# Oral History Project Interview

## Arab and Muslim Women's Research and Resource Institute (AMWRRI)

Number of Interview: SMD 1.00

Date: October 21st, 2019

Gender: Female

Name: Hamda (name changed for confidentiality purposes)

Country of Origin: Jordan

Year of Immigration: 1984

**Abstract:** The purpose of this project is to better understand the Muslim identity in the United States. For this project I have interviewed a three-year acquaintance and professor of mine. The interview lasted a total of 52 minutes and was recorded on the morning of October 21st, 2019. In the interview we discussed topics such as marriage, what it means to have a homeland, how perspectives of Muslims in American society have shifted from the Gulf War on through 9/11 to today. One of the most important perspective that the interviewee shared was her comments about arrangement and that when defining terms, it is very important to not define terms broadly. Arrangement, for example, has a lot of different meanings to different people and that despite the stereotype, the interviewee had never met anyone, whether in Jordan or the United States, that had a strict arrangement of their marriage. Another interesting perspective was the question of the Muslim identity after 9/11. Asked about whether life had changed after that date she said that prejudicial attitudes had not changed that dramatically, or at least any more than what she was already accustomed to. It was that last part that is interesting, that people adapt/acclimate to prejudicial actions. The question being what causes acclimatization, what can be done to prevent acclimatization, etc. The goal for the paper on scale is to further investigate these two themes, definitions, and acclimatization.

**Key Concepts:** Identity, Migration, Family, acclimatization, definitions

**Note:** In the transcript, “I” refers to Interviewer, and “R” refers to Respondent/Interviewee.

I: I'm the interviewer, Seamus McDermott. This is for Arab women's studies for Enaya Othman. We are going to be doing an interview regarding identity of the Muslim culture. Thanks for doing this.

R: You're welcome.

I: To begin with, can you state your name and your age?

R: My name is Hamda, and I'm thirty-seven years old.

I: Okay. Then, where is your home?

R: I consider my home to be my family. When I write or when I speak, I like to talk about that being my home. Unfortunately, my grandfather passed away and my grandmother passed away, so they're not with me, but they're my root back home. I feel like their story is a story of migration, and of refugee-ism, and I identify with that.

I: Do you identify your home as a physical place, or is it just family-oriented?

R: It's not a physical place. Here, when I walk into a class and people ask me where I'm from, lately I've been saying I'm from the ocean, and people laugh at me.

I: Right, right.

R: I feel like I am from that history, the history of migration, so I identify as being a second-generation refugee, and a first-generation migrant is what I say. If it's okay with you, can I talk about their histories?

I: Yeah, go for it, go for it, yeah.

R: My grandmother and my grandmother from my father's side, they lived in a place called [Ah-buh-see-yah 00:02:00], between [Hay-thuh and Yeth-uh 00:02:03] in Palestine. I'm saying Palestine not to offend Israelis.

I: It's all right.

R: I consider it Palestine.

I: Right, right.

R: They lived there, and got married when they were sixteen years old. Both were sixteen years old.

I: What year was this?

R: I don't remember. I don't remember. I think my grandmother told me before she passed away. All of these stories I've collected every time I visited.

I: Okay.

R: I lived there for quite a while and I was always interested in those stories because I felt like my identity depended on their identity, what they identified with. In the United States, Arabs and Muslims don't know where they're from at times. So, my grandmother's father, he was a very religