taught me to wear” despite having returned to the heat of the South where the many dense layers of black cloth and gloves might be considered an unnecessarily heavy burden to bear in the name of propriety. Noor insists however, “I’m comfortable, I want to wear it” claiming that “I don’t ever feel it is a barrier. It is not a barrier for me. It is a kind of protection, maybe”. As a devout woman, in a society where the activities of women can make or destroy a family’s honour, Noor’s reputation is of paramount importance, particularly given that she lives apart from, whilst still married to, her husband.

Noor’s understanding of herself as a good Muslim also appears to have played a key role in her decision to accept her husband’s proposal although “my parents, weren’t very happy because he wasn’t educated enough for them” and there were other concerns given his origins “not a bad family, but not the same class”. Although Noor admits “I didn’t have much information about him” she had “heard some good things about him, good enough to make me accept him as a husband. I wasn’t looking for a wealthy man. I wanted a house, a loving husband and kids”. Her parents, no doubt out of respect for their clever daughter “kept the decision for me to decide whether I wanted or not, [said] it’s up to you” but it is likely that relatives would have been concerned about her marriage prospects at the age of 25.

5.8.1.2 Noor the mother

When she married, Noor was not planning to continue teaching “I wanted only to be a mother and have kids, that was my dream. I always thought that I would like to look behind me and see a line of my own children”. She was more than a little concerned then that after her marriage “I stayed three years at home without getting pregnant” and “I was worried because I really wanted children, I really love children”. After her husband lost his job however “I had to start to work to bring money to the house” but shortly thereafter “I got pregnant al-hamdulillah”. Noor was not to be allowed to stay at home after the birth of her first child Salma in 1992 however because “life began to change, it became worse, things used to be cheaper” and “so I had to keep my job”. Fortunately for Noor, her family rallied round and “my mother moved, she came to stay with me for a whole year” to help with Salma “then after that year she had to leave me, and she got me an Ethiopian servant”. A son, Omar followed who would have
cemented Noor’s status as a ‘good woman’ in the eyes of a society (with an established and enduring preference for male children) that reserves the highest accolades of respectability for wives who bear healthy sons (Molyneux 1991: 250).

Noor clearly believes that a home should be a haven, a place of safety, and this is a widely shared concept in a country riven by civil war, where houses are typically protected by high walls, and the ground floors of tower houses in the north are built to withstand assault. A defining event in her life then was the burglary that took place whilst her young children Salma and Omar were home alone, prompting her decision to leave Taiz with this ultimatum to her husband “if you are not going to leave, I will take my kids and go to my family because I’m no longer safe”.

Aware that this would not have been an option for many women, Noor recognizes her good fortune “I’m really lucky, I have a very good family, al-hamdulillah. I am safe with them now, I can keep my children and go to work”. In this context, ‘safe’ seems to encompass physical safety, the integrity of her nuclear family and protection from reputational damage. Her husband could have divorced her, which given her concerns for propriety, might have deprived her of a certain status and a degree of respectability, and more alarmingly risked losing Omar to his father’s custody once he reached seven. Instead, reflecting on her husband’s response Noor says “I feel it’s a kind of relief for him. Men in Yemen don’t want to take responsibility” and whilst Noor was scared of harm coming to her children she has no such fears of the responsibilities she has taken on as a single parent “I’m their father, their mother and al-hamdulillah I’m not scared”. Noor does not see this stance of hers as unique, believing that many women in Yemen are shouldering similar burdens “most of the responsibilities are on the mothers, not on the fathers, even if the father is at home he is not with his kids, they have their own lives, chewing qat, spending time outside. So it is the mother’s responsibility at the end”.

Home-loving Noor who always envisaged a house as part of marriage and motherhood, now has a house of her very own, one that she is attached to as much for its symbolic value as a sign of her independence, as its practical function “it’s a small house, but I love my house, yes. I want it all the time tidy, clean and…. so I prefer
staying in than going out, because it is my priority to keep things in order, organised and clean and to look after my kids. Most of my going out is for my kids, taking them to the park, to have dinner outside, to the beach, if they won’t ask for it, I won’t go out, I hate leaving the house, I love my house very much…” Here Noor is very much functioning as the guardian of traditional values, with the home as the heart of a woman’s existence, which she only leaves out of necessity. The above might suggest that she is a full-time housewife, but Noor’s understanding of necessity includes the (admittedly self-imposed) obligation to go out to work to support her children, mandatory participation in the social rituals of women and responding to her children’s demands.

5.8.1.3 Noor the professional

Although Noor was originally an Engineering student “I didn’t find myself there” and so “I enjoyed arts subjects and decided to study English because I said to myself to be a teacher is better than to be an engineer”. No mention is made of her early teaching career in Taiz and it seems that in professional terms Noor came into her own once she became an inspector after a decade at the chalk face. Noor did not start working full time as an inspector until she moved back to Aden, and having spent her entire career in strictly segregated Taiz, “I wasn’t used to talk to men, when I moved to Aden it was really a problem for me to talk to them. It took me a long time to get used to it, but in some months I found as long as I behaved well, everybody respected me and I respected myself. Again, Noor’s concern is for her reputation, but she feels protected by her modest attire “I was in my hijab, it doesn’t stop me from working, from interacting with others” and now “in Aden, especially our inspectors department they respect me, yes. I like being there talking to them” and she readily acknowledges that “settling in Aden was a great leap forward in my career”.

When asked about her job as an inspector, Noor says “I really love it. I want to be successful and I try to do my best” and goes on to describe how “I never stay at home, I work the whole week. I know that some of my friends and colleagues stay at home and fill anything in on their timetable but it is against my principles”. In addition to her principles, there is also the matter of her reputation to worry about “I don’t want them to say that Noor is not working hard or that she’s lazy” because “I am trying to
improve myself”. This desire for continuous development does not stem from any sense of inferiority however, for she states freely “I am not less than any of the men, I feel myself much better than them, yes, no really!” and it is my experience that women employed in the education sector in Yemen tend to be of a higher calibre and work harder than their male colleagues.

The ability to support her family is of great importance to Noor “I feel I am independent, it gives me strength. I feel I am strong” despite the ‘double shift’ it represents, meaning she usually gets less than 5 hours sleep “I am exhausted but I can do it, yes” and “I am really satisfied with what I am doing”. A key source of affirmation for Noor is from her children who are clearly proud of their dynamic mother “they are happy if I go to their school. I can see that they are happy that I am coming to ask about them” who takes their love and affection in turn as proof “that everything I have done for them and given them is not in vain” and also justifies her career.

5.8.2 Reading for We

Noor uses we with a fair degree of frequency, and her description of her childhood is largely couched in such terms, embracing both her family and fellow Muslims. In contrast to the highly exclusive we of Hana’a, Noor’s we is largely inclusive, encompassing numerous groups of whom she counts herself part, but which I feel lend themselves to categorisation primarily in terms of family, Muslim society and the education system. By far her most frequent references were to her natal family, which appears to be the bedrock of her existence “we are a small family, only two sisters and a brother but we are so close to each other” and the basis for her liberal outlook “we were raised in a well educated family – reading books, novels, listening to music” as well as her faith, for she is at pains to point out “we were not just watching movies, and listening to music and neglecting our prayers and religion”. There are also references to life with her husband “so we got married in Taiz and I wasn’t thinking at all to work” and her nuclear family “Omar likes to sing a lot. We have a CD in the car and I don’t try to stop him or say it’s haram… because I like him to”.

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Religion is of central importance to Noor and provides a standpoint from which to view the rights and obligations of individuals and society as a whole “we are Muslims, we should be kind and clean” and in specific situations “we had to cover our faces in Taiz”. Although she adopts the weightiest version of hijab, Noor does not impose her own standards on others and maintains close relationships with less sartorially conservative women “I don’t judge people according to what they are wearing. It is up to them. If she is good to me, if she’s nice…we can still be friends”.

Noor’s many references to education include her school friends, fellow students, colleagues, the system itself and our mutual commitment to reforming the curriculum. She fondly remembers her co-educational schooldays “it was the first year they started to mix girls and boys, it was a trial, they were trying to mix boys and girls and see how it worked and we had good friends at that time” and recalls that before her decision to don the headscarf, she and her classmates “didn’t use to wear abayas, just our own clothes, long sleeves, long dresses or skirts”. When Noor taught at an Islamic Institute where the emphasis was very much on the Qur’an and the hadith “we still had to teach English, Arabic, Maths, all the other subjects” suggesting the voluntary shouldering of an additional burden by the Institute’s staff, in a pious yet supportive environment, where there was no pressure “they didn’t force us” to adopt the most comprehensive version of hijab.

5.8.3 Reading for You

Noor uses you as often as she does we, and her usage can be categorised as appeals to shared knowledge, discussion of normative behaviour and reported speech. The appeals to shared knowledge took two forms, with by far the greatest number inviting my opinion on something, “What do you think? Many people say that I am lucky” or affirmation of our mutual goals “Do you think we can achieve it?” and a small number prefaced by “you know” relating to places where we have both lived and worked “you know in Taiz the society is more conservative than in Aden” and “you know because I was in Taiz and it was only a women’s society” as well as aspects of our joint professional endeavours “for me, you know I feel sorry…if I see a dirty, not well dressed child sitting on the floor”.

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Noor’s discussion of normative behaviour relates to women’s increasing access to education “You can see many girls joining colleges, there are female doctors” the double shift created for women by male failure “You can see most of the responsibilities are on the mothers, not on the fathers” and the demanding visitation schedule that even working women like Noor have to honour “social interaction keeps you busy, especially in Yemen, a lot of weddings, a lot of haflas”. She also discusses religious responsibilities with regard to modesty “it is more important to cover the hair, you do not have to wear the niqab” and cleanliness “we are Muslims, we should be kind and clean and keep everything clean outside but you can not see this”.

Noor often uses reported speech in her description of affectively charged situations, such as returning from work to find her home had been ransacked and her children nowhere to be seen “I kept calling ‘Salma, where are you Salma?’” and interaction with her parents, her concerned mother asking “Noor, you have something going on, what’s your problem, talk to me” and her loving father’s daily inquiry “How’s work? What did you do today?” She also uses it to illustrate her agency, particularly in relation to her husband “I told my husband, ‘If you are not going to leave, I will take my kids and go to my family because I’m no longer safe’ so I finished that year in Taiz, then I left” and his bad habits “If you want to smoke, then you can keep it outside the house”.

5.9 Reading 3: Relationships

Please refer to Section 5 or Appendix D for an exemplification of the analysis.

5.9.1 Relationships with individuals

Although I conducted the highlighting exercise as described above on these texts, it was not actually necessary to demonstrate the extent to which Noor understands herself and her actions in relation to others. Indeed the only way in which sense can be made of the somewhat chaotic patchwork of episodes and events recorded in the interviews is by following the relational logic. In the first interview for example, Noor talks about her mother and her literacy then moves immediately to mothering and modelling literacy to her own children which leads to the revelation of a key
event in her life, the move from Taiz to Aden, again framed by her concern for the children.

Noor describes her family as ‘very close’ but there is no mention of her brother and sister until much later in the interviews, and the fact that Noor does not position herself within the family hierarchy at the outset is striking, as birth order is highly significant in Yemen, particularly given the overwhelming predilection for sons. I wonder if she was indulged as a boy would have been because she was the firstborn, and her parents had waited a long time for a child.

5.9.1.1 Noor and her parents

Noor explains that both of her parents “are originally from Hadramawt” and goes on to introduce her father, known to all by the honorific “Ustad” (a title reserved for highly respected teachers) “because all his life he has been a teacher”, a role he apparently occupies in both his personal and professional lives. Her father is portrayed as supportive, loving and engaged, “early in the morning when I get up, he hugs and kisses me and when I come home asks me how is my work, how did you do in the class today?” and is seemingly the yardstick against which she measures and finds wanting ‘men’ in general. Theirs is clearly a strong and affectionate relationship, but he does not seem to have exerted influence to quite the same extent as Noor’s mother, although it is evident that his generosity of spirit will have facilitated that mother-daughter bond. Not many men in Yemen or elsewhere would have consented to losing his wife, her domestic labour and companionship, for a year while she babysat her granddaughter for example or shown such consideration to his heavily pregnant daughter “my father wanted to go out, but he didn’t want to turn the car on, because I was having a baby and needed to sleep well, so they were pushing the car. They were both pushing the car”.

Noor describes her mother as “well educated”, and emphasises her literacy, “she was taken out of school at the age of 14 but she is a good reader” who continues to read “every day”. She is clearly proud of her mother and the fact that she was educated at a time when it was unusual for girls in Hadramawt. Her mother modelled a literate adult in a largely non-literate society, and one where, when reading does take place
(even now) it is usually restricted to the Qur’an, the hadith or newspapers. Noor is very much aware of, and hugely grateful for her mother’s support and understanding “she is a great help to me” which has been a constant in her life “Shukran, Mamma. She’s really lovely”.

5.9.1.2 Noor and her children

The next person mentioned is her oldest child Salma, a daughter who speaks good Arabic and has a lively imagination because Noor talked to her, read to her, told her stories, helped her with homework and insisted on correct language, even as a small child. In Islam, mothers are explicitly entrusted with the education of their children, but in Yemen this is usually interpreted as teaching the children about their religion. Noor talks about studying, reading and doing homework with her children and clearly sees this as central to her role, building on the model provided by her mother. She alludes directly to this when she says ‘My mother did it to me and I did it to my kids’.

Noor does seem somewhat preoccupied with the choices of her older daughter, Salma in contrast to those of her son. Whilst she discusses what Omar does and likes, Noor frequently refers to what she wants for Salma, “I am trying to convince Salma to take photography” at university for example, hardly a mainstream career, and one which most view as an unsuitable or “unworthy profession” in the words of Yemen’s only female photographer of note, Bushra Al-Mutawakel (2012). Most surprising are Noor’s efforts “to persuade my daughter not to wear [hijab] the way I am wearing it” and specifically not to wear the veil. Just as Noor donned a headscarf and risked the wrath of the secular authorities, it seems she now wants her daughter to challenge the ubiquity of the veil, forced on many women in Aden by the neo-Islamic resurgence and political sentiment. Noor’s children have apparently inherited her strength of character as she complains “my children are so stubborn. If they feel they are forced they won’t do it” which perhaps explains the way in which she couches her desires “I am not pushing her, but I want her to…”

As well as singing, her son Omar “likes computers” and is apparently skilled in their use to the extent that Noor claims “I depend completely on Omar” for anything to do
with technology. Her youngest child Marwa is only mentioned twice, when Noor
relates how guilty she feels if her professional duties prevent her from telling her
dughter a bedtime story “poor Marwa she keeps waiting for me, and she goes to bed
before telling her [a story]” and explains how Marwa’s negative experiences at a public
kindergarten “every morning she finds an excuse not to go, I hurt my finger, I’m sick”
intensified her desire to open a private nursery with properly qualified staff.

5.9.1.3 Noor and her husband

Noor’s husband, apparently a “good, kind and generous” man is mentioned in passing,
only appearing in the narrative when she informs him she is going to leave Taiz after
the burglary. Although her affection for him is apparent, lacking status, education and
the sensibilities of her bayt, he is ‘an ordinary Yemeni’ in contrast to her own
uniqueness. Noor never describes him as ‘loving’ thereby setting him apart from her
men folk and suggesting that he only fulfilled one of her three hopes for marriage “a
house, a loving husband and kids” albeit the most important one, from which her
affection for him most likely stems. It would seem that she is content living apart
from him, entertaining him as ‘a guest’ on his conjugal visits. In return he evidently
respects her wishes with regard to the children, although as he makes no visible
financial or other contribution to supporting his family, it is perhaps understandable
that he would not be involved in the decision-making process. The fact that “he’s still
in my life, and not in my life” allows Noor to maintain her social status as good wife
and mother, whilst providing the justification for pursuing her career.

5.9.1.4 Noor and her siblings

Noor describes Ahmad as a “very, very good brother, loving and caring” with her
descriptions of his help and support far exceeding the contributions made by her
spouse. It is clear that Ahmad (like her father) represents a good, strong and reliable
man, one who takes seriously his religious and familial obligations. It was her parents
who took her in when she left the conjugal home in Taiz, but it was her brother
who facilitated a more independent life by building Noor a house in the family
compound and buying her a car, acts of generosity unusual in Yemeni society “I’m
really lucky, when I tell people about it they can’t imagine”. Ahmad also contributes to
the cost of the children’s private schooling and even offered to support Noor “actually I can stay at home and he will pay for me and afford the whole thing, but I won’t accept it” in glaring contrast to the paucity of her husband’s contributions to the upkeep of his wife and children “the whole thing is on me now, yes. I don’t ask him even for money. If he doesn’t give money on his own, I don’t ask for it”. Ahmad epitomises the open-mindedness and tolerance that in Noor’s eyes distinguishes her family, by his marriage to a Christian woman, “he didn’t force her to convert to Islam, but after she was married for a few years, she was convinced” won over no doubt by her husband’s exemplary behaviour.

Little mention is made of her younger sister Arwa, perhaps because she was away studying in the United States for a number of years, and married as soon as she returned to Aden, meaning she has not been part of Noor’s daily life for a long time. Noor does however reference her indirectly when she explains that “my niece is also my daughter, yes, because I breastfed her, so she’s my daughter too, now when anyone asks me I say I have four kids, not three, because she calls me Mama”.  

5.9.2 Relationships with wider networks

Whilst Noor is “very close” to her immediate family, her extended family are very much in evidence throughout, and relatives are often interchangeably referred to as friends. (Elsewhere Noor refers to all the activities undertaken together as one ‘big’ family’ “To us the concept of family involved all our close and distant relatives, so actually we were one big family” – Appendix C)

Noor explains that “social interaction keeps you busy, especially in Yemen, a lot of weddings, a lot of haflas” and the significance of such social activity is underlined when the home-loving Noor points out that “if I go out, it is for something that is really important, if I want to pay a visit, yes”. Despite the value and status associated with such social networking, beyond the fact that all her closest friends are professional women, lawyers, teachers and inspectors, Noor offers very little information about her circle and its activities. Perhaps because they are such an integral, taken for

55 This is an Arabic practice referred to as milk kinship, in which Noor is a milk-mother and her children milk-siblings of the breastfed child (Parkes 2005).
granted part of life, and therefore form part of our shared understandings of what it means to be women in Yemen. It is possible that she is consciously or unconsciously distancing herself from the normal routine and activities of women, whose lives are so different from her own, but given the prominence given to her family whose closeness she feels is unusual, I think it is more likely that she sees her social life as self-evident, given my own initiation into the rites of women.

Noor’s frequent use of *they* functions primarily to describe the activities of people within her in-groups of family, education and Muslim society, in an approving fashion. The Italian nuns who taught her as a child “they were really nice and good…I did not think about the fact that they were Catholics and we were Muslims”, her colleagues at the Islamic Institute “I liked the way that they were wearing hijab so I started wearing the hijab the way they were wearing it…they did not force us to do it, there were some teachers who did not cover their faces” and traditional Taizi society “they are conservative in Taiz, but they are still open-minded, they need women to teach their girls”. Occasionally Noor does use *they* to express her disappointment or disapproval of those who have failed to live up to their responsibilities, husbands who “are not participating in family life, they want their wife’s salary, and they want them to work, but are not participating in her duties and helping them” and fellow Muslims who “clean their own house and throw the rubbish outside. They only care about their own environment, but the street, isn’t it part of you, of your environment?”

5.10 Reading 4: Cultural contexts and social structures

Please refer to Section 6 or Appendix D for an exemplification of the analysis.

Born in the twilight of Aden’s colonial heyday, Noor’s formative years were spent in a Marxist state committed to educating women and encouraging their participation in political and professional life. Noor has benefitted from a vastly superior education than that available to her mother, and has exceeded her father’s professional achievements by becoming an inspector when he remained a teacher all

56 The impetus for encouraging women into the workforce was not just ideological but practical as the impoverished PDRY suffered from a labour shortage (Molyneux et al 1979: 8).
his life. There was clearly a strong ethos of education and literacy in the family, but much of her educational and professional achievement appears to be the product of opportunities created by the British and expanded by the ruling National Liberation Front in Aden.

Noor’s education was unusually liberal in that she was educated initially with Christian children in a Catholic convent, then with boys in a public school, so she received a far less insular and more socially rounded education than that available to girls today. Her family circumstances also meant that by the time she was 18, Noor had often been to Ethiopia, had visited the Near East and been as far afield as the United States, enviable then, beyond the reach of all but a handful of elite women now. Her opportunities to mix and learn with and from the ‘Other’ during her childhood have no doubt contributed significantly to her ‘live and let live’ attitude and her openness to learning from all available sources, despite an appearance that to outsiders might suggest a ‘closed’ mind. Her choice to veil for example has greater credibility as an act of personal conviction given that it was made in full knowledge of a range of choices made by women at home and elsewhere, and in the face of real hostility from the university she was attending.

Noor has actively prioritised education for her children, particularly where Salma is concerned, and theoretically they should have even better opportunities than their mother, but despite a respect for education that was fostered by both the British and Soviet colonial powers and is apparent in many ways in the region, increasing centralisation of educational policy is felt by many to be dragging Aden backwards. There is some nostalgia in evidence as Noor reflects on her schooldays, “my life there was good, really different from our schools these days…the teachers had a good relationship with us, they used to talk to us” and whilst she acknowledges the difference in class sizes “we used to have a smaller number of students in classes” she seems reluctant to accept how difficult it is to foster similarly positive relationships in today’s massively over-crowded classrooms “teachers now they want to give their lessons and leave the school. They know nothing about their students”. Noor is perhaps projecting her own high standards and the values of the curriculum reform
programme on which we worked together, and inevitably finding most teachers wanting “Teachers are not aware of children’s characteristics and how to deal with them”.

In many ways Noor embodies the “new person” evoked in the PDRY’s 1974 Family Law, being both economically and reproductively active, and participating in the country’s development (see Chapter 1. Section 3). Ironically, given the antipathy the Marxist regime felt for religion, her stance is one with which Islamist feminists might also identify, for as the head of a mini-state, the family “it is natural that women participate in society and be involved in politics” (Clark 2004: 135). Traditional and conservative though she may appear because of her ‘heavy’ veiling and her quiet and reserved demeanour in public, this woman is a revolutionary, embracing single working mother status as a badge of honour, and one that she is so attached to that she is not prepared to give it up, despite the fact that she could live comfortably as a full-time mother, with her brother’s support.

5.1.1 Conclusion

In this chapter I have described the voice-centred relational approach that I used to analyse the interview data and offered multi-perspectival readings of Hana’a and Noor’s accounts of their lived experience. I have explored ways in which they are situated by their sex in a gender-segregated society, and construct their own gendered identities in ways that are both sacred and subversive. I have offered these interpretations at length as a third, analytical frame for the life histories presented in the following chapter.
Chapter 6
Memories of the heart: Women tell their stories

6.1 Introduction
In Chapter 4 I told the story of the research process that resulted in the creation of the life histories presented in this chapter. Norman Denzin claims that we “know the world only through our representations of it” (2009: 215) and I hope that these re-presentations enable readers to understand a little more about the world that Hana’a and Noor inhabit, transforming “information into shared experience” as Denzin would have it (ibid: 216).

6.2 From the margins to the centre
In Chapter 5 I offered interpretations of the stories told by Hana’a and Noor, based on long immersion in Yemeni society, and long acquaintance with these women. I have declared my politics and tried to enact it responsibly and ethically in my interrogation of the subjective realities of their world in order to make them more accessible to a reader. As this is a work of advocacy however, it is not my intention to speak for or over these voices and lives, using them as a ventriloquist might, to advance my own agenda (Fine 1994b: 19) but to create a space in which they might be able to speak for themselves (Lather 1991: 164). The life histories that follow were co-constructed with Hana’a and Noor who exercised complete editorial control over the texts and their re-presentations.

6.3 Hana’a: From modern to mediaeval
A divorced woman with a daughter from her short-lived marriage, Hana’a lives with her natal family in one of the most conservative regions in Yemen, Wadi Hadramawt. She works as an English teacher in a secondary school for girls.
I am the second daughter in my family; I have four siblings, two sisters and two brothers. My father is an Arabic teacher and my mother is not an educated woman but she can read and write well. My parents come from Hadramawt, and I was born in Tarim. My family moved to Ma’alla in Aden when I was small and I lived there for thirty years. I was spoilt by my father and I was very close to him when I was a child. I learned teaching from watching him and he encouraged me to help him in his work, so I have wanted to be a teacher since I was a child. I had a blackboard and chalks and a notebook to write the marks and every day I used to collect my neighbours and the children who visited and teach them.

I was very active at school; I was always first or second in the class. My dream was to be a teacher or a doctor and after I graduated from secondary school I thought about university and decided I wanted to go. In the beginning my mother said ‘Oh no, you have to get married and university will delay your marriage’ but I insisted on going to university and my father encouraged me. When I joined the English Department, my personality was not the way it is now. I was very shy, you wouldn’t believe it. I didn’t use to talk to people freely, I had low self esteem. At university I was clever and I was active but I didn’t participate a lot in the classes. My marks were high and I graduated 4th in my year. I dreamt of teaching at university but I couldn’t do that, because to be a teacher you have to teach without being paid for two or three years with no guarantee that you will get a job.

In 1998, the year I graduated, I got engaged to a stranger from Hadramawt. I didn’t know my fiancé or his family but my family knew some of his relatives in Aden and they told us that he was a good man and that he had a good job. Some of my relatives told me ‘Oh you have to marry. It’s very late, you are now 24 years old and you should be
married. He is a good man and he’s the only son of his mother, who is divorced from his father. I thought about it a lot but I had been told that he was a good man so I didn’t find a reasonable reason to refuse.

We married in November the same year. My family went with me to Al-Shaher when I got married and stayed with us for two or three days and then they left and went back to Aden. My husband himself was not a bad man, he was kind and friendly but his mother was a rude and aggressive woman. When she was insulting me or treating me badly at the beginning, I said to myself maybe she will change, she’s only got one son and he has just got married and so maybe she feels jealous. I believed my husband when he said she would change, I was so simple. I hadn’t enough experience in life, enough experience of people, and I was put in a very different society.

From the first day my mother-in-law didn’t accept me so she tried everything that she could to make me leave, to hate the house and her son and everything. She told me ‘I want you to go to work’, but what she really wanted was for me to be far from my husband – at work or anywhere, to go away. My husband didn’t want me to work from the beginning. He had bad ideas about female teachers, I don’t know why. He didn’t tell me directly, but I felt from his speech that he didn’t like women to work. Once he told me, ‘If you go to work you mustn’t talk to men, I don’t want men to talk to you, because there are some bad men in some schools’ and things like that. But at that time I wasn’t really thinking about work because I got pregnant after less than a month and I was very sick, especially at the beginning. I didn’t think about work. All I thought about was how to get away from that house and go back to my family in Aden, I was frightened, it was a battle between me and his mother.
I faced problems inside and outside the house because I had to visit many people every
day, two or three houses a day sometimes. And I think our neighbours were very bad, I
didn’t like sitting with them because they were always talking about other people and
they liked to interfere in people’s affairs. They asked me ‘How does your husband
treat you? How does your mother-in-law treat you? How much is your father’s salary?’
Very personal questions. I was very surprised, why were they asking me such questions?
I really didn’t like going from house to house visiting them, although my mother in law
thought it a punishment to prevent me going!

I had no relatives there, no sincere people to talk to, or friends. I didn’t find a friend who
I could share my problems and difficulties with. So I had to keep all my feelings inside.
Even my family, my parents, what could I tell them? They were very far from me, how
could they help me, you know. If they were near or in the same place I could have gone
to them immediately but they were so far away from me, and so in the beginning I
endured, endured and endured. Then I decided to collect my clothes and I told my
husband ‘I’m going to my family, I’m not going to stay here and be insulted’. He said ‘Oh
don’t leave, my mother will be better with you, please be patient, and she will get better’.
And then I said okay. I did this two times and the third time I didn’t, I told him ‘I can’t
endure this anymore and I have to leave to go to my family. I am from a very respectable
family and you didn’t bring me from the street to be insulted. And you have to know that
I can go and have my life without you and your mother’ and so I left. He phoned my
family and told them that I missed them and was coming to visit. He didn’t tell them
anything of course and after that he and his mother told people, ‘Oh she’s a very bad
woman, she only wants to go out and go shopping and she doesn’t like our life’.
I was, I think, very patient to be there for six months, and I recognized at last that it's difficult to live with such a person, such a woman. I was going to have a baby after a few months and the child would be treated very badly maybe or see its mother being treated very, very badly and it's not good. So I decided for my sake and for my baby's sake to leave. I was in the sixth month of my pregnancy when I went back to Aden and my family surrounded me with love and care. When I told them about the way my husband and his mother had behaved towards me, they told me 'Don't go back to him, he's a very bad man, you have to be divorced from him'. I had my daughter Khadija after three months and my father promised he would take care of her and be her father. A month later I asked for a divorce and my husband divorced me al-hamdullilah. It was like a very bad dream in my life and I got rid of it. Fathering my daughter is maybe the only good thing that he has done in his life.

In the first year after the divorce I was very sad and disappointed and kept asking myself why it had happened to me, why had I failed with that man? I was thinking about my daughter, that she would be without a father. She deserves to have the love of her father and her father's family and I felt sorry for her. But the second year was better. I started to feel stronger and I thought that I could learn a lesson from everything that had happened to me. I could continue my life without anyone's help. I could work, I was an educated woman and there were many things I could do. After having Khadija, I took some computing courses and after that I worked at the University of Aden, in the Faculty of Medicine. I worked there as a printer for a year. It was a very hard year because I had to work in the morning at the Faculty of Medicine and in the evening at an institute teaching English, and I was very, very tired. But I had to work to support my daughter and myself. My father is a simple man, he is only a teacher, and he couldn't afford to pay for me and my daughter, and I felt that so I challenged myself.
My opportunity came when I was assigned by the government to be a teacher. It happened by chance that my father was working at 14th October newspaper and he saw my name in the magazine. There was a list of those selected by the Ministry of Education as teachers, and my name was there and he phoned me and told me ‘Hana, your name is there!’ Because every year I went to the office and filled in a form for a job and they said ‘Okay, we will keep this and then we will send it to Sana’a and they will choose’. At the beginning I didn’t believe it, I thought it might happen after ten years, you know but at least I was working. Although I was working in the Faculty of Medicine, I was not an employee and I was waiting to be assigned a job. I was only receiving 4,000 – 7,000 YER a month, but I had to stay there because I was not sure that I could get a job in the Ministry of Education because it’s really very, very difficult. But I thought I would try and be patient and maybe after working for two years I might get a job. And after one year the job came to me and al-hamdulillah, I became a teacher!

My manager asked me to stay at the Faculty of Medicine and he told me that he would change my job from the Ministry of Education to the University but I refused because my job was not related to my education. I wanted to be a teacher because I was educated in the Faculty of Education and I thought that I would find myself more as a teacher. I was very happy. My colleagues at the office were very kind and friendly and I had a very good relationship with them but I left the Faculty of Medicine and after maybe two or three months of teaching in public school, I left the institute also. I became more comfortable and I could take better care of my daughter. My mother and my younger sister Fatima helped me a lot in taking care of Khadija because Fatima was single at that time. Khadija loved her so much and even though Fatima is now married and living in Saudi Arabia, Khadija remembers her and says ‘I love Fatima’. My family plays a very important role in my life in supporting me and encouraging me.
Being assigned by the government to be a teacher was a very, very big thing for me. I was very happy because as a government teacher no-one could sack me or tell me to leave work and so I have worked as a teacher since 2001. By the day I felt that I was getting stronger and stronger. I could help people. I felt that I was very useful to my family and to my society, and to my daughter of course. I could make my own life, I could depend on myself, I could even help others. So day by day I felt more confident, my self esteem became strong, stronger and stronger. I was helped by my family and my friends, teachers and relatives also, I have cousins who are doctors and teachers. They encouraged me a lot and now I look at life in a very positive way. I think I can enjoy my life, enjoy everything and help my family and help my society. It's not important if I am married or not, I do not need a man in my life, I can depend on myself and I can take care of my daughter myself.

But when my father decided to move to Tarim in Hadramawt it was sad news for me because I was used to living in Aden, which is a very open area. I liked living there because women can do everything they want to do. They can work, they can go to the market, but in Hadramawt it is different. Most of the women there, and especially our relatives, are housewives, they don't work. They can't even go to the souq to do the shopping, because there is a men's souq and a women's souq. In the women's souq you can find clothes, shoes, curtains, soft furnishings, tea cups and nothing else. But in men's souq you can buy everything, everything but if you are a woman you can't go to the men's souq, you can only go to women's souq - it's special! Even if you need medicine from the pharmacy you have to tell your husband or your father or your brother to bring it. So I felt very angry. I told my father that Hadramawt was a very strange society. I had been to Hadramawt many times and every time I visited Hadramawt I told myself oh, al-hamdu lillah I live in Aden, not in Hadramawt! From my
father's point of view, our apartment in Aden was very small, tiny and he wanted to build a big house for us. His relatives were in Hadramawt, and all my mother's relatives were there too. Many of the families in Hadramawt, As-Sa'ada families like ours, can trace their origins all the way back to the sons of our Prophet. Some people think that if you are Sayyid you should be respected and you are better than other people and things like this. I don't think it's something to be proud of, but it means that you have a responsibility to behave well and be worthy of respect. I believe that people should be judged by their actions more than by their ancestors, maybe because I grew up in Aden. In the beginning I fought against the move to Tarim, I fought hard but I didn't succeed. My mother didn't want to leave me in Aden, she said 'No I will not leave you, I will stay with you in Aden or in Tarim or anywhere I will not leave you'. I love my mother so much, I want to make her happy and that's why at last I agreed because I didn't want to make her sad. She was sick and I felt we had to be close to our relatives and so I said okay. I wanted to obey my father and my mother. And so I saw it as a challenge, to live in Hadramawt and adapt myself to the life there. My daughter was happy that she was going to a different place. She is still young!

The thing that worried me most was being a teacher in Hadramawt, because the attitude towards women teachers is not the same as in Aden. Men in Hadramawt look at women as something not complete and I don't like this view that we are less than them and lack the ability to work or to study and learn like men. Girls are educated only to the 8th or 9th grade, and they have to be married after that, and I was afraid for my daughter. But my older sister Huda was already living in Hadramawt and teaching there, she is a strong character. She's four years older than me, and we are close to each other. She didn't become a teacher until she was about 35, because she got married after finishing secondary school. After she had her children she decided to
complete her education because she wanted to work. She wanted to study English but it was a struggle for her because she had three children, her husband was in Tarim and her house in Aden was a long way from us in Ma’alla. For two years she had to go to the Institute of Languages at Aden University to study and then go back home to cook lunch and take care of her children but she continued until she was awarded her diploma in English. Then she joined her husband in Tarim and tried to get a teaching job. It took her one or two years but she was very, very happy and she’s now very enthusiastic and we are always talking about teaching. She told me that at first some of the girls in the class refused to take off their veils, because it is the tradition in Tarim that single girls do not show their faces to married women. So she refused to teach them until they had taken them off, she said ‘I’m a woman like you, I will not teach you if you are covering your faces!’ I also had an uncle in Hadramawt who was an inspector, and he promised to help me. He told me to choose the school that I wanted to teach in, and I chose to teach in the secondary school for girls.

In the first days, after we moved, I was bored, the atmosphere was different and I couldn’t go shopping as I was used to in Ma’alla Street, and Aden Mall, but my relatives didn’t leave me. They were very friendly and they were always phoning me and asking me to go out with them, for a walk, or a drive or to go to Seiyoun, which made me feel less sad and angry. There are always lots of wedding parties in Hadramawt in the summer and I’m very social and I like to be with people and I felt that I had to participate in society to feel more adapted and happy. We had only just moved when my older brother, Najeeb got married. His bride Muna was only sixteen; she looked a good girl and I empathized with her, I tried to teach her the way things are done in our house. At the beginning, my brother complained that he had to turn the clock back twenty years because he had to play with her and talk to her. He was 29, and I laughed at him and
said ‘Oh, miskin’ (you poor thing)! Her mother told us that before marriage she only watched cartoons, she didn’t watch anything else, but after the wedding when I asked her what programmes she liked, she didn’t say cartoons, she was embarrassed because her mother had told me. I was very sympathetic because I felt that she was like my daughter, still a child. Najeeb told me that she doesn’t watch cartoons anymore. When he told her ‘It’s okay, you can watch cartoons’ she said ‘No, no, no, I don’t like cartoons’!

After my brother’s marriage, my daughter asked me, ‘Oh Mummy, when you will marry me? Will you marry me like Muna? When? At what age?’ I told her ‘You should finish school, go to university and then you will marry’. Young girls like things like gold, make-up, the things of women, you know? They want to be women and so they admire these things, and think that this is what marriage is. They don’t know what life will be like, how their husbands will behave, that they will suffer when they get pregnant and have children that need a lot of care. A girl hasn’t got any awareness of this, she is still young but families say ‘Oh, our daughter is very pretty so she has to get married young, very young’.

When I was at secondary school in Aden, there were an equal number of girls and boys and when I was at primary school I remember that we didn’t look at boys as though they were boys and we were girls, no, I saw them as my brothers and friends. When we were in secondary school we were thinking about our studies, what we wanted to be in the future, but most of the girls now are thinking about when they will get married and the qualities of the men they will get married to. Boys spend most of their time watching the TV, films and songs and they are influenced by the ideas on the TV. So their time and all their thoughts are focused on love, how to love, how to get engaged to a girl, how
to seduce her. Some of the boys are trying to cheat girls and so they tell her I love you, you should love me, and it's a trick, a game they play. Maybe our society was closed, but it is very open now and people don't use technology well.

We didn't have the internet when I was a teenager. I remember that there was television but not as many channels, as many choices as now. We were either studying or reading. I liked reading the magazines that my father brought home. Some of them were for children or teenagers like Majid and Al-Arabi Al-Sageer and some of them were for adults but I really liked reading when I was a teenager, although now I don't read a lot. Many things have changed in my life, when we were young our life was very simple, simpler than now, there were not many places to go, and families visited each other. Now it is great to have a modern life but what I don't like is that the new generation is not aware of how to use technology and benefit from it. We all like technology, we like computers and the internet and everything, but I think young people use it only for entertainment, not to benefit from science, from what is new now in the world. That's why our society is very behind.

In Tarim it's difficult for women to live without men because men do everything there, you can't even get medicine for yourself or your children, you need a man to bring it for you. But I think that a person can adapt himself in any society and that's what I'm trying to do. Really I'm trying to know or to understand the thinking and to speak with people, especially with the old women, and ask them why they marry their daughters so young. They say 'Oh, she didn't refuse'. It's a very, very strange answer, when she got married, she didn't refuse and she didn't come back from her husband's house so she must be happy that she is married? I told them that even my eight year old daughter wouldn't refuse to get married. Do you know why? Because girls who are not married are not
allowed to wear beautiful clothes, or go to wedding parties or to put make-up on or go to the hairdresser’s. They must cover their hair and stay at home taking care of children. When she gets married a girl gets many new things, beautiful clothes, gold, accessories and her own room*, and so of course she will be happy, she’s a child! The day before my brother’s wedding party I went to Muna’s room and I saw her looking at her gold and her clothes and she was very happy, preparing herself for the party. I think that it is a great injustice to be married at such a young age. The biggest problem is that a girl often has a baby in the first year of marriage, but she herself is a child so how can she take care of a child? I don’t know how to change the way these people think but I’m trying and insha’allah I’ll do my best to convince them. It’s very difficult because early marriage is traditional and something which is fixed in this society and there are people who say that from a religious point of view it is better for the girls to be married very young, because it is safer. I heard something like that, really it’s horrible. And imagine, the husband is not young, he is maybe thirty or older, because he has to complete his education, go to university and his wife is very young, she’s got very little experience of life and I don’t know how they can understand and get on with each other. These young girls have to grow up five or ten years overnight when they get married. She has to be a grown up, a woman, not a child, and she has to do all the things that women do, cook, take care of the house, clean the house, take care of her husband, his clothes, yes, many things and after that her children. I think they grow up fast, very early. Women my age have daughters, married daughters, and they are grandmothers. Imagine me as a grandmother! I still feel like a child, I play and enjoy my life.

If a girl is no longer young, if she is 20 and still single, people look at her pityingly and they say ‘Oh, poor girl she isn’t married ah, miskina she can’t participate in social events, she can’t go to parties, she can’t even sit with the married women’. She’s still a
virgin so she can’t talk to the married women, she has to sit with the other virgins, and she works in her father’s house and people pray for her, ‘May Allah make you marry’. Some of them get married to old men, as the important thing is to be married, because if she is grown up and isn’t married by 20, life is horrible for them. She’s still a virgin, *miskina*, so she has to get married, even to an old man who is divorced or widowed, and the difference between his age and her age maybe 30 or 40 years sometimes. I knew a girl, still in her teens who was married to a man of 60. He was an old man and after five years he got sick and she had to take care of him, and nurse him. That girl’s father was dead and maybe her uncle or her mother’s new husband was taking care of her, so he gave her to that old man. You will see many very young women with very old husbands and some of them have children, can you imagine? I don’t know how because he can’t even... he’s too old to stand up!

Husbands in Tarim respect their wives, yes I have noticed that. Wives don’t work, most women don’t work but their husbands have to support them and give them money for clothes and make-up. He has to work in the morning and maybe in the evening too to have money to support his wife, his children. I think generally, men in Hadramawt respect women. They see women as less than men, but they respect them. They love their daughters very much, but they think that when they marry their daughters young, it’s a kind of love. They are very happy when their daughters are engaged, they say ‘Oh my daughter is engaged to a very good man and I’m going to throw a big wedding party and buy gold for her’. According to their thinking, it’s a kind of love to be married at this age and the families compete to get their daughters married young. Girls get engaged at 12 or 13 and they hold the wedding party after two or three years and some of the girls haven’t matured physically when they get married. It’s horrible. So you will also find many divorced girls in Tarim, very young divorced women. Some of them have
the opportunity to work or to study if they stay at their father’s house and if they have
children their families help them take care of them.

I have received some offers of marriage but I refused them all, because I hated men and
marriage and at the beginning, I couldn’t even speak to my parents or my sisters about
the problems that I had with my husband and my mother-in-law. But now I can talk about
everything that I faced and everything that I suffered, I can talk about anything because
it’s done now and I survived. When I’m telling somebody about what my mother-in-law
said or did to me, I can laugh because that is something from the past, I have thrown it
away. I have started a new life, a new page, and my life is happier and better. Recently I
was asked for marriage by a divorced man and I couldn’t accept because he left his
children, five children – so how could he be a good father for my daughter? I told the
woman who approached me that I’ve got a very comfortable life and if there is a man who
will give me things that are better or who I feel can provide me with a better life, okay, but
I don’t think that person is him. He needs help, but I want a man who will help me!
Because I suffered during my first marriage, I want to be careful and I would have to
think a lot before getting married again.

The most important thing is a father for Khadija. And I don’t know if I will find that man
but it’s not something which I think about a lot. I can live my life without a man, but if I
found a man who was very kind and would accept my work and my daughter and who
would be open and flexible with me, I would get married again. I’m not ready to leave my
job or to lose it because of a man, he should be persuaded that my work is very
important for me and he will have to accept me with my work and my daughter. Because
if I get married again I won’t know what the man is like and how he will behave. Maybe he
will say ‘Oh I will be very kind and I will take care of your daughter and I will treat her as
my own' and after a year or two years maybe he will change, and his treatment of me will change. Maybe I won't be able to continue my life with him, so if I lost my job and then I lost my husband, I would have lost everything, so I can't leave work because I want to get married.

I think that men and women share a responsibility in life and they have to work together to improve and help each other, but in some societies men believe that they have the right to force women to do things or to deny them opportunities to work and be educated. They think that they are better than women. They are the ones that have the right to education and jobs because they have bigger brains. They are afraid sometimes when women go to work and get an education. I think in general here in Yemen and in the Arab World, men don't like educated women, don't want to marry an educated woman because they think she will be better than him or she will argue with him and she will not do what she is told. She will have her own opinions and views and so he wants a woman who always says okay, that's fine, and listens to him and does what he tells her to do. But there are some exceptions, yes. There are some good men who think that women should be educated and work but they are few I think. Maybe this view will become more common over time. I think a woman can live without a man, but a man can't live without a woman. And women in modern societies can work and have a normal life, but in some societies she needs a man, a father or brother or husband and so women get married because they need someone, not because they want to marry really, but because they need a man in their life because some societies do not accept a woman without a man. Maybe one day, the situation will change but I really don't know when and what will make this change. When everyone has a good education and people recognize that girls have the right to learn, and to be educated and to work like men, then maybe it will change.
I think it is difficult when a woman chooses to be an employee, to work. It is not simple or easy to be a mother and a wife and also to work, but if a woman wants to she can, and there are many examples in my society. There is my sister, she is a very good wife, she takes care of her three children, and she's also a teacher. So she is a very good model I think. I know many women who are challenging themselves to be good wives and also be good at their jobs. But first of all the woman herself should believe in her work and its importance, and if her husband helps her, even sometimes in the house, then she can be very successful at work because she has got support from her husband or her family.

My sister has got very strong support from her husband. He is very proud of her and he says that she is a very good teacher. So I think a woman needs a man who will stand beside her, support her and encourage her so she can be a good wife and successful in her job and work.

I think even my daughter is proud because her mother is a teacher, an English teacher, especially. I promised to teach her English after she was very good at reading and writing in Arabic, she's very enthusiastic about learning and she is very clever I think. She's all my life besides my family and my parents of course. She's the most important thing in my life and I think I'm the most important thing in her life. I take care of her, tell her stories before bedtime or during the day, play with her, teach her and sometimes watch television with her, even cartoons! Of course I want her life to be very easy and comfortable. I want her to be well educated and be loved and cared for, I don't want her to feel that she is not like other children because her father is not with her. I try to give her everything that she needs and I don't talk about her father badly because I want her to see him as a good man. Maybe one day she will meet him and I'm sure she loves him even though she has never seen him. I want her to have a better life than me and marry a very good man who appreciates her and loves her, that's all. I want her to be a strong
woman and depend on herself and not be dependent on any person, even her husband. I am trying to make her happy and I hope that when she’s a young woman she will appreciate what I did for her. But I will not tell her ‘Oh I made these sacrifices for you and you should do what I say, you should be very good to me because I did that and that for you’. I hope that she will respect me and appreciate me and be a good daughter.

It was my mother who encouraged me to study computers after the divorce and that helped me to get a job at the Faculty of Medicine. My daughter was only three months old at the time and if there had been no support or encouragement from my family, I wouldn’t have been able to work, to be what I am now. My mother loves me, she’s very emotional and to be emotional is a good thing, but sometimes it makes us suffer. I remember when I was in Al-Shaher she told me that she felt things were not okay and she dreamt that I was suffering and I was in a very bad state. When I was talking to her on the phone I told her that I was okay and that she shouldn’t worry, but maybe it’s a mother’s instinct. I’m a bit emotional too because I’m very connected to my daughter, I’m very close to her. Maybe that comes from my mother and also my grandmother.

I live with my parents, my brother Najeeb and his wife Muna, my brother Ali and my grandmother, although she does not stay with us all of the time as she has her own house. During the holidays I like to cook lunch and dinner and my mother helps me to clean the house. My brother’s wife Muna helps me too and I am trying to teach her to cook but we know that she’s very young. When I go to work, my mother cooks lunch, and I help her clean the house and prepare dinner. It depends on my mother’s health. If she’s not okay or not in the house, I clean the house and I don’t find it a problem.

My mother worries about my youngest brother Ali, who is still a student. He’s
stubborn, he doesn’t like to be advised about his health and what not to do, but I am close to him and I understand him better than my mother. Maybe because she’s from a different generation. He understands me too, and I’m always asking him to help me, but sometimes Ali and my daughter Khadija quarrel because Khadija is spoilt by my father, and sometimes my father shouts at him because Khadija wants to watch cartoons and Ali wants to watch something else. The relationship between Ali and Khadija is not so good, really. I am trying to make it better but Khadija says ‘I don’t like Ali, he annoys me’. Maybe he feels jealous because he was the youngest in the family and he was spoilt by us all. She’s also jealous sometimes – ‘Why does Ali have the right to shout at me? I’m sad, I’m angry with you Mum, you have to love me more than him’. And I tell her, ‘He is my brother’. And she tells me ‘You are my mother and I am your daughter. You have to love me more’. You know children don’t keep anything in their hearts. I’m trying really but the problem is my father because he spoils Khadija and I don’t dare say to my father don’t do that. Khadija is right all the time. Because my father would be very angry with me if I asked him to stop, it would upset him really. My father is difficult sometimes when he is angry, he won’t allow anyone to interfere. Sometimes after he calms down, I can talk to him, but when he is angry I will just make the problem bigger. He loves my daughter very much but he spoils her and when I’m at school, Ali tells me that she is different from when I am at home. I’m trying to make her fit in more. If there is a problem and she is crying, I talk to her and she listens to me but my father immediately asks ‘Who made Khadija cry? Who shouted at her? Who beat her?’ you know. So everything positive has its negative side.

Living in Tarim too has some positive sides which we can not perceive if we only think about modern, urban life. I really like to be with people and I love to meet people from different areas in Yemen, I think it’s good to know how people think and how they
behave. I like to listen to people and find out about their traditions, I even like their
different dialects. I have many friends in Tarim now. They are housewives and they
haven’t finished their education and I talk to them about many things, different from the
things we know, like work and study. They know that I work, that I’m a teacher. They
say ‘Oh you are lucky because you finished your studies and you work’. Some of the
women pity me and say ‘Oh may God help you, miskina because you are working’ but
many of them tell me ‘You are lucky you are working, yes, you have got a job and
although are you are without a man, you can depend on yourself and you can live with
your daughter, you are independent’. And you know if I was rich, I would buy a house, a
very big house and a car, a very nice one, and I would still work (whispers) because I
don’t work for the money only. It is very important in our lives, money, very important,
and I’m very happy because I can help my family and give them money, but it’s not the
only thing, the only reason that I work, because I like my job. I like being a teacher
especially and if I got a million dollars or more than a million dollars, I would buy many
things, but not leave my job – maybe I would pay for a school and I would pay the
headmaster’s salary!

I think there are women who have got some awareness that education is a good thing
and a few of the women have started to be aware of the importance of education for
women especially, yes. But when I am at parties or weddings I talk to everyone, even if
they are not educated, I don’t make them feel that there is a difference between us. I try
to find things to talk about, about children, even about make-up, clothes, things that
you can buy in the women’s souq, about Aden, anything. I like to be with people.
6.4 Noor: Right Religious Rebel

Noor, an inspector, is a married mother of three, who lives in her own house in her family’s compound in Aden. Her husband lives and works in a different region and visits regularly.
I was born in Aden in January 1964. Both my mother and father are originally from Hadramawt. My father’s nickname is *Ustad* because he has been a teacher most of his life. I have a well educated mother, she was taken out of school at the age of 14 but she is a good reader. She reads magazines everyday and we were raised in a well educated family – reading books, novels, and listening to music. My mother likes classical music. In fact there was a balance between religion and other aspects of life. We were not just watching films, and listening to music while neglecting our prayers and religion. I remember that we went on picnics regularly, and I had the chance to travel abroad. My grandfather was a famous tradesman for coffee and if you go to Ethiopia you can hear his name everywhere, he’s well-known. So we had the chance to go every year and stay with him. I also visited Syria, Jordan, and when I was 18 I went to the USA.

My first school was run by nuns. They were Italian and you can still see the school buildings today at *Al Tawahi*, Steamer Point. When I entered that school I was four years old and I didn’t think about the fact that they were Catholics and we were Muslims. My family was happy with the high standard of teaching at the school. On Sundays the nuns had to take pupils to church but as Muslims we were allowed to go home. Yes, so it was two different religions. We studied at the convent, we got what we needed to get from them, but not about religion and their own concepts and beliefs, no. There was a boundary, so it didn’t affect my life or the way that my family raised me. On the contrary, I learned discipline from them, how to behave. They were really nice and good and I was with them from the age of four until ten. I was in the 4th grade when the school was closed by the Communists and the nuns had to leave the country. There were no private schools at that time, except the two convent schools and so I joined a public school. It used to be a camp for the British soldiers. I was kind of unique when I joined the school because I could speak English, and write in English. At that
time teaching English started in the 5th grade. Most of my teachers were good and in general my life there was good, really different from our schools these days. We used to have a smaller number of students in classes than we have now. Teachers had a good relationship with us, they used to talk to us but teachers now just want to give their lessons and leave, they know nothing about their students.

For grades 7 to 9, I had to move to another school. It was the first year that they started to mix girls and boys in the same classes. They wanted to see how it worked and we made good friends at that time. For secondary school I joined the Technical School. Two of my cousins were already there and I thought that it might be a good idea to be with them. I was supposed to be an engineer, but I didn’t like it. I found it hard; I didn’t like it at all. After three years I decided to leave. I enjoyed arts and decided to study English. So I joined the Faculty of Education and studied for four years to be a teacher.

I was in my second year at university when I started wearing the hijab, I wasn’t completely covered, I was just covering my hair. We didn’t use to wear abayas, just our own clothes, long dresses or skirts and only the scarf. Not many women were wearing hijab, then. At college I was the first to wear it. Then it became something common, many girls started wearing it after me.

After I finished college my family moved to Taiz, because my father was working there as a manager at a melamine factory. The company paid for a nice house, in a quiet district outside Taiz and I lived there. My husband was working for the same company with my father. He is an Adeni too, and I knew his family from Aden, his sister is a friend of mine. He asked to marry me, and I didn’t meet him until after we were engaged.
For the three months between the engagement and the wedding, we were not allowed to be alone, just visits in the presence of my father and my brother, then we got married, and we rented an apartment on our own. My parents weren’t very happy with him because he didn’t finish his education, he only had a diploma, but they left it to me to decide whether to marry him or not. He comes from a good family, I’d heard some good things about him, good enough to make me accept him as a husband. I wasn’t looking for a wealthy man. I wanted a house, a loving husband and kids.

I got married in Taiz in 1989 and I wasn’t planning to work at all. I wanted only to be a mother and have kids, that was my dream. I always thought that I would like to look behind me and see a line of my own children. After getting married I stayed at home for three years without getting pregnant and I was worried because I really wanted children, I do love children. That year my husband left his job, because of a problem with his boss and he was left without work. Getting a job for a woman is much easier than for a man, especially for teachers. I applied for a job at a girls’ school with a good reputation and I was accepted. That same year I got pregnant and life began to change, it became harder. Things used to be much cheaper, a family could live on 3,000 or 4,000 YER per month, and things were affordable. Nothing remains the same, prices went up and the newcomer had his demand, so I had to keep my job. I had Salma in 1992, and my mother came to help me take care of my daughter. She stayed with me for a whole year and when she left, she got me an Ethiopian maid to take care of Salma. Four years later, I had my son Omar.

Salma was seven and Omar was three when I was teaching and supervising. I considered myself lucky because I had a nice and kind headmistress. She understood the fact that I was alone, my family was in Aden, and I had no-one to take care of my
kids. So she allowed me (only me!) to come early in the morning and to leave at 10.00am. It was a daily routine, leaving at 6.30am, locking the door, leaving Salma and her brother asleep till 10.00am. Until one day, I came home finding all cupboards open, I called for my kids and they came out of the bedroom. Asking what had happened they said that I gave permission to a friend of mine to come home to take some of my clothes, jewellery and money. Fortunately, I always kept my jewellery and my valuables with my mother and father. The woman took whatever she wanted from the cupboards and left.

I felt really, really frightened, so scared. I was grateful that she only took the clothes, and didn’t harm my children, al-hamdulillah. That was the exact moment that I decided to leave Taiz. I felt it was no longer safe. My husband wasn’t really happy with that. He thought it was a hurried decision. I finished that academic year in Taiz, got my papers for the inspection sector and moved to Aden.

I’m lucky to have such a caring family. I am the oldest and there is my brother Ahmad and Arwa my sister, whose daughters are mine too because I breastfed them. I have a very, very good brother, loving and caring, he built me a house and bought me a car. My parents’ house has got a big yard so he built it in the back yard, it’s like an annex. It’s a small house, and I love it. Close to them my children are in good hands. My husband is still in Taiz. I do everything for my kids. I’m their father, their mother. It’s a big responsibility that I accepted – all I want is to see them happy, have a good education and to have a stable life and I’m working on it. We have our meals together. Mom cooks, I do the washing and cleaning, my father pays the bills, each one of us has his own responsibilities.

My husband is a good man. He’s kind and generous, but he is a typical Yemeni, he
doesn't like helping in house work. House work is only for women!! If he does something, it is because he wants to, not because he must do it. Frankly, I am comfortable living this way. He comes every week, or every two weeks. He's still in my life, and not in my life. I have less responsibility than a normal wife would have for a husband. When he comes, he comes as a guest and we are all happy to have him. We keep that part of respect and love between me and him. Many people say that I am on a constant honeymoon because my husband is not with me all the time.

I got pregnant for the third time. I had all my three children in hospital. I am such a coward. I was afraid to have my deliveries at home. My mother had all her deliveries in hospital, so I was born in hospital and I have a birth certificate with the crown of the Empire on it, a British certificate. I know many women in the North of Yemen have their babies at home, but for women in Aden it's unusual.

Working mothers in Yemeni society has become a phenomenon. The majority of them are trying to balance work and family responsibilities. I'm sorry to say that most of the fathers I know have their own interests like chewing qat or spending their free time outside the house with their friends. They want their wives to work, they need their salaries but they won't share duties at home. When I sometimes get busy and tired, I wish I wasn't working. Missing one of my priorities like a bedtime story, for example disturbs me a lot. However, this feeling lasts for a while and soon I get better.

My children are stubborn. If they feel they are being forced to do something they won't do it. They have their own time watching TV, listening to music and playing. Omar likes music. I'm trying to raise them the way I was raised, yes, insha'allah I'll do my best. My parents are educated, they are open-minded. My father was a well-known teacher and although my mother comes from a traditional Hadrami family, she had a well educated
mother. My grandmother was a good reader. They didn’t go to school but they were literate. I have never seen my parents arguing or having a fight – they keep it between themselves. We as children never noticed that something wrong was going on. As adults we can feel it. On the whole it was a quiet life.

One of my strongest memories, is when I was pregnant with my second baby Omar. I was at my parents’ house when one morning I heard someone moving outside. My room overlooked the yard so I looked out and saw my mother and father pushing the car. My father was going to work. Instead of turning the car on, which might wake us up they were pushing the car!! They were both pushing the car. It’s something I won’t forget my whole life (overcome with emotion).

I’m not forcing my daughter to cover herself the way I do, it’s up to her to wear the veil or not. Covering the hair and wearing long and loose clothes is not negotiable. The hijab is the most important thing to wear. One of my friends is a lawyer, and she has never covered. She has her hair cut, she drives a car, she goes out without abaya, but still she’s my friend. What I mean is that I don’t choose my friends according to what they wear. I like her and don’t miss a chance to tell her about hijab as an essential part of our religion. Eventually, it’s her own choice to take it or to leave it.

I started wearing the hijab in my second year at University when I was about 17 or 18. Before that I used to wear casual but decent clothes. I was the first at university to wear it and the administration threatened that marks will be deducted for wearing the hijab, it was something against the rules. I didn’t care what they said or did and continued wearing it. At that time I didn’t wear an abaya, just a long skirt, a long sleeved blouse and the hijab. My family didn’t push me to wear it. I wasn’t pushed by my mother
or any other member of my family, no-one. I was convinced to wear the *hijab* because I knew that when a girl reaches a certain age she is supposed to wear it and I didn't feel comfortable coming and going with my hair uncovered. I did it on my own, it was my own decision. And since then it has become heavier and heavier!

After I finished my studies, my family moved to Taiz where society is more conservative than in Aden. We had to cover our faces in Taiz, it was impossible to go out without wearing a veil. I joined a school there – an Islamic school. I liked the way that my fellow teachers were wearing *hijab* so I started wearing the *hijab* the way they were wearing it, it became heavier and I started concealing my eyes and wearing gloves. It is the way I wear it now. They didn't force us to do it ... there were some teachers who didn't cover their faces either. There was no pressure at the school. I was comfortable, I wanted to wear it. The only male was the guard outside, and whenever we had visitors he would announce that there was a man coming in case any of the girls wanted to cover their features. But because it was all girls I didn't cover my face when I was teaching.

My first teaching job was at the Islamic Institute, and I was there for 8 years before I moved to another one where I worked for three years before deciding to move to Aden. I became a supervisor in my tenth year in the other school – I spent two years as teacher, and the third year teaching and supervising. So when I came to Aden I was already an inspector, responsible for schools in Crater and Khormaksar. I had three schools in Crater and four schools in Khormaksar, but now I have only Khormaksar, and I supervise Arwa School for the Caravan project as well.

I really love my job as an inspector. Because I am in it ... and I try to do my best. I don't want to be less than others or that I can't work as well as others. I am trying to improve
myself to be what I want to be. I want to be successful. I work the whole week. I know that some of my friends and my colleagues stay at home and fill anything in on their timetable but it is against my principles. Either be in it or leave it.

I want my children to be happy, to have good jobs and good education, but what they do is up to them. I am trying to convince Salma to study photography, she has not yet decided what to do. She’s not interested in arts. She doesn’t want to be a doctor or an engineer, she doesn’t imagine herself being a teacher, either. I think photography is something that we need in Aden. Omar likes computers, and he is very good at using them. I depend completely on him if I have any work that needs to be done by computer. I’m trying to find some free time to attend some computer courses. I have a good offer from a friend, all I have to do is to choose the appropriate time to take the course.

If I had time, I would like to study something about child psychology. It’s something that I like doing. My big dream is to have my own nursery. There are few nurseries in Aden, and rarely that you find a good one. Teachers are not aware of children’s characteristics and how to deal with them. One of my friends was telling me about her nephew, he was writing on a desk, he’s three years old and his teacher slapped him on his face for this, why? Because he was writing on his desk, yes. So whenever I hear something like this I feel irritated. I wish I could do something to change them. I need money for the building, furnishing it, for salaries. We need someone to keep the toilets clean and we need a doctor if anything happens, we need a guard and then electricity, water. I think we can find parents who would pay. I have talked to my mother about it and a close friend, she’s an inspector too, and she keeps pushing me – why don’t you do it Noor? She thinks that I am good. And I am waiting, I have still hope that Allah will make everything fine and I will get the money to start it insha’allah.
My youngest daughter Marwa goes to a public kindergarten. The building is really nice and well furnished. Each class has its own garden. Children have a schedule for different responsibilities; wiping the desks, putting away the plates after having breakfast, etc. The whole thing sounds good. The point is that she was frightened of her teacher. She had a loud voice and rarely smiles. Marwa started going and then she stopped. Every morning she would find an excuse not to go. Meeting the teacher, I knew that it’s her last year for service at the kindergarten. I thanked Allah for this and felt sorry for all those whom she taught before. Things changed rapidly, and that noisy teacher travelled abroad to visit her son. Another nice and gentle teacher replaced her. *Insha’Allah* if I have my own nursery I will ask her to work with me.

6.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented the women’s lives in their own words, aware that each reader will form their own relationship with the texts and the living, loving, laughing women partially captured within them (MacLure 2009: 98; Grumet 1991: 69).
Chapter 7

Beyond the veil: Beyond difference

7.1 Introduction

In previous chapters I have situated my storytellers and myself historically and spatially (Chapter 1) and explored womanhood in cultural and political terms (Chapter 2). I have anchored my work within the critical qualitative inquiry paradigm, discussed criteria for evaluating qualitative research (Chapter 3) and provided an account of my research journey and my efforts to achieve 'representational adequacy' (Denzin 2009: 157) in the creation of negotiated narratives (Chapter 4). I have described the VRDA protocol I used to analyse the interview data, offered the multiple perspectives generated by the method (Chapter 5) and then presented the life stories fashioned collaboratively from that data (Chapter 6). In this final chapter, I review what I have learnt about the ways in which Noor and Hana’a understand, experience and perform their agentic selves in order to answer my research question, and evaluate this study in terms of Tracy’s (2010) criteria for qualitative research. I identify the practical, political, methodological and conceptual significance of the contributions to knowledge made by this thesis and make suggestions for further research.

7.2 In search of answers

In Chapter 5 I explored Hana’a and Noor’s lives holistically through the medium of VRDA and offered detailed interpretations in order to provide a mediating framework for their life stories which are presented in Chapter 6. I now draw on that analysis to answer my research question which is how educated Yemeni women understand and inhabit the storylines available to them, as ‘sisters’ of men rather than their equals who should aspire to being ‘good’ wives, mothers, daughters and Muslims. This study has shown that Hana’a and Noor are very much aware of these storylines, and the expectations that accompany them, many derived directly from interpretations of the Qur’an that are more than 1,000 years old. Islam remains the
**lingua franca** of Yemeni society and to a large extent determines the “map of possible roles and of possible worlds in which action, thought and self-definition are possible” (Bruner 1986: 66) and it is not surprising therefore that *iman* (faith) plays a central and largely undisputed role in defining the parameters of possibility. Whilst engaging with and working within those expectations, events in Hana’a and Noor’s lifetimes, not to mention their own lived experience, have demonstrated that even time-honoured storylines are neither static nor universal, but fluid, relational and contextual. I first review what I have learnt about women’s understanding of their status in relation to men, before considering their engagement with their roles as wives, mothers and daughters. I then consider what it means to be a good Muslim in this context and the ways in which each woman aspires to live her faith.

### 7.2.1 Sisters of men

Statistically, Yemen suffers from the greatest gender inequality on the planet (UNDP 2013; WEF 2013) and discriminatory practices are enshrined both in the constitution, and personal status laws, that deny women rights granted to them by Islam. The international community’s exclusive focus on the admittedly very real challenges faced by Yemeni women however, obscures not only the fact that educated Yemeni women do exist and are not in need of ‘saving’ but also that many such women are working to effect change in a culturally appropriate fashion not always visible to outside eyes. It is the very ‘invisibility’ of activism like Hana’a and Noor’s that permits progress towards their self-determined goals to be made and attitudes to shift as I discuss below (Section 4.2.2).

The notion that women are inferior is promulgated by men and perpetuated by male dominance of the public sphere, policy and the historical record. Hana’a clearly and colourfully articulates the disparities in status in Hadramawt:

> Men believe that they have the right to force women to do things or to deny them opportunities to work and be educated. They think that they are better than women. They are the ones that have the right to education and jobs because they have bigger brains.
Noor explicitly rejects this secondary status “I am not less than any of the men, I feel myself much better than them, – aiwa, no really!” and Hana’a asserts the value of her contribution to family and society in an equally direct fashion. Hana’a and Noor’s are by no means the first generation of Yemeni women to feel this way (Makhlouf 1979; Molyneux et al 1979) a sentiment captured powerfully by Aida Yafai, a leading light in the National Liberation Front in Aden in the 1970s:

When we declare that we want to be equal to men, we want to be equal in rights but we don’t want to be equal if men are trapped in under-developed thoughts. In an underdeveloped society men have underdeveloped ideas and we don’t want equality in this. We have to fight with men to eradicate these backward social relations. And these relations are very complicated. We can’t demand that men change their spots overnight. They have inherited the way they are from thousands of years of backwardness and this is why they reject any demands for equality between men and women (Molyneux et al 1979: 12).

Hana’a and Noor have both had the unstinting support of their own fathers in their educational and professional endeavours, and they are not unique in Yemeni society as they explain that some men are proud of their working wives, and others at the very least recognize the need for women to work as teachers. Neither in awe of, nor cowed by their men folk or men in general, Noor returns repeatedly to the theme of men’s failure to do their duty “Men in Yemen do not want to take responsibility for things” whilst Hana’a refers to her marriage as a “very bad dream” claiming that “fathering my daughter is the only good thing” that her husband had done in his life.

Whilst individual men may have failed them, and neither woman grants unearned respect on the basis of gender, they do not position men as the enemy, or a source of oppression and there is some tolerance for, despite the frustration caused by, their ‘backward’ ways, as Mohja Kahf so aptly illustrates in her poem “I Can Scent an Arab Man a Mile Away” (2003: 29):

They may be
mustachio’d, macho, patriarchal,
sexist, egotistical, parochial –
They may, as men may,
think themselves indomitable,
being easily manipulable,
- but they’re mine, my
sleek and swarthy, hairy-chested, 
curly headed lovers of the Prophet.

The secondary status commonly ascribed to their sex, explicitly rejected by Hana’a and Noor does however seem to function as a catalyst for their professional and personal endeavours with both women speaking of challenges they have embraced, parenting alone for Noor and living and working in Tarim for Hana’a. Despite the challenges they face, or perhaps because of them, both women have a strong sense of self, and confidence to spare. This is consistent with the findings of Carla Makhlouf’s study of women in Sana’a and her observation that “a cultural ideology which presents women’s part in society as insignificant does not necessarily result in self-devaluation for the women. Rather, the subjective reality of women’s lives may contradict this view” (1979: 25).

7.2.2 Good wives, mothers, and daughters

The concept of goodness is a powerful one in Yemeni society, where people, acts or things are typically judged as intrinsically good or bad, on the basis of the halal (lawful) haram (prohibited) binary, despite the fact that Shari’ah provides for intermediary positions (the recommended, neutral and disapproved). The desire both to be, and be acknowledged as ‘good’ is very real and apparent in both women’s stories as “identity is constructed with the moral obligation to be good in mind” (Meneley 1996: 45). Public acknowledgement of a woman’s ‘goodness’ is not just about protecting her own reputation, important though that is in this context, but also about earning status and respect for their bayt. In an honour based society such as Yemen, “honour does not exist without continual recognition” (Meneley 1996: 190) so status is shifting and dynamic and therefore a bayt must be constantly alert to threats to its reputation, which if damaged will reflect badly on all its members. Hana’a talks at length about good wives, keen to demonstrate that education and employment do not detract from a woman’s virtue:

It’s not a bad thing or something that will damage families. I mean when I am working I can be a good wife. There are many women who are good wives and who work, yes.
Noor too is very concerned to be seen as a good wife and suggests that all her freedoms are a direct result of her husband’s trust in her, underlining once again the importance of a woman’s reputation. Being a good mother is one of the highest accolades on offer to women in Yemen, and Noor and Hana’a both stake their claim to this title. They take their responsibilities as good mothers to mean not only to offer their children love and support but to educate them in the broadest sense of the word, and to try and ensure the happiness and fulfilment of the girls as people before they become wives. Rather than remain at home, these women have embraced professional careers, to better provide for their children, sacrificing their time and comfort, rather than their self-actualization, and in so doing both provide positive role models and demonstrate that a good mother does not have to remain housebound.

A woman’s status for much, if not all of her life is bound up with that of her natal family, and even where she marries up, it is typically not until she has adult sons, and created a power base within her husband’s community that her status might become affiliated with that of her conjugal family (Mundy 1995). As befits good daughters therefore, both women are extremely loyal to their natal families, and Noor gives thanks repeatedly for her “loving family” and the sense of security that she derives from them. Hana’a too attributes her achievements to the love and support of her family, “I think if there had been no support or encouragement from my family… I wouldn’t have been able to work, to be what I am now”. In her darkest hour, faced with moving from liberal Aden to traditional Tarim, Hana’a first struggled against her father’s wishes, and then struggled with herself to do her duty because “I wanted to obey my father and my mother”. Like being a good wife and mother, being a dutiful daughter is part of being a good Muslim, and as can be seen in Hana’a’s struggles above, submission to the will of Allah is not an act of passivity, but an act of strength and conscious determination in the pursuit of piety (see Section 4.2.3 below).

7.2.3 Good Muslims

Hana’a and Noor live, and strive to make a contribution to, a society largely shaped by Islam and underpinning all their efforts are their understandings of themselves as Muslims for “any attempt to develop and fix Arab society that doesn’t concentrate
on faith - the strongest, most beautiful element in the Arab being - will not succeed” (Atia 2005 cited in Pandya 2009:71). Women are often considered to be more religiously observant than men in Yemen (Pandya 2009; Clark 2004) and my research suggests that this is because Islam provides women with their own path to fulfilment, one that is neither dependent on, nor directed by men. This desire to achieve self-actualisation through religion is I believe a direct result of women’s understandings of Islam, which are fundamentally at odds with the patriarchal interpretations (Ahmed 2000: 120) with which most in the West are more familiar.

### 7.2.3.1 Women’s ways of knowing Islam

As women in Yemen are typically encouraged to pray at home rather than in mosques, and have often not had the benefit of literacy, they have not received the male-authored version of Islam, but “an aural and oral heritage and a way of living and being” (Ahmed 2000: 125) passed down through the generations and assimilated in the company of women. This is a rich and vibrant heritage, reflecting the radical nature of Islam at the time of its founding when it gave women unprecedented rights, including a voice in the law for the first time. Whilst the Holy Qur’an is considered to be the word of God, revealed to the Prophet, guidance on how to be a Muslim is found in the sunnah, the words and actions of Mohammed recorded in the form of hadith. These tales of everyday life and decisions are far more accessible than the complexities of the Holy Qur’an and historically more likely to have provided women with their knowledge of Islam. If the Prophet’s life is taken as a model, his treatment of women in general, and his wives in particular, support the claim that Islam respects and offers equality to women (Kassam 2012; Merali 2006; Bewley 2004; Bullock 2002; Ahmed 1992; El-Saadawi 1982).

### 7.2.3.2 Modesty

Noor and Hana’a understand Islam as supportive and respectful of their sex, and are aware that the intersection of patriarchal culture, politics and economics in Yemeni society impedes women’s access to rights granted to her by her religion. It is not surprising then, that they should turn to their faith for sustenance and affirmation, embracing modesty as a means of getting closer to God and ensuring their just
reward in Paradise as “Anyone who acts rightly, male or female, being a believer, we will give them a good life and will recompense them according to the best of what they did” (Qur’an 16: 97). The pursuit of piety in a Muslim society does however create opportunity for gains to be made in this life as well as the next, for as Anne Meneley explains “practices of female modesty are a locus for both personhood and hierarchy, embodying personal virtue and piety, as well as the moral worth of families” (1996: 191).

7.2.3.3 Self-actualisation within the context of religion

The ability to read or recite the Holy Qur’an is considered to be “an important sign of being a good Muslim” (de Regt 2007: 112) as the Prophet declared “Seeking knowledge is compulsory for every Muslim”. Noor and Hana’a work tirelessly to improve and promote education and are able to argue for the education of women on the basis of strengthening their faith, and indeed many literacy classes for adult women take Islamic education and reading the Holy Qur’an as their focus (Pandya 2009; de Regt 2007; Clark 2004). Education is also viewed in some quarters as an aid to chastity, for it has been suggested that an educated woman “will not get wet even if she falls in the ocean” (Mirza 1989 cited in Najmabadi 1993: 511). As long as the desire to study is presented in terms of personal and spiritual development and remains within a gender-segregated environment, there is no religious or cultural basis for denying it. In this context then, as in so many others throughout history, religion provides women with the opportunity for education and self-actualisation.

7.2.3.4 Freedom and desire

Whilst it is possible to argue that Hana’a and Noor for all their strength and independence remain constrained, I believe the same could be said of us all “if we accept the fundamental premise that humans are social beings, raised in certain social and historical contexts and belonging to particular communities that shape their desires and understandings of the world” (Abu-Lughod 2013: 40). Judith Butler goes further, pointing out that by accident of birth we all endure “forms of proximity, of living with, of adjacency and co-habitation that are radically unchosen” and that these “are conditions we are nevertheless obligated to protect and defend,
even though we never agreed to them, and they do not emerge from our will” (2011: 26). Although imposed by virtue of history and location, their active embrace of their faith provides them with a blueprint for a more just and genuinely Islamic society where men and women are equal in terms of education and opportunity as well as in the eyes of God, and it is the creation of this society that they are working towards. Aware of the ways in which cultural and social practices in Yemen are in conflict with Islamic principles, Noor and Hana’a combat these where and how they can, making the best of the situations in which they find themselves and remaining proud of their heritage, history and culture.

The educated women featured in this thesis understand and embrace the storylines they see as God-given but resist the limiting, parochial interpretations of Yemeni society. Informed by their own interpretations of being good women and good Muslims, and with the support of their families, they are steadily shifting the boundaries of education and opportunity for women in an effective, if often hidden fashion.

7.3 Excellent qualitative research?
In Chapter 3 I reviewed a number of possible criteria (Bochner 2000; Ellis 2000; Richardson 2000) for the evaluation of qualitative research, and felt that Sarah Tracy’s (2010) model (see below) which attempts to incorporate the ethical, elegant and poetic concerns of these scholars within a frame that recognises the institutional demands on a formal research report was the most pertinent for the purposes of this thesis.
# Eight “Big-Tent” Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria for quality</th>
<th>Various means, practices, and methods through which to achieve</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Worthy topic</strong></td>
<td>The topic of the research is</td>
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<td>• Relevant</td>
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<td><strong>Rich rigor</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Sincerity</strong></td>
<td>The study is characterized by</td>
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<td>• Self-reflexivity about subjective values, biases, and inclinations of the researcher(s)</td>
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<td><strong>Credibility</strong></td>
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<td>• Thick description, concrete detail, explication of tacit (nontextual) knowledge, and showing rather than telling</td>
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<td><strong>Resonance</strong></td>
<td>The research influences, affects, or moves particular readers or a variety of audiences through</td>
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<td>• Aesthetic, evocative representation</td>
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<td>• Transferable findings</td>
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<td><strong>Significant contribution</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Ethical</strong></td>
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<td>• Procedural ethics (such as human subjects)</td>
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<td>• Exiting ethics (leaving the scene and sharing the research)</td>
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<td><strong>Meaningful coherence</strong></td>
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<td>• Achieves what it purports to be about</td>
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<td>• Uses methods and procedures that fit its stated goals</td>
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<td>• Meaningfully interconnects literature, research questions/foci, findings, and interpretations with each other</td>
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*Figure 1. Tracy’s Eight “Big Tent” Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research (2010)*
7.3.1 Worthy topic

Tracy suggests that a worthy topic is “relevant, timely, significant, interesting or evocative” and with the increasing marginalisation of Muslim communities in the West, I believe that this study which attempts (amongst other things) to humanise the ‘Other’ is both timely and relevant. Few accounts of the lives of Yemeni women are in circulation, and those texts most readily available tend to describe lives of unremitting misery, examples of “pulp nonfiction” peddling a “pornography of pain” (Abu-Lughod 2013: 80). My integration into Yemeni society through marriage afforded me a privileged perspective from the margins, a position in which I was both othered (by implication) and included (in practice), and required me to “work the hyphens” (Fine 1994a: 70) on a daily basis. I believe that the insights into women’s lives, hopes and dreams that I offer from the liminal space I occupied on the margins bear the stamp of “educative authenticity” (Guba & Lincoln 2005: 207) and should be useful as well as interesting. Attempting to destabilize assumptions about the oppressed Muslim woman in this fashion I feel I have contributed to the “provocative and productive unpacking of taken-for-granted ideas about women in specific material, historical, and cultural contexts” (2003: 333) urged by Virginia Olesen who has long championed the need for “incisive scholarship to frame, direct, and harness passion” (2003: 332) in the pursuit of social justice.

7.3.2 Sincerity

A key element of the quality that Tracy describes as sincerity is reflexivity, and in recognition of the “embodied, situated and subjective” (Mauthner & Doucet 2003: 414) nature of research, I have attempted to be transparent about how I came to be both who and where I was, as I started out on this particular journey, by weaving my own narrative through the text. I made myself vulnerable in the process through the exposure of events over which I had little control, and which are not commonly shared in academic writing, believing that it is necessary to take risks in order to create genuinely reflexive texts (Davies & Gannon 2006: 95; Denzin 1997: 225). The reflexive elements of the VRDA protocol I chose also prompted me to examine how my own history and assumptions might be impacting on the process of analysis.
7.3.3 Credibility

In qualitative inquiry, credibility can be defined as “the trustworthiness, verisimilitude and plausibility” (Tracy 2010: 842) of a study, or whether in Laurel Richardson’s words it “expresses a reality” through its “fleshed out, embodied sense of lived-experience” offering “a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of the ‘real’?” (2000: 254). I have tried to surface the tacit knowledge that I possess as a result of my long immersion in Yemeni society and believe that the life histories of Noor and Hana’a in Chapter 6 effectively convey an embodied sense of experience. In keeping with my collaborative principles, those stories were co-constructed, which in tandem with the voice centred analysis protocol ensured that multivocality is a feature of this text.

7.3.4 Resonance

As qualitative inquiry “offers insights into human behaviour and works on behalf of social justice” (Pelias 2007: 181) it aims to move the heart as well as the head, evoking emotion whilst engaging the intellect. Such resonance can be achieved through aesthetic merit, by presenting a text “in a beautiful, evocative and artistic way” and transferability, “the production of vicarious emotional experience in the reader” (Tracy 2010: 845). I have been mindful whilst writing therefore of the need to create a text that is both engaging and informative, believe that the VRDA protocol used offers a particularly rich understanding of experience, and that the co-constructed life stories represent “evocative storytelling” (Goodall 2008: 27) that readers can think and feel with (Frank 1995).

7.3.5 Rich rigor

A key element of any high quality research endeavour, Tracy associates rigour in qualitative inquiry with richness and abundance, “nuance and complexity” (2010: 841). I have demonstrated rigour in this thesis by being explicit about, and offering detailed descriptions of, the contexts that have shaped my storytellers and myself, “the processes of which [we] are a part, and the relationships and connections that structure [our] being-in-the-world” in order to “produce thick, complex, and rigorous forms of knowledge” (Kincheloe 2001: 688-689).
7.3.6 Meaningful coherence

According to Tracy, meaningfully coherent studies “eloquently interconnect their research design, data collection, and analysis with their theoretical framework and situational goals” (2010: 848). As the motivation for my study was as much political as academic, guided by feminist ethics of working with, rather than on, women, I have attempted at all times to keep faith with those principles, and the relationships without which this thesis would not exist. This has created a number of challenges that I have dealt with by adapting the structure of the text to ensure that the form is consistent with the feminist, post-structural framing and stated goals of the study.

7.3.7 Ethics

Whilst it is possible to argue against incorporating ethics into a framework such as this, on the understanding that it should be an overarching principle of research, I feel that the inclusion of ethics as a criterion is of value precisely because it forces us to examine the ways in which we have operationalised our ethical beliefs. In terms of procedural ethics, or what we might call institutional ethics, I have been frank with my participants throughout the study, about my research interests and the ways in which I planned to work with and present the data in this thesis. I have done my best to protect their privacy and confidentiality and invited them to choose the pseudonyms by which they and all the other characters in their stories should be known.

As this work is a feminist study premised on relational ethics (see Chapter 4) it was built on a bedrock of trust, mutual respect and affection between myself and my collaborators. Although my close and ongoing personal and professional relationships with these women created a number of dilemmas for me in terms of the analysis and presentation of data, I have continuously reflected on my practice and subjected my decisions to ongoing scrutiny for as a matter of situational ethics, my long immersion in Yemeni society has rendered me mindful of the joint dangers of exposing my storytellers to censure at home and ignorance abroad (Ellis 2009). Whilst it is impossible to control how an audience might respond to a particular narrative, ethical researchers have a duty to achieve “representational adequacy” (Denzin 2009: 157) by anticipating “how the public and policy makers will
receive, distort, and misread our data” (Fine et al 2003: 195) and making every effort to mediate the text to minimize “unjust or intended consequences” in what Tracy defines as exiting ethics (2010: 847). This presented me with a double burden, as I was ethically bound to honour the participants’ wishes about the ways in which their lives were to be portrayed, whilst committed to unsettling taken for granted attitudes about oppressed Muslim women and the two aims were not always symbiotic. To achieve the first, I gave my collaborators complete editorial control over the stories presented in Chapter 6, and people, places and events were removed as they saw fit, with what remained adapted until they felt like the story was ‘theirs’ and were satisfied with the re-presentation to be published (see Chapter 4). In order to achieve the second, I have provided multiple frames, historical (Chapter 1) political (Chapter 2) and analytical (Chapter 5) for these stories, in the hope that these women’s lives and actions, their multiple subjectivities and their agency would be illuminated by such rich contextualization and encourage an audience to read against the grain.

7.4 Contributions

Tracy’s final criterion relates to the ways in which a qualitative study furthers “knowledge, practice, and politics” (2010: 845) and thereby makes a significant contribution to scholarship and social justice. This thesis offers contributions of a practical, conceptual, methodological and political nature and makes suggestions for further research.

7.4.1 Practical contribution

It was always my intention that this study, designed as an intervention, should have practical significance, impacting positively on my storytellers, given my firm belief that research should be transformative (see Chapter 4) as well as making a contribution to the limited literature available on the lives of women in Yemen. Collaborating in the research process has I believe been of value to Noor and Hana’a as it not only provided a rare opportunity to talk at length about their experiences, desires and dreams, but also gave them the chance to reflect on their lives and the significance of key events for them and their development. This process
appears to have contributed positively to their confidence in, and recognition of, their own abilities and willingness to articulate their self-worth more publicly, for as Noor states “I have gained myself”.

I hope that the life histories presented in Chapter 6, in all their messy, complex and contradictory incompleteness function as useful and necessary counter narratives to the widely disseminated “pulp nonfiction” portraying the observant Arab Muslim woman as abject, and the even more insidious “common sense” understandings that the West in its moral superiority should intervene in these countries to rescue women from the clutches of their men, and their women-hating religion. I offer these histories as my contribution to the feminist tradition of literature-as-praxis (see Chapter 2) as I remain convinced that “literature acts on the world by acting on its readers” (Schweickart 1986: 39).

7.4.2 Conceptual contribution

Laurel Richardson asks of research that claims to make a contribution: “Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social-life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded (if embedded) human-world understanding and perspective?” (2000: 254) and I believe that the insights into the lives of these two Yemeni women offered as a result of the VRDA analysis and drawing on the 13 years I spent in-situ offer an uncommon perspective on lives and agency that are so often hidden from the prying eyes of outsiders. Here I elaborate on three commonly misunderstood concepts that are integral to the structure and fabric of women’s lives in Yemen, those of honour, segregation and iman.

7.4.2.1 Honour

One of the catalysts for my research into Yemeni women’s lived experience of power and agency was seeing women go hungry to feed their menfolk and guests, whilst being in control of the food supply (see Chapter 1). My research has shown that this was neither the result of discrimination nor evidence of subjugation, and whilst women did, and indeed still do, make sacrifices they are not only voluntary but entirely strategic in nature. When my neighbours went without to ensure their
guests had plenty, it was in the service of the reputation and status, i.e. honour of their bayt, and therefore themselves, as dictated by the relational logic of Yemeni society. For Noor and Hana’a, honour is not an idea imposed on women by men, but a central pillar of society and a guiding principle of life (Abu-Lughod 2013; Meneley 1996). Whilst in the West people are only too familiar with ‘honour killings’ and the ways in which women might be deemed to have fallen foul of what is seen as an explicitly sexual code, far less is known of the “shared and complexly lived moral code that inspire[s] and obligate[s] individuals” (Abu-Lughod 2013: 117) both male and female. The pursuit of honour then is a collective one, in which women participate freely, actively policing themselves and taking pride in their virtue and the dignity its public enactment creates. When Noor refuses to visit her qat-chewing friends, and Hana’a avoids the houses of gossiping neighbours, they are both asserting their morality and denying friends and neighbours the respectability their presence would confer. Although women are still associated primarily with the home and what might be considered the ‘private’ realm, in Yemen their houses are ‘public’ spaces because of the rituals of reciprocal visiting in which all women participate, the hospitality that they offer being another crucial element of their reputation. In this way, even housewives whose only society is the company of other women still make an important contribution to the honour and standing of their bayt.

7.4.2.2 Segregation
Although often viewed negatively in the West, the segregated nature of life in Yemen means that “the female’s separate sphere is a somewhat autonomous and self-sufficient world” (Makhlouf 1979: 36). Even though as a member of the ‘third sex’ I occupied a liminal space between the male and female realms, the company of women was central to my experience of life in Yemen, and the profound sense of loss expressed by Sara Suleri, “Leaving Pakistan was, of course, tantamount to giving up the company of women” (1991: 1) resonates with me.

Rather than feeling confined to this sphere, women view it as a place of freedom, over which men exert no control and from which they are actively excluded (Ahmed 1982: 528). In this society where “women live with women” husbands are
often referred to as “daif al-diwan – a guest in the living room” (Mundy 1995: 128) and Noor explicitly positions her husband as such. Liberated from male oversight in this fashion, segregation also allows women to avail themselves of opportunities for personal development as in Yemen “what people are not directly confronted with is acceptable, even though they may know it is going on” (de Regt 2007: 120). In practice this sometimes translates to girls being able to go to school or women attending literacy classes while husbands and fathers are not looking (de Regt 2007; Paluch 2001) with the complicity of other women of the household. Such support is offered in many ways and as Hana’a and Noor’s descriptions of their natal homes in Chapter 6 clearly demonstrate, women work together sharing chores, childcare and leisure time.

It is in the company of women at haflas that women find “an emotional outlet, a social life outside of the home, and a support group” (Clark 2004: 133) which they may turn to for advice, guidance or education as well as companionship. Whilst domestic in appearance, such female networking not only builds social capital (Clark 2004; Meneley 1996) but constitutes a power base from which women may exert considerable control over the lives of men (Mundy 1995; Makhlouf 1979) and act on social and cultural scripts in the process. Matriarchs can make junior women’s lives a misery as both Hana’a and I know to our cost, and it is women who are primarily responsible for the perpetration of traditions which limit female fulfilment, such as female genital mutilation and early marriage, believing “it’s a kind of love”. Hana’a has limited movement within a small geographic space, but is attempting to colonise that space, making use of these multi-generational gatherings to campaign against the practices of child marriage and early motherhood in Tarim. While covering a large geographic area behind the wheel of her own car, Noor carries segregation into the public sphere, her sartorial hijab “symbolically signalling” that she is “still in the inviolable space” of her home and “under the protection of family, even though moving about in public” (Abu-Lughod 2013: 36).

7.4.2.3 Iman
One of the most rewarding aspects of this study for me was coming to a deeper understanding of the ways in which these women lived their faith, and found agency
in so doing. The root from which the word Islam is derived signifies peace, purity, submission and obedience, and it is the quality of submission that is most often misconstrued. Whilst submission is often associated with passivity and victimhood, it does in fact require great effort to discipline the mind and body to cultivate virtue, as Saba Mahmood (2001: 212) relates:

Although piety was achievable through practices that were both devotional as well as worldly in character, it required more than the simple performance of acts: piety also entailed the inculcation of entire dispositions through a simultaneous training of the body, emotions, and reason as sites of discipline until the religious virtues acquired the status of embodied habits.

Whilst we are accustomed to thought influencing action, in the pursuit of piety repeated actions may achieve the desired mental state where “action does not issue forth from natural feelings but creates them. Furthermore, in this conception it is through repeated bodily acts that one trains one’s memory, desire and intellect to behave according to established standards of conduct” (ibid 2001: 214 emphasis in the original). Noor first donned a headscarf in secular Aden as an act of conscience believing it to be “a must” but only adopted the niqab (veil) when she was compelled to do so after her family moved to Taiz. Working in an Islamic Institute, Noor’s hijab became “heavier and heavier” as she gradually disciplined herself into the most conservative version of the garb that she now wears, where even her eyes and hands are concealed. Noor internalised these and other practices of modesty to the extent that on her return to Aden:

It was really a problem for me to talk to them [men]. It took me a long time to get used to it, but after some months I found that as long as I behaved well, everybody respected me and I respected myself. I was in my hijab, it did not stop me from working, from interacting with others. I do not ever feel that it is a barrier. It is not a barrier for me.

Noor effectively constructed a new woman demonstrating in her clothing and demeanour “the disciplined de-eroticized body” (Najmabadi 1993: 510) that enables women to be active in heterosocial spaces without fear of compromise to their honour (de Regt 2007: 335).
The quality of *sabr* (patience or endurance) is highly praised in the Islamic faith and is considered to be the counterpart of the equally prized *shukr* (gratitude) which Noor exemplifies “I keep saying *al-hamdulillah* with every piece of my heart”. Yemeni women are often called upon to shoulder the burden of *sabr* (de Regt 2007; Mundy 1995; Makhlouf 1979) as they are to model other virtues which “have lost their value in the liberal imagination (like humility, modesty, and shyness)” but *sabr* and its companions should not be “considered emblematic of passivity and inaction” (Mahmood 2001: 222). *Sabr* can be understood as a type of struggle or *jihad*, and in this context it appears as an important element of Hana’a’s story. Hana’a specifically references *sabr* when she is recounting her suffering in her marital home, and makes it clear that she chose to stay and endure, rather than give up on her duty. Evidently, she might also want to have avoided admitting defeat and the tongue-wagging that inevitably occurs when a recently married women returns to her natal home, but remaining was construed as action, rather than inaction on her part. Similarly the move to Tarim which she first contested and then made her peace with, is represented as a trial, but one that she can not only survive and learn from as she makes clear, but also one that furnished her with the opportunity to make a more meaningful contribution to society. This conforms to the Islamic understanding that the reward for *sabr* is more opportunities for exercising *sabr*, although in Paradise they “will be given their reward twice for what they patiently endured” (Qur’an 28: 54).

### 7.4.3 Methodological contribution

In my detailed description and exemplification of the process of turning interview data into stories in Chapter 4, I believe I have made a methodological contribution. Whilst there is a substantial literature detailing technical aspects of processing data for and during analysis, and a growing number of works in which data is presented in more creative formats, there is a dearth of information regarding the journey from raw data to more polished artefacts such as those presented in Chapter 6.
7.4.4 Political contribution

Whilst many scholars, feminists in particular, are preoccupied with the achievement of Denzin’s “representational adequacy” (2009: 157) and describe their struggles with this principle (Gillies & Allred 2012; Wise & Stanley 2003; Standing 1998; Wilkinson & Kitzinger 1996) I have found very few descriptions in the literature of how these concerns are operationalised in practical terms. I engaged with such practicalities through reporting on a small scale survey using a sample excerpt from a life story, the responses to which informed my treatment of the stories themselves and the decision to mediate them via the extended interpretive readings featured in Chapter 5. The detailed account of this process I offer in Chapter 4 therefore makes a contribution to operationalising understandings of such critical representation.

7.4.5 Reflections and future directions

When I chose my storytellers, despite having long-established and productive working relationships with them, I knew almost nothing about their personal lives beyond the fact that they were married women with children who remained committed to their careers in education. I was not aware of Hana’a’s elite status as sayyid, nor of the comparative wealth of Noor’s family and was shocked to discover that both families hailed from the conservative Wadi Hadramawt, where education for women is still viewed by many as of limited value. I was also surprised by the revelation that both women were effectively ‘single’ parents, raising their children with the support of their natal families. Although separated by a decade, their stories tell us about the intersection of two establishments not considered to be particularly female friendly, the British Empire and Marxism, and the opportunities created for women in the space ‘between’. These encompassed education and employment, but the effects bled out into wider social and cultural norms and echo through the stories of Noor and Hana’a. There was a focus on ‘being and becoming’ which meant that opportunity existed and was theoretically available to all, supported by the gender-neutral ‘project of building the new person’ enshrined in the family law of 1974. Under colonial rule, Higher Education became a possibility for women in Aden, and during the Marxist regime it was almost commonplace, with suitably qualified women able to take advantage of the overseas scholarships on offer.
Participation in the workforce was normalised for women, girls had expectations of both education and a career, although of course these expectations would continue to be supported or thwarted at family level.

Given that geography plays such a powerful role in facilitating or denying opportunity, it would be of great interest to construct life histories with professional women of similar age and status in Yemen’s other major cities, Taiz and Sana’a (both formerly part of YAR) and in more rural areas of both the former PDRY and YAR for the purposes of populating ‘the map of possible worlds’ that these women make their own. It would also be of value to explore the lives of younger women, those active in the Arab Spring or belonging to the separatist Southern Movement, to see how their specifically political affiliation influences and co-exists with their understanding of womanhood in Yemen in the 21st century.

7.5 Conclusion

In this chapter I have reviewed what I have learnt about the ways in which Hana’a and Noor engage with the storylines available to them as women in Yemen and highlighted the roles played by baʿyt and iman in both protecting women and creating conditions of possibility for them. I have demonstrated that these women’s understandings of their status and agency are at odds not only with the superficial structure of Yemeni society but also the widely disseminated notion of the passive oppressed woman, somehow diminished by the curtain of sheer muslin worn in public. Using criteria appropriate to a work of critical qualitative inquiry, I have evaluated this thesis and made my contributions to knowledge in terms of practical, political, methodological and conceptual significance explicit. Finally I have reflected on the way geography impacts on opportunity and indicated possible future studies that would contribute to the more comprehensive storying of the lives of Yemeni women.
My story: Endings…

I embarked on this study because I was passionate about widening access to education and opportunity for women in Yemen, and in the process became equally passionate about challenging the representation of such women as the oppressed, deluded ‘Other’. Despite the challenges presented by such a stance, I believe it has been generative for all concerned, and has provided opportunities for learning and development that I could not have anticipated at the outset. I believe that engaged scholarship is integral to methodologies of the heart, just as long as we hold ourselves to standards of transparency in our stance, ethics in our relationships and rigour in the pursuit and reporting of research:

If we collaborate in the work of making real to ourselves the ‘innerness of other’s lives’ and find ways to restore passion and genuine commitment, the texts we create today will become the blueprints for tomorrow, guiding us to the most critical narrative construction of all, becoming human. (Emihovich 1995: 45)

In an age of rapid globalisation and burgeoning connectivity, barriers between cultures and countries remain intact only on maps and in people’s minds. I believe we can no longer afford to luxuriate in comfortable epistemologies of ignorance that prevent us from engaging in a constructive fashion with the Other, and there is a pressing need to engage with the Islamic Other on both a local and international basis:

But I do not insist on difference. Difference pales

beside the horrors facing our race
- the human one: hunger, HIV, genocide,
  the unconscionable global marketplace
  Where is the salve? We write. We recognize

- we must – each other in millennial glow
  Or we will die from what we do not know
  (Kahf 2003: 92)

The veiled woman remains the ultimate Other, a symbolic barrier that separates East from West, creating “an imaginative geography” composed of “cultures in which first ladies give speeches versus others in which women shuffle around silently
in burqas” (Abu-Lughod 2013: 32). I have attempted through the stories told and the interpretations offered in this thesis to surface an “individual, and communal sense of the real” (Richardson 2000: 254) that can be engaged with, for there is much to admire in our sister selves and the faith that sustains them. Despite the many hardships currently faced by women in Yemen, it seems their sense of themselves as part of a family, a community and a wider community of faith sustain and inspire them. Such deeply relational understandings of the self produce, and perhaps always have, strong and independent women like Noor and Hana’a, but their stories have seldom been heard:

One imagines that a hundred years ago Yemeni women were as forceful as they now are, but to turn history inside out and write in a female voice would require sources no-one yet commands. (Dresch 2000: 17)

I hope that this thesis will bring the day that Yemeni women tell their history in print at least a step closer.
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Appendices
Appendix A

Extract from transcript (Noor, 2nd interview)

Tanya: Tell me why when you have such a busy life and so much to do, why is it that you want to carry on working?

Noor: I felt it inconvenient just to totally rely and depend on him. He has his own life too. As long as I can work and I can do my own money, why not? Yes, al-hamdulillah I’ve got someone to help me, still I am exhausted but I can do it, yes.

(breaks off to talk to her son)

Tanya: Is it just because… is the only reason that you feel that you ought to, erm support yourself because you’re able, or erm, the work that you do … I mean, what…is the only reason that you don’t want to rely on your brother?

Noor: Yes, that’s it.

Tanya: That’s it?

Noor: Yes.

Tanya: So you don’t…

Noor: But if I had a real chance for me to stay at home, yes I would prefer to stay at home, yes. Because sometimes I get really busy and I feel myself nervous and don’t talk to them well and er, story time for Marwa, poor Marwa…she keeps waiting for me, and she goes to bed before telling her…yes I, er feel guilty about it. I feel myself as a mother more than myself at work. I like being a mother, yes.

Tanya: Okay, but do you get satisfaction from your job as an inspector?

Noor: Yes, al-hamdulillah, I really love it yes. Because I am in it…and I try to do my best. I don’t want to feel that I’m less than others or that I…can’t work as others, no, no. I am trying to improve myself to be what I want to be at work.

Tanya: And what do you want to be at work?

Noor: I want to be successful. I don’t want to say…I don’t want anyone to tell that Noor is not working hard, she’s lazy or…I have some things to do, yes. I never stay at home, I have the whole week work. Though I know that some of my friends and my colleagues, they, they would stay at home and they would fill anything in their, their timetable or whatever, but it is against my…yes. Either to be in it or leave it helas!
Tanya: And why do you think you feel that way?

Noor: About what?

Tanya: About doing a job to the best of your ability. Where does that come from?

Noor: I am not less than any of the men, yes, yes I feel myself much better than them, aiwa – no really! I want to be a good mother for my kids, yes, I’m a mother and still a mother, I’m hard working, I can get them money, even if their father is not all the time with them, I can still do it, yes. And I’m, I’m really satisfied with what I am doing, yes, yes.

Extract from transcript (Hana’a 2\textsuperscript{nd} interview)

Tanya: Why is your work so important to you?

Hana’a: Because I think I’m very strong with my work. I think I’m important for my society. I can help people and I feel that people need me and I can help them and I have the ability to help them. So why I leave it, I leave them? It’s not a bad thing or something that will damage…I mean when I am working I can be a good wife. There are many women who are good wife and who work, yes. They are good in their job and their life and wife, yes.

Tanya: How do you find coping with your working life and being a mother at home?

Hana’a: You mean erm what do you mean by coping?

Tanya: Coping – well you work and you take your job very seriously and your responsibilities seriously and you obviously take your responsibilities as a mother very seriously as well. So are there any sort of clashes between you wanting to do your job to the best of your ability and you wanting to be the best mother that you can be?

Hana’a: Yes, I think it is difficult with the woman she want to be an employee, to work. It is not simple or easy to be a mother and a wife and also to work, but the woman who wants to she can, I think, and I think also there are many examples in my society. There is my sister, she is a very good wife, she brings up her children – she has got three children, and she’s also a teacher. So she is a very good teacher I think. There are many women who I know that they are challenging their life being a good wife and also being good in their work. But first of all the woman’s husband should believe in her work and it is important, and maybe sometime her husband help then it’s the men’s role to help the women to continue and to go on in her work and that’s why the man should accept his woman’s work if she is an employee, especially if she has got a job. I think the husband who
helps his wife and sometimes he erm helps her even in the house, the wife erm can be very successful in her work because she has got support from her husband and also as a family it’s erm sometimes erm her family supports her. My sister has got very strong support from her husband. He is very proud of her and he is talking about her that she is very good teacher and he always talks about her. So I think the woman needs the man who stands besides her, supports her and encourages her so she can be a good wife and successful in her job and work.

Tanya: Were you working when you were married?

Hana’a: No, because I was just graduated from my university and I hadn’t even (received) my certificate but I was talking with my husband that I want to work. He was not erm he didn’t want me completely to work but he was saying okay when your certificate comes we will see. But I think our life now sometimes may make the men allow their wives to work because maybe some of the men their salary will not be enough to survive the family.

Tanya: Do you think your relationship with your husband might have been different if you’d been working when you were married?

Hana’a: No, because my relationship was judged by his mother already. In the first day…from the first day she didn’t accept me so she tried all what she can to make me escape from the house and hate the house and everything. So I think it’s not related to the job or something like that. She was telling me I want you to go to work, yes, all what she wanted. She wanted me to be far from my husband – in work or maybe in anywhere, to go anywhere. Her husband, my husband, wasn’t erm didn’t want me (to work). Maybe he will be convinced but not from the beginning to work. He has got bad ideas about the teacher or the female teacher, yes, I don’t know why.
Appendix B

Reader response prompt

I am a PhD student in the School of Education working with life histories. I am currently interested in how different readers respond to the same life story and I am writing to you now to ask for your help, by taking the time to read the extract from a life history below, and then immediately recording your responses to it and emailing them back to me as soon as possible.

It would help me greatly if you could also provide me with the following information in your email:
- gender
- age
- nationality
- professional occupation

This study will form the basis of a paper that I am due to give at the International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry (QI 2009) later this year, and I would be happy to send the finished paper to those who would like to read it (and maybe even respond to it!)

Extract from ‘The Life of N’

“Yes, in the beginning I am the second daughter in my family. I have got four [siblings], two sisters and two brothers. My father is a teacher of Arabic language and my mother is not an educated woman, but she can write and read well. I lived in Ma’alla in Aden for thirty two or thirty years and I was spoilt I think by my father. I was very close to him when I was a child, I taught, no I learnt from him teaching and I like to be a teacher since I was a child. Yes, because my father was encouraging me to help him, and in his work as a teacher, and I was collecting my neighbours, the children to teach them. I have a board, blackboard and chalks and I have also a notebook to write the marks and maybe every day I used to teach my neighbours and the children who visited us.

I got in the secondary school and I was very active in the school. I was in the first or second place, yes, in the school. My dream is to be a teacher or a doctor and after I graduated from the secondary school, I thought about the university and I wanted to join the university. In the beginning my mother she said “Oh no, you have to marry and the university will maybe delay your marriage”. And then I insist to join the university and my father encouraged me. I joined the department of English, English department in the college.”

Many thanks for your time and contribution!

Tanya Halldórsdóttir
12 February 2009
Reader response emails

Response 1

- gender (female)
- age (>57)
- nationality (Kenyan)
- professional occupation (Training with a medical background)

Extract from ‘The Life of N’

“Yes, in the beginning I am the second daughter in my family(., responding to 2 questions). I have got four [siblings], two sisters and two brothers. My father is a teacher of Arabic language and my mother is not an educated woman, but she can write and read well. I lived in Ma’alla in Aden for thirty two or thirty years and I was spoilt I think by my father (ambiguity, I think there is a deeper meaning in this statement). I was very close to him when I was a child, I taught, no I learnt from him teaching and I like to be a teacher since I was a child. Yes, because my father was encouraging me to help him, and in his work as a teacher sounds like expression of regret or just a reflection from the past and I was collecting my neighbours, the children to teach them. I have a board, blackboard and chalks and I have also a notebook to write the marks and maybe every day I used to teach my neighbours and the children who visited us a treasured time in their childhood?

I got in the secondary school and I was very active in the school. I was in the first or second place, yes, in the school was there a probe here? My dream is to be a teacher or a doctor and after I graduated from the secondary school, I thought about the university and I wanted to join the university. In the beginning my mother she said “Oh no, it seems the mother agreed after persuasion? you have to marry and the university will maybe delay your marriage”. And then I insist to join the university and my father encouraged me. I joined the department of English, English department in the college.”

The English grammar used indicates a second language – probably not well mastered

Response 2

Gender: Female
Age: 43
Nationality: British
Occupation: Psychotherapist

I noticed I was reading and looking for similarities to my own life, things I could relate to and found them in her family composition and in having a close paternal relationship. I was aware of differences, from the style of writing, grammar and command of the English language, and her upbringing. I think I was unconsciously trying to identify with the writer so as to empathise with her story. I couldn’t relate to her particular dream and realized how much I take for granted in respect of right to be independent and not conform to a gender role and access to education. I respected her struggle to get what she wanted and her real sense of vocation. Good luck!
Response 3

Parents play a great role in children's life. In this particular story the father is obviously a role model to the girl, not as in many may think to be 'the mother'. A career is more than a source of income, it can be a fulfillment of a childhood dream.

This lady is definitely confident of taking her career as a teacher, yes! This is a lively flowing narrative - read three 'yes'.

Response 4

I am a (white) British, female phd student (previously a youth worker), aged 38. I am also working with life stories, so I love to read them! This one made me think of my own children, I think that I am a parent of girls, and a daughter may be the most important influence on me as a reader. When the narrator talks about helping her father in the school, collecting the children, etc. I thought of the way my own children (aged 5 and 8) play schools. Gathering dolls together in their classes, where this girl gathered real children! And how priveleged our children's lives are in this country, but also how separete from us (they disappear to school, and we give over responsibility for thier welfare and education from an early age). She seems to have shared some of her education time with her father, and this has affected their relationship.

This girl seems to have a close relationship with her father, which has enabled her to go off to university. They say father's are very important if girls are to be able to succeed. It is interesting that it is her father, not her mother, who encourages her to go to university. Women often seem to work to maintain the status quo in society, even though it is them, and their daughters who would benefit from change. I find this difficult to stomach as a feminist, but also as a woman, who's experience tells her that it is men who resist changes in their personal lives, whilst women push things forwards. But perhaps this is just my life, or my culture!

I hope this is of some use to you. I'm not at all sure if it's what you wanted. Good luck with your paper.

Response 5

Male
British
In regards to you request for responses to the life story, I would always be eager to help a fellow Phd student, however I am unsure exactly what you are asking? I have no connection or indication as to the relevance of the story and as such, although I would like to help, I am unable to comment.
Response 6

Female
25
British
Trainee Educational Psychologist

Slightly difficult to follow due to irregularities in grammar/sentence structure
She sounds proud of her achievements and education
She sounds like a strong determined lady,
who is very grateful and proud of both her parents, for enabling her to achieve her
dream and get to university

Response 7

Hi Tanya, what an interesting idea! I am a male D.Couns. student who works as a
university teacher. I am 50 years old and am from an Irish background.

On reading the extract I was reminded first of all of the affection a daughter feels for a
father and the touching desire to emulate him and possibly gain his approval in doing so.
I also wondered if the interest in her fathers occupation represented natural curiosity
which was not there in relation to the mothers occupation, maybe because of some
excitement involved in being a teacher which wasn’t present in being a "mother". The
enthusiasm to follow an ambition is endearing in the young girl and structuring her play
around the teaching game is "cute" for want of a better word. I felt some anger and a
sense of injustice for some reason at the mothers desire to see the girl follow the path
that she herself had followed and then pleasure at hearing the father had not sided with
this "traditional"? view and had encouraged her to follow her ambitions.

I’m not sure if this is what you wanted but if you can use it good luck

Response 8

My information is: Female, 27, Greek, phd student.

The first thing that came to mind was how much emphasis is put in women to marry
and not to continue into education and even if they are allowed to continue into
education after they finish they are expected to marry and not practice a profession. I
also was a bit sceptical about how honest the girl in story was, especially about her
performance. I wasn’t sure if her being first was a result of her father pushing her to
over perform.
Response 9

Here is my immediate response to the excerpt I read.

Language: The story-teller must be a foreigner and not a very advanced speaker of English. I caught myself picking on errors (I think I do that with all kinds of texts - I am not a native-speaker of English myself and I am an English teacher)

Father is a teacher and mother is not an uneducated woman? That shows you the difference in gender status in the culture. Big family? I bet they are from the Middle East. This entire setting reminds me of my own girls - students in Qatar University.

Yes, they are. They live in the Middle East.

The girl can attend a university. Just like my girls - new generation of women growing in the Middle East. Still very traditional but they can get their education and can work.

Gender: Female  
Age: 45  
Nationality: Russian  
Profession: Teacher (at the moment, English teacher in the Middle East)

Those are immediate thoughts. If you have more specific questions, e-mail them to me.

Response 10

My immediate reaction is to think she was very brave. She says her mother had certain expectations but she challenged those and went on to become a teacher, which was something she had always wanted. Of course, the figure of the supporting father must have played a crucial role. I wonder what it was like for her to go against her mother’s wishes. It must be difficult to be told what to do with your life, and even more difficult to ignore that and go your own way! I say well done N.

- gender F  
- age 31  
- nationality Uruguayan  
- professional occupation Teacher of English as a foreign language
Response 11

After reading the extract I felt quite confused (read it only once) and did not know what to think. Who was talking, where was she (I presumed the person was a she) coming from, where was she living now? The language was quite basic. I don't know why either but the query of the person herself about how long she had been 'there', 32 or 30 years? Did I feel annoyed?

I would have liked to have known more about this person. There are many questions outstanding and many assumptions made when reading this. What is happening for her, what has happened, where is she now?

Anyway that is just my first spontaneous thought without thinking too much about it. Hope that is what you wanted and that it is helpful.

I am curious about the paper your are producing. Narrative analysis?


Response 12

My initial response is that it was very positive that the father helped and encouraged his daughter so much, even to the extent where he supported her application to university in the face of her mother’s objections. My preconceptions of Arabic fathers is that they do perhaps indulge their children but that seems not to have been any kind of problem in this case. My heart did sink somewhat when I started to read about the mother's view of university vis-à-vis marriage – my personal view is that everyone should be encouraged to pursue, and if possible get to the logical end, of their aptitudes. To have this denied by cultural norms and mores is, I think, one of the great sadesses. I know of a few of our female students who have reached the latter years of their degree, achieving a great deal, and are then obliged to drop out in order to marry and be with their husband in a different city. I object to this on at least two grounds: the false start of an education of the women who is then dragged away from it; and the lost opportunity of someone else who could have had this place. If this is going to happen, why bother?

In some senses this is a fairly amusing story, but I am glad that the narrator has been able to follow her desires. I wish there were more fathers like that!

I am male, 34 (next Tuesday), British, working as a HE administrator.
Response 13

Gender: Female
Age: 36
Nationality: Danish (of Egyptian origin)
Professional Occupation: (3rd year) PhD Student, School of Education, University of Manchester

The first thing that drew my attention was that this young lady has a positive view towards her family, so she talks about her father as being a teacher but she also talks about her mother who although not being educated, she affirms that she can write and read well. She talks more in depth about her relationship with her father, how he used to spoil her, and how she learnt from him, and how he encouraged her and towards the second part of this passage we understand that even he helped shape her dreams, so she said 'my dream is to be a teacher or a doctor'. It seems that this young lady also has the opportunity to pursue her dreams despite some of the views that her mother had like getting married or that the university might be an obstacle in the way, but she insists and the role of the father comes in again to encourage her to pursue these dreams. So the main point that drew my attention was the positive outlook towards the family and the role of her father in shaping her dreams.
Appendix C

Event and Telling Narratives

Hana’a 1: University

Event
Since I was nearly eight I have suffered from asthma. I couldn't run or play like the other children. A little effort was enough to make me get sick, so I had to be absent for many days. However, I was always brilliant and hardworking in my class. I wanted to be something important one day and did my best to get high marks at the secondary school. On the other hand, our traditions as (Tarimis) didn't approve girls to continue with their university education. According to our traditions in Tarim, girls get married after the eighth or ninth class. However, most of the Tarimi people who live in Aden allow their girls to join the secondary school. Girls who had not the chance to get married or in other words who were not asked for marriage, had to stay and wait at home till they get engaged. The scholastic year was about to start and I had two choices: to continue with my education and join the university which was against our traditions or to stay at home waiting for somebody to come knocking at my door and asking for my hand. At that time our financial affairs were not very good. We were four children and my father had to support us all. In addition he was a qat chewer. I knew that my education might put more strain on my family but it would make them proud of me. My mother actually was not so happy about that. She knew how our society looked at an educated woman. They think she is proud, spoiled and bad at housework. She was afraid that my chances of marriage would be less. On the other hand my father had a restrained and reserved attitude as usual. He supported me at the beginning. In the final year of my secondary school when we were asked to fill in a form for the specialization that we wanted to study at university, he encouraged me to choose the English department. So I considered his next silence an approval. I felt that it was my own decision. It was the first decision I made on my own. There was a little conflict and hesitation inside me, but it did not last for a long time. I felt that joining the university would open new doors for me to a hopeful future. And I decided to go through them.

That year was different from the other years. We had not sat for the acceptance exam because of the civil war that happened between the north and the south of Yemen. The scholastic year had been postponed as a result. In the college I was a very shy student, but diligent. Sometimes I had to borrow or write instead of photocopying or buying leaflets for I did not have enough money. And I was not the only one. There were some very good students who struggled to get educated.

Telling narrative
Amani was my best friend at college. I knew her from secondary school, but we got closer later in my first year at college. In that year, we had an afternoon shift, so we went home in the evening. In fact it was a tiring shift especially since we had to get home by bus and it took a bit a long time to arrive. Amani’s area was quite near my own, so we took the same bus when getting home. We used to talk and chat in the bus, for we had to wait till it became full. Amani told me about her family and her struggling mother. I also told Amani about my story when I decided to join the college. I said to her how difficult it is for a girl – in our traditions – to join the
university. Amani was really from that kind of people who makes you feel released. She was a good listener for me and that is what I really needed. I felt that she was sharing my feelings and she understood me. The bus at that time was not a very good place to talk about such things. However, as soon as we got on the bus we started to release as if we were the only people in it. Sometimes we had a good comfortable bus with good lights.

Reflection
I told my friend Amani this memory because it was really boring to wait till the bus got the full number of passengers, so we used to talk to get to know more about each other. In addition, we used to leave the college in the evening. At that time of day we felt that we needed to relax and release after a long and tiring day, so it was a good idea to find a close friend and tell her some things about my life. I was with Amani nearly all the time at college, we were always either having a pre or post discussion about the lectures, but when we were on the bus, we could think of and share other things apart from the college materials.

I think that talking about that memory made it clearer and more explicit. When I was talking to Amani, she shared some of my opinions and sometimes she had different points of view about things. When telling it I could see my memory from different sides and that comforted me, for it was the first time I had talked about that subject. In addition Amani’s response was very supportive and encouraging.

If I was going to tell somebody else about the same memory, it wouldn’t be in the same way that I told my friend Amani! There were many common things between us, so she could understand many things I was telling her with no need for explanation!

I also think that I would be less affected by that event than I was at that time when it was fresh. More important events happened to me after it and I am much more affected by them.

Hana’a 2: Marriage

Event
I was at the end of my fourth year at university when my elder sister told me that somebody wanted to affiance me. He was not one of my kin. I had not even heard about his family although he was from Tarim (most of the Tarimi families know each other). He lived in Al-Shaher in Mukalla and worked for the national oil company there. He had a simple position for he had not finished his study. He had only the secondary school degree. He was the only son of his mother after she has been divorced from his father since he was very young. He started working as soon as he finished his secondary school to support himself and his mother. My parents asked some people who knew him about his conduct and behaviour. I thought him a struggling independent person and I accepted his proposal. One of his relatives (she acted as mediator between us) told me that he was very faithful to his mother and I thought it a good feature, but I discovered later that it could be very bad one.
It was September and the wedding was agreed to be two months later. During that time I prepared myself like any bride. At that time I had not received my college certificate yet (we are given our certificate at the end of the year). I was worried about that a bit because I had to go to Al-Shaher after marriage. I talked to my fiancé. He was very gentle with me at that time and relieved my worry. The wedding was held on the 11th November 1998. A couple of days later I flew with my parents to Al-Shaher whereas my husband went with his mother by bus because his mother will not board a plane!!!!! It was really the first thing that bothered me, to travel with my parents without him. As soon as we arrived there, I felt that I did not like the way she looked at me. I also heard some whispers between my husband and his mother about me. However he was very polite and kind to me and my parents. On the third day my parents had to return to Aden. And then my tragedy began, because my mother in law started to unveil her real face! I discovered that my husband was a puppet in his mother's hands. She was controlling him in everything. He was taking orders from her and consulting her even in his private affairs! Actually I was shocked when I saw such an odd relationship. She told frankly me that she did not like me. And although I knew that she detested me, I did my best to obtain her cordiality, but without success. I suffered a lot of non human treatment. My husband had a very passive attitude towards all of that! He believed that his mother had the right to do anything and I had to tolerate it. After six months of suffering and endurance I became sure that my marital life could not last any longer. At that time I was pregnant and in my fifth month. I wished my baby could grow up with a father and a mother like any baby, but I believed that it was my and his fate! I gave birth to my baby four months after going back to Aden. A month later, I got my divorce.

It was really a very painful experience and it affected me for quite a long time, but I learned a lot from it. It gave a birth to a new stronger woman inside me.

**Telling narrative**

Staying in accommodation with friends or colleagues is really an exciting thing! When I went to Sana’a for the first time I was not relaxed, for many reasons, the accommodation was bad enough to make us feel sick and so we tried to create a bit of fun to forget our sufferings! There were also some other girls from different departments who shared the same place with us. We gathered sometimes and chatted, but mostly I gathered with my colleagues who were with me on the same course Balquis, Samia and Anisa.

I knew nothing about each one’s story and how she got divorced before that night! And I found out for the first time that Samia was also divorced though she was my classmate for four years at college! We sat together that night and decided to tell each other our experiences in marriage and how it failed! Balquis started and I was so affected while I was listening to her. I felt that she had suffered a lot, but she was still strong. Then it was my turn. It was not my first time to talk about that experience and tell somebody about it, but my feelings were different that time! I felt that I could release to somebody who could understand me because they had lived through similar situations. And I remembered when I listened to everyone’s story that saying that a person who listens to other people’s misfortunes, his own trouble becomes easier. At the end, it was Anisa’s turn. But to our surprise, she refused to tell us anything and she said that we should not talk about such painful things and remember them. We should enjoy our time and talk about lovely things.
At that time I felt that Anisa’s hurt was still bleeding and she hadn’t forgotten it enough to be able to talk about it. And I thanked Allah for having this ability! Some days later Anisa told me her story, but we were alone!

**Reflection**

When I told my colleagues the story of my marriage it was an opportunity to get close to each other by knowing more about each other. I felt that I wanted to share my experiences with them especially when I discovered that they were divorced too!

I think that telling that story made it clearer and helped me to understand it more. In addition, I could feel the more importance of it and its effect on my life, particularly when I listened to my colleagues’ comments and their stories as well. I was really comfortable and relaxed while telling that story mainly because I felt that my listeners were the people who would most understand my sufferings and all the challenges that I faced.

I think that I may tell this story to somebody else at another time, but it won’t be in the same way. I think my feelings will be different and that is because of many reasons related to the place maybe, the people who were listening and my mood at that time.

**Hana’a 3: Moving to Tarim**

**Event narrative**

I am originally from Tarim. My parents left Tarim for Aden when I was only two and my older sister was six. My mother gave birth to my other brothers and sisters in Aden. We lived in a small apartment on the fifth floor in Ma’alla Street. It was a lively energetic street. Every thing we needed was near us and was easy to get. Schools, shops and supermarkets, bus and taxi station, clinics and pharmacies, telephone and internet centres, mosques and so on. Thinking about moving to Tarim came actually after my family faced several obstacles. But my father started to think seriously of moving when he retired. He started to feel lonely for most of our kin live in Tarim. He might have thought that he had to go back to his land and his origin. I had been a teacher in one of the primary schools in Ma’alla and was surrounded by lovely friends. I had financial independence and I liked to do everything for me or my daughter by myself. I had been to Tarim before and I had an idea about life there. That’s why I firmly rejected moving.

At the end of 2006 my mother felt sick of a psychological crisis. She had a strong depression because of several ordeals that she had passed through. The last one was her sister’s death. I felt pain when I saw her in that state. I tried to help her to overcome her tribulation, but all the time I believed that I could not do it alone. She was in need of support from her close relatives and all of them were in Tarim. In January 2007 I was attending a course in which I was very interested. At that time my mother was making a very slow response to the doctor’s treatment. My father opened the same subject again about moving to Tarim. That time I did not argue like the previous times. It was my mother who asked me to agree. She wanted to be
close to her mother, sister and elder daughter and to change her surroundings. I started to think seriously about moving and discussed it with my family. My father wanted to sell our apartment in Aden and build a big new house in Tarim. Our apartment in Aden was too small. He told us that our life in Tarim would be much better and more convenient. I was not happy. I felt anxious and sorrowful. I had never imagined that I would leave Aden. How could I change my life? How could I quit my school, my students, my colleagues and all the people who I loved? I was also very sorry about missing the second part of the course that I should be doing in Aden at the time of our leaving. I felt that I had missed a valuable opportunity. We moved to Tarim on the 17th May 2007. Our first days there were full of work. We were organizing our new house and preparing for my brother's wedding. Only two weeks after the wedding I received a call from a friend telling me that I was invited to attend a course in Sana'a. I felt that I still had opportunities in life and it was not over.

More than three years now have passed since we have moved here. I can not say that my life is better or worse than before, I believe that a human being can not get everything he wants. Living in Tarim has some positive sides which we can not perceive if we only think about modern and urban life.

**Telling narrative**

To find somebody who can understand us does not always happen. When we pass difficult situations and new experiences in our life, we feel that we need somebody who can listen to us and understand us. That's exactly what happened to me after moving to Tarim. I was in need of that person. I missed my friends in Aden. Inside me were feelings of loneliness, although there were people all around me.

In July 2008 I went with my daughter to Aden. It was my first visit after moving to Tarim. It was a really marvellous feeling. In Aden I met all my relatives, friends and colleagues. I missed them all and I had lovely times with them. When I went to Ma’alla (my own street) I felt that I could breathe better. However the weather was hot at that time! Immediately I went towards my old building and climbed the stairs. I stopped at the third floor. When I was standing at that door I recalled all lovely memories with my favourite neighbour and friend, Nada, who lives in that flat. She was three years younger than me and she came to live in our building only three years before we moved, but we became very close friends. I stayed at her home for about four hours. We talked about many things and I told her about Tarim and my new life there.

During that time, Nada was listening to me, but I felt that she was not completely with me as usual! Nada's behaviour was unexpected especially after that period of being away from her, I felt that she was not the close friend that I knew! But after a while she told me something that surprised me! She was going to get married soon. Nada was divorced with a son and at that time she was very anxious and worried about what would happen to her son when she got married. When I knew that I forgave her for her inattention to me and I tried to relieve her worry especially after she told me that her fiancé was a good person.
Reflection
I was very happy when I was climbing the stairs of my old building. I felt that my heart leapt up. I relived many memories at that moment. When I arrived at my friend’s door, I wanted to go on climbing to have a look at our old flat, but I couldn’t. About thirteen months had passed since I left Aden and everything in it, so after this long period I was eager to tell somebody about my experiences after moving to Tarim. And I felt that Nada was that person to whom I could release [talk freely?]. I had only known her for three years, however, I used to tell her and talk to her about everything. I respected her opinions and comments and I asked her for advice sometimes. She did the same.

At that time Nada was not in her best situation, she was not listening to me carefully as usual. So I was not actually comfortable while talking. I felt that I needed to stop. By the way she tried to show me interest, but I knew that something was worrying her. I can’t deny that there were some comments from her which made me feel the importance of some of the events that had happened to me, but they were not as I had expected.

I think that I couldn’t tell somebody else about my memory unless she is a near friend who understands me well. And maybe it wouldn’t be in the same way. At that time I was still affected by leaving Aden and my life there, but now I will tell it after many things that I have achieved and done in my new life.

Noor I: Break in

Event
What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. This exactly applies to what happened to me 11 years ago. I was teaching in Taiz, and had Salma, 7 years who was in 2nd grade (afternoon) and Omar, 4 years. I used to have a regular schedule, leaving the house at 6.45am and coming back at 10.30am. My husband leaves the house at 8am and locks the door leaving the children asleep. I woke them up when I got back for breakfast. Punctuality might be a disadvantage sometimes. A thief benefited from it. It was clear that she had been watching us for a period of time to make her feel safe enough to get into the house. She knocked the door, telling Salma that she’s a friend of mine and that I sent her to get my money and my gold. Poor Salma told her that my cupboard was locked, and she didn’t have the keys. When she lost hope, she asked about clothes, Salma helped her to find what she wanted. I came home finding the cupboards’ doors open and stuff thrown here and there. Knowing what had happened was a shock, actually it was a disaster. At that moment all I cared about was the safety of my kids, I didn't think at all about what was taken no matter how precious it was.

There was a constant dispute between my husband and I about settling in Aden. I always wanted to move while he didn't. But when push comes to shove, I and only I decided to take my children and leave. From that day till the day I moved, (about 3 months) my helpful and kind neighbours took care of my children.
Settling in Aden was a great leap forward in my career. With the help of my beloved and caring parents, I could focus on my work, there was someone there whenever I needed help. Nothing in the world compares to having caring parents who support, help and make ones life easier.

Now I have my own house and I’m sharing the same yard with my parents. Salma finished high school with high marks and waiting to admit university. Omar is in grade nine, a good athlete (tennis player). Marwa, my last child is in second grade who I think will become a great artist.

My husband is still in Taiz, he comes every now and then to see us. Al-hamdulillah, things are going fine, I’m putting all my efforts on achieving my aims - being successful in my career and to bring up stable, good children who are able to function effectively in life.

**Telling**
The first person to think of after the robbery was my mom. Although I badly needed someone to talk to, I didn’t rush to the phone to tell her about what had happened. I waited till I calmed down then I rang her in the evening on the same day. Mama was quiet and listened to me carefully. Talking to her made me feel better; it was like a vent to my anxiety and anger.

Being able to share your feelings with someone you love is great. Mama reassured me that everything will be fine and what we really needed to think of was the safety of the children.

I understand that this is life, good and bad things happen and what is important is what we learn from it. It was a hard lesson that woke me up to take the next step, the step that had been delayed for quite a long period of time; however it was taken at the end for the best of my children.

**Reflection**
My mom was the perfect person to talk to about what had happened on that day. Everything was still fresh and I needed someone to listen to me on the same day. I felt disturbed and lost. Sharing my bad experience with my mom was such a relief. Being able to think in a loud voice and to disclose your feelings with someone you trust is great.

There’s a verse in the Holy Qur’an that says “It may be that you dislike a thing which is good for you and that you like a thing which is bad for you. Allah knows but you don’t know” Reminding myself with this verse helped to calm me down.

I understand that there are some challenging situations in one’s life, and the way we respond to them determines how our coming days will look like. I learnt afterwards that there are positives in the negatives. Then I concluded that all what had happened (the negative) was a reason to take the decision of settling in Aden, where I found security for my kids and myself (the positive).
That memory was one that I wanted to keep for myself. I left Taiz and nobody knew the reason for that. May be it was the sense of guilt that kept me silent. I blamed my husband and myself for all what had happened.

Now it's my ninth year in Aden, and it wasn't until a couple of years [ago] that I felt that I want to unpack my negative baggage by sharing that experience with Salma, my eldest daughter. She's the one who experienced the incident, and to my surprise I found that she still remembers nearly everything. Coming to know that she wasn't afraid on that day comforted me a lot. It helped to release me from the sense of guilt I carried for the passing years. To me, fear is the worst thing a child can face.

Al-hamdulillah, now I'm less sensitive about that memory, and I don't mind sharing it with others. I've tried it and it worked. The more I tell it, the more relaxed I am.

Noor 2: Sand Dunes

Event
One cannot deny the impact of early childhood days on one's life. One of the many unforgettable memories was my family picnics to the sand dunes. We used to go there every other month, and especially when it is full moon. Going there was great fun to me, I enjoyed playing and racing with my cousins. Having sand baths were cheerful, but rolling down the sand dunes was the most enjoyable and exciting part. Every one of us had to come up with a new idea for rolling down the sand dunes. We were really funny, silly but creative. That soft and cool touch of the sand is unforgettable. We used to stay there till the moon appears and shines the sky.

It is family tradition that is still kept for over 30 years. Becoming fathers and mothers we are still keen on doing the same with our children, and being in my forties, I feel as if I'm a child of 10 when I'm there. I still enjoy climbing up and rolling down the sand dunes, although it requires a lot of effort as I'm heavier now. The sunset there is amazing, watching the sun going down gradually and disappearing below the horizon, where there are no boundaries, where the land meets the sky, it's really unbelievable.

Having the same experience in different times of my life, made me think about myself as a child. All I was interested in was playing. The sunset and the shining moon didn't attract my attention. As a child I thought it was good that the moon was there, as it meant more time for playing.

Telling
That was the fifth day on Mentoring Course in Sana’a (8 August 2007). On that day we were asked to write our own metaphor about mentoring and to illustrate it in drawing. Since I'm not good at drawing, I chose a compass, which can be easily illustrated.

Abdul Karim, who is skillful, drew a wonderful scene of the full moon with its light reflected on the sand dunes. I can't remember what his metaphor was, but I still remember the illustration. It was a masterpiece.
When sharing our ideas in pairs I told Abdul Karim that sand dunes mean a lot to me. I recalled my childhood memories going to the sand dunes and told him that it's a family tradition that is still kept for over 30 years. Abdul Karim liked the idea, but he was surprised because it never came to his mind that it's a place where people can go and enjoy themselves. Many people have the same idea and unless they go there they won't change their mind.

In fact I can't only remember this exact day, the whole mentoring course is memorable. Every single day on that course was special. It was one of the most enjoyable and informative courses I attended. The subject of the course, the useful knowledge, the techniques, the enjoyable company, and the place were all unforgettable. Three years have passed, however I still remember it as if it was yesterday.

**Reflection**

Abdul Karim's drawing was the reason to recall the sand dunes memory and to tell him about it on that day. It's one of the memories I like sharing with others, though it sounds strange to some of them that how we enjoy going to such a place. They consider us a daring family being able to spend long hours in that deserted place!! Some of them find it silly sitting there watching the sunset and playing on the sand dunes. I understand it's all about family traditions, likes and dislikes. To us the concept of family involved all our close and distant relatives, so actually we were one big family. We are accustomed to going to the sand dunes and accepted it as normal, because we were raised in that typical family. As children we were longing for those scheduled outings, because they were different and special.

I consider myself lucky comparing my childhood to my children's. My parents used to spend more time with us than we (as parents) do now with our kids. Life was easier and less demanding. I was content and happy.

The sand dunes memory is only one of plenty of other beautiful memories I had. That memory had a great importance in my life, it made me value and feel the importance of family ties.

Nowadays, in our fast moving world, being busy trying to keep a good standard of life, I'm really keen on passing the same values and behaviours to my children.
Appendix D

Voice-Centred Relational Data Analysis (VRDA)

In this appendix I want to demonstrate the voice-centred relational approach to data analysis (see framework below) that I used to create the multiple readings presented in Chapter 5 which reveal the multiple and sometimes conflicting subjectivities of my story tellers.

<table>
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<th>Voice-centred relational approach</th>
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<td>1. Reading for plot and our responses to the narrative</td>
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<td>What are the main events, the protagonists, the subplots?</td>
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<td>Which words, images and metaphors re-occur?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How am I located socially in relation to the storyteller?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How do I respond emotionally and intellectually to the story?</td>
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<td>2. Reading for the voice of ‘I’</td>
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<tr>
<td>“How she speaks of herself before we speak of her” (Brown &amp; Gilligan 1992: 27)</td>
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<td>How does the woman experience, feel and speak about herself?</td>
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<td>When does she use I, we, you?</td>
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<td>3. Reading for relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>How do women speak of their relationships, with husbands, parents, children, colleagues and friends?</td>
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<td>Which are apparently sources of support and comfort, which are perceived as negative?</td>
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<td>4. Reading for cultural contexts and social structures</td>
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<td>How do women experience the particular social context from within which they are speaking (this includes dominant and normative conceptions of women’s roles)?</td>
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Figure 1. Voice-centred relational approach to data analysis
As I consider the recordings of the interviews to be my primary data source, I worked with those recordings as well as the transcripts whilst conducting the four readings. I found that listening to them whilst reviewing and developing my analysis kept the environs, emotions and events fresh in my mind, and allowed me to check my interpretations against the recordings to keep them 'real'.

Although the account of the implementation of the VRDA that follows is linear for the sake of clarity, it was in fact a highly iterative process, as I visited and revisited the data frequently to develop each reading, coming to new understandings as a result of my many ‘conversations’ with the data. The holistic nature of the approach means that there are inevitably overlaps between the readings, and whenever I was struck by epiphanies that might sit comfortably in several of the readings, I annotated my notes to that effect. On reviewing the analysis and particularly those ideas that re-occurred, I tried to ensure that in each reading I was engaging with a slightly different aspect and adding richness and complexity to the portraits being built up.

**Reading 1**

**Reading for the plot**

In this initial reading, the first task is to identify the plot, the main events, protagonists and subplots. In order to identify the plot and dramatis personae, I first read the transcripts whilst listening to the recordings and made notes of everything that struck me, as illustrated below:
Notes on first pass

Father (lines 2 & 4) is already looming large
Role-model & mentor (line 5 & 6)
Role-playing as a child (lines 8 & 9)
Mother championing traditional role (lines 14/15)
Pressure to get married (lines 28/29)
Lack of options - no way out (line 34)
Sense of ascribed identity(line 48)
Ability to help empowering (lines 83/85)
Surprise at the ability to help others? (line 85)
Support of family again to be independent (line 87)
Importance of family rather than facilities when mother is sick though it means
distancing her from better medical care! (line 128)
‘Have to’ participate in society (of women?) (line 146)
Expectation that she would leave her daughter if she remarried (lines 187/9)

*Recurring theme: boundaries between child and woman
*Something of an obsession with marriage! Fears for her own daughter perhaps?

Figure 2. Reading 1: Extract from notes on first interview with Hana’a

As I read each transcript I made a list of the people mentioned, and the order in
which they appeared, and annotated that list with adjectives that were used to
describe the individuals or anything that struck me about the ways in which they
were being positioned, as illustrated below:

Characters (in order of appearance)
Father (line 2) Arabic teacher
Mother (line 2) not educated but can read and write well
Neighbours (line 8)
Relatives (line 28)
Husband (line 30) not a bad man
Mother-in-law (line 31) everything bad
Daughter, Khadija (line 50) all my life
Sisters (line 52) very helpful
Brothers (line 52) very helpful
Friends (line 66) teachers
Cousins (line 66) doctors and teachers
The initial stages of this interview suggest that her parents are the chief protagonists in her story, and that key events in her life are related to family, both of which are borne out by the study of the interviews in their entirety (see Chapter 5. Section 3). During this first pass I was also searching for recurring words and ideas that might constitute elements of the plot, and as I read I was struck by four emerging motifs; the ‘Battle of the sexes’, education, employment and self-sufficiency. In order to check my impressions I examined the texts to see how often items from those four lexical sets occurred. Using the ‘Find’ function on Word, I first searched for all instances of gender related binaries under the broadly defined category ‘family’ i.e. man/woman, mother/father, husband/wife, bride/groom etc. Woman/women was the single most common noun (110) followed by man/men (96) mother/mother-in-law (50) father (46) family (40) husband/s (31) wife (23) wedding (12) and bride (7). Married appeared 82 times, and combined with marry and marriage, appeared 133 times in all. I then searched for words in the lexical set ‘education’ and between them education, university, school and studies appear 117 times in total, with teach and all its derivatives including her specific role as a teacher referenced 56 times. Looking for items related to ‘employment’ I found work/working mentioned 90 times and jobs 19. Looking for evidence of ‘self-sufficiency’, the idea of being able to help herself and others occurred 13 times. Hana’a asserts her knowledge and abilities overtly, with the phrase I can appearing 37 times in stark contrast to the negative construction which only arose 7 times, and usually in the context of her being unwilling to conform to expectations, rather than describing restrictions imposed upon her. There was a lot of what could be classified as fighting talk, challenge (4), difficult (16) I fought a lot but
I should prove myself and a comparatively limited number of mentions of her experiencing negative emotional states, sad (3), angry (3) and disappointed (1). I have used a wordle to illustrate this (see Chapter 5. Section 3.1.3).

As I wanted to verify that my focus had not been unduly influenced by my own pre-occupations rather than Hana’a’s, I checked my findings by uploading the transcripts into the concordancing programme AntConc (Anthony 2011). I used the wordlist to definitively establish the most frequently occurring lexical items and the concordancer to check the most common collocations associated with those words. The wordlist and concordancing tools largely supported the motifs I had identified but also drew my attention to the frequency with which the word think appeared. I had noted that the life of the mind was of great importance to Hana’a, but not realised that think was in fact the single most common verb (excluding be and have) appearing 140 times in total, the majority of which (92) were in the first person explaining how Hana’a views her world, and particularly the status of women within it.

As a manifestation of the status of women, Hana’a focuses on relationships between women and men and the practice of early marriage and motherhood in Hadramawt on girls is a particular preoccupation, as the following extracts illustrate:

*I think in Hadramawt life is different because the girls there are educated only to the 8th class or the 9th class and they have to be married after that.*

*It’s tradition and this is something which is fixed in this society and there are also some people who say that … from a religious view it is better for the girls to be married very young. It’s safe for her (laughs) I heard something like that, really it’s horrible (laughs).*

*The girls get engaged at 12 or 13 and they hold the wedding party after two or three years and some of the girls haven’t matured physically when they get married (laughs) It’s horrible.*
According to their thinking, it's a kind of love to be married at this age and they compete, the families they compete to get their daughters married young (collapses in gales of laughter).

I think that it is a great injustice to get these young, very young girls married at this age but they said no, it’s okay they did not refuse, they can be married and they can be wives.

When my brother got married he got married to a very young girl, it's their tradition. He got married to a girl of fifteen and she’s a very good girl and I empathize with her and (laughs) I feel that I’m like a mother to her.

The big problem is to have a child after a year of her marriage. That's a very, very big problem because she herself is a child, how can she take care of a child?

Hearing Hana’a’s frequent bouts of laughter whilst she recounted many of these details is a marker of how alien she finds these practices, even those in which her own family participate and is also perhaps a way of managing her own fears for as she freely admits “I’m afraid for my daughter really”. Her solution is twofold:

I’m trying to change this view that the girl should marry at 14 or 15 and I’ve decided to educate my daughter and to get her a very good education and that’s because it will help us, it will help her in her life.

Hana’a concedes that challenging tradition is very, very difficult and she is uncertain how to go about it:

Really I’m trying to know or to understand their thinking and to speak with them, especially with the old women, and ask them why do you get your daughters married so young?

I do not know how to change the way these people think, but I’m trying and insha’allah I will try, I will try my best to convince them.
It is clear from the above that Hana’a not only recognises herself as different (the subplot) but is acting upon that difference in a positive fashion, challenging herself not only to live in what is in many ways an alien environment, but also positioning herself as a change agent within it, all key elements of the plot.

**My responses to the narrative**

The second step of the first reading was to document my own responses to the stories told, as “in analysing data we are confronted with ourselves, and with our own central role in shaping the outcome” influenced as we are “by our own personal, political and theoretical biographies” (Mauthner & Doucet 1998: 122). After reading the transcripts and listening to the recordings a number of times I responded to each text at length in a free writing exercise, which largely captured my social and emotional responses. I then edited my rather colourful and emphatically punctuated text (see below) into the more sober paragraphs presented in Chapter 5, wondering as I did so why ‘legitimate’ expressions of emotion in this context still felt like transgressive data in academic terms?

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**I relate to...**

Going to a convent from the age of about 5, but as one of only two Protestants I was labelled a ‘heathen’ by the oldest nuns in the community (born in the late 1800s!) damned to eternal hellfire, and punished for the sins of my Catholic peers. As my mother worked in the City, I had to stay behind at school until she came to pick me up, and spent many of those hours on my knees in the chapel listening to the Latin mass (no get-out-of-mass card for me!).

Reverend Mother and the youngest sister were kind however, and I cherished those rare occasions when I was invited into Reverend Mother’s office for a chat, or was sneaked into the kitchen for a slice of bread and jam! Like Noor, I learnt discipline and good behaviour - winning the good conduct cup in my final year with the nuns, before we moved to Colchester where I attended a Church of England school, and managed to retain my place at the top table until my 11+ result secured my place at grammar school.

**Figure 4. Reading 1: Extract from my free writing responses to Noor’s second interview**
As religion, education and family play a defining role in my own life it is not surprising that I was alert to these aspects of the stories told by Hana’a and Noor. I do however have an ambivalent relationship with the systems of control that these entities can sometimes represent, and they have all been sites in which my voice has been positioned as resistant. By definition, a resistant voice has not been silenced, and so I am naturally drawn to situations where women speak out on their own behalf or that of others, but I am also conscious that agency can be manifested in many ways, which a dichotomous view of voice as merely resistant/silent can obscure, and aware of the need to search for silences and absences in the text.

Reading 2: Voice

Reading for I

Having identified the plot and the people who feature in it, and engaged reflexively with them by laying out “the evidence of our responses for others to see” (Mauthner & Doucet 1998: 128) in the first set of readings, the focus in the second set is on creating space to allow the woman to speak for herself. The first step is to focus on how the woman uses I, so I began by highlighting all occurrences of the pronoun I in the transcripts, as illustrated in the short extract from Noor’s transcript below:

I am not less than any of the men, yes I feel myself much better than them, yes – aiwa no really! I want to be a good mother for my kids, yes, I’m a mother and still a mother, I’m hard working, I can get them money, even if their father is not with them all the time, I can still do it, yes. And I am really satisfied with what I am doing, yes even though it’s not traditional.

Figure 5. Reading 2: I statements in an extract from Noor’s transcript

I then created a new document composed entirely of Noor’s I statements, listed in the order in which they originally appeared, as illustrated below:
This allowed me to focus on what each women was saying about herself, the language in which she was expressing her ideas and how often particular topics occurred. As I read and re-read these lists in tandem with the complete transcripts, I annotated them and created memos, recording my thoughts as to their significance and identifying potential themes.

The statements above suggest that Noor’s identities as a mother and professional are of great importance to her, and I was struck by the fact that while she says she sees herself as a mother ‘more’ than a professional, in the next breath she says she ‘likes’ being a mother but really ‘loves’ her job as an inspector. Noor’s work ethic, ambition and pride in her achievements are also much in evidence as is her awareness of difference, both from her less conscientious (and predominantly male) colleagues and the majority of mothers.

Once I had studied the statements in the order that they occurred and created a set of companion memos, I then created a new document in which I grouped the
statements thematically and linguistically, as I illustrate below (with the same sample):

**Motherhood**
- I see myself as a mother more than myself at work
- I like being a mother
- I want to be a good mother for my kids
- I’m a mother and still a mother

**Work and achievement orientation**
- I really love it (my job as an inspector)
- I am in it … and I try to do my best
- I am trying to improve myself to be what I want to be at work
- I want to be successful
- I have many things to do, yes
- I never stay at home, I work the whole week
- I’m hard working

**Markers of difference**
- I am really satisfied with what I am doing even though …it’s not traditional
- I know that some of my friends and my colleagues stay at home and fill anything in on their timetable or whatever, but it is against my principles - either be in it or leave it *helas*

**Second class citizen?**
- I don’t want to feel that I’m less than others or that I can’t work as others
- I don’t want them to say that Noor is not working hard or that she’s lazy or …
- I am not less than any of the men
- I feel myself much better than them, yes – *aiwa* no really!

**Ability**
- I can get them money, even if their father is not with them all the time
- I can still do it

**Desire**
- I want to be a good mother for my kids
- I am trying to improve myself to be what I want to be at work
- I want to be successful

*Figure 7. Reading 2: Sample list of themes identified in Noor’s I statements*

Once I had completed this process for all the transcripts, it was apparent in Noor’s case that the three voices in which she expresses herself most frequently are those of mother, professional and *Muslimah* (Chapter 5. Section 8). It also revealed competition or conflict between those voices, as Noor-the-Mother (elsewhere in
the transcript) says ‘I hate leaving the house’ for example whilst Inspector Noor here says ‘I never stay at home’, although she could, not only because her colleagues do so as a matter of course, but because her brother would happily support her. Insights such as these fed back into and informed the ‘Contradictions’ section of Reading 1 (Chapter 5. Section 7.3) as well as Reading 2.

Reading for We

I followed the same procedure to identify the groups which the women claimed membership of by virtue of their use of the pronoun we, first highlighting the we statements in the transcripts and then extracting them as described above. Having annotated the lists and recorded my perceptions in memo form, I then categorised the statements as illustrated below using Noor’s data:

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>We</strong></td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natal family</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuclear family</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Muslim Society</strong></td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslims</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Society</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female friends</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellow teachers</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education system</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To me directly</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The South</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 8. Reading 2: Noor’s use of We*

These figures suggest that Noor’s primary identification is with her family or bayt and that she sees herself as an active participant in Yemeni society, which she understands as Islamic, although she is disappointed by the failure of men in
particular, and society at large to behave in accordance with Muslim ideals. The sphere of education is the other major in-group of which Noor claims membership, and if the statements addressing me and our joint endeavours in educational reform were to be included, then it would in fact be the second most frequently invoked group (Chapter 5. Section 8.2).

**Reading for You**

I followed the same procedure to identify and analyse all of the you statements in the transcripts. Both women used the pronoun you regularly, according to the wordlist in *Antconc* (Anthony 2011) it was the 16th most common word in Hana’a’s text and the 27th most common in Noor’s and they used it in a similar fashion, that is in discussion of normative behaviour, reported speech and appeals to shared knowledge. Many of Hana’a’s examples of reported speech (Chapter 5. Section 4.3) also reflect normative behaviour, particularly regarding marriage as illustrated below:

In the beginning my mother she said “Oh no, you have to marry and the university will maybe delay your marriage”.

Some of my relatives told me “Oh you have to marry. It’s very late for you to stay without marriage”

“You are now 23 or 24 years old and you have to marry. He’s a very good man, without faults”

After 20 if she’s still single…people look at her as something very pitiful…and they pray for her, “May Allah make you marry”

By way of contrast, Noor uses reported speech to demonstrate her own agency or give immediacy to affectively charged situations (see Chapter 5. Section 8.3).

**Reading 3**

**Relationships**

In the third reading which focuses on relationships and their facilitating or constraining function, I explored *relationships with individuals* first, using the list of characters created in Reading 1. In a variation on the method described above, I followed each person through the text using a highlighter pen, and extracted
information that I felt offered insight into the nature of the relationship and the role it played in each woman’s life. Having assembled all the relevant data for each individual, I annotated the text as I read and re-read it, essentially embedding my analytic memos, as illustrated below:

**Father (overwhelmingly positive, key facilitator)**

- Mentioned first and repeatedly, key influence and gate-keeper
- A teacher of Arabic (suggests high status, and a conservative outlook)
- Spoilt by him
- Close to him
- I learned teaching from him and I’ve always wanted to be a teacher
- was encouraging me to help him in his work as a teacher
- I insisted on going to university and my father encouraged me

Role-model, choosing to model herself on him, rather than her stay-at-home mother, already appreciating the relative freedom and perhaps status conferred on teachers?

- They told me I should divorce my husband
- My father promised me he would take care of my daughter

Hana’a is able to leave her marriage because of her father’s support, and not forced into a second marriage, thereby protecting her daughter and allowing them to remain together, by no means a given in Yemeni society.

Figure 9. Reading 3: Extract from notes on Hana’a’s father from first interview transcript

Once I had explored all the relationships with individuals, I turned my attention to **relationships with wider networks**, namely relatives, friends and colleagues, and followed the procedure above, highlighting all mentions, recording details and embedding memos in the relationships text. I also studied the way that the pronoun they functioned in the text, given the hierarchical nature of interaction in Yemen and the way both women had mentioned social status. In Noor’s texts, they occurred frequently; it was in fact the 19th most common word according to the wordlist in **Antconc** (Anthony 2011) and functioned in a largely inclusive fashion, describing the activities of people within the in-groups identified above of family, education and Muslim society, as illustrated below:
Inclusive they

Family
Because my parents were educated, they are open minded
My children are happy if I go to their school. I can see that they are happy that I am coming
I buy them books, they have everything that is essential for education, they have computers, al-hamdulillah
They are all studying in private schools

Education
I was in a school that was run by nuns, they were Italian
I did not think about the fact that they were Catholics and we were Muslims
They were really nice and good
The teachers had a good relationship with us, they used to talk to us
I liked the way that they were wearing hijab so I started wearing the hijab the way they were wearing it
They did not force us to do it, there were some teachers who did not cover their faces

Muslim society
I do not judge people according to the way they look, the way they dress
They are conservative in Taiz, but they are still open-minded, they need women to teach their girls
Many people say that I am lucky because they say you are on a constant honeymoon because your husband is not there

Figure 10. Noor’s inclusive use of They

In a minority of cases however, Noor does use they to express her disappointment or disapproval of those who have failed to live up to their responsibilities, as illustrated below:

Othering they

Family
Even if the father is at home he is not with his kids, they have their own lives, chewing qat, spending time outside. Husbands are not participating in family life, they want their wife’s salary, and they want them to work, but are not participating in her duties and helping them

Education
But they threatened to give me reduced marks because I was wearing the hijab which was against the Communist rules
Muslim society
We are Muslims, we should be kind and clean and keep everything clean outside but you can not see this. They clean their own house and throw the rubbish outside. They only care about their own environment, but the street, isn’t it part of you, of your environment?

Reading 4

Reading for cultural and social contexts
In order to place Hana’a and Noor’s lives within their cultural and social contexts, I drew on literature on Yemeni history and society, as well de se knowledge gleaned from my own long immersion in that context. I started this process by creating a life line for each woman, marking each mile stone (birth, starting school, going to university, getting married etc) with both the year and the location in which the event took place. I then consulted various sources, including legal documents, about each relevant year or period in key regions (Aden, Hadramawt, Sana’a and Taiz) to provide a historical and political framework for these women’s lives and their agency, as I illustrate below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Noor</th>
<th>Events</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1964 Born in Aden | Aden in revolt against the British, hampered by infighting amongst different factions  
Civil war in YAR between Royalists (supported by Saudi Arabia) and Republicans (supported by Egypt) |
| 1965 | British invoked emergency powers in Aden |
| 1966 | British declared intent to withdraw from Aden in 1968 |
| 1967 | British expelled from Aden on 29 November 1967  
People’s Republic of South Yemen (PRSY) declared by NLF on 30 November 1967  
Egyptians withdraw from YAR, but civil war continues  
Seige of Sana’a (November 1967 - February 1968) |
| 1968 Starts convent school | Hadramawt attempts to secede from PRSY  
Royalists and Republicans reconcile in YAR |
| 1970 | PRSY becomes Marxist PDRY (People’s Democratic Republic of Yemen) and all political parties other than newly formed Yemeni Socialist Party (YSP) banned |
Having looked at the political and historical environment, I then reviewed the transcripts for descriptions of their immediate social contexts such as school and work, as I illustrate below. I was interested both in how these contexts might have constrained or facilitated self-actualization and the extent to which each woman was aware of “institutions, structures and ideologies…providing strong enabling or constraining messages” (Lawthom & Stamford 2004: 134).

Noor’s schooldays appeared to be both happy and supportive, contributing to her confidence and self-actualization through education. Attending a convent school exposed her to daily contact with other individuals of differing but equally deeply held religious convictions, and offered her a high quality education, as well as inculcating a respect for difference. She acknowledges that self-discipline was one of the benefits of a Catholic education, and her own awareness of her self is evident in the recognition of her uniqueness on joining a state school, because she possessed linguistic skills others had yet to acquire. She speaks very positively of her time at
that school, with its small classes and attentive teachers, and at the next was part of
the great socialist experiment, in which boys and girls were taught together building
‘new’ people in a new equitable culture that the YSP was committed to creating in
the PDRY. In addition to the political imperative of gender equality, being classmates
and ‘friends’ with boys would have allowed Noor to compare her performance with
theirs, and as she completed her undergraduate degree by the age of 20, it is likely
that she was outstripping them from an early age, as she demonstrates no deference
to their gender (Chapter 5. Section 10).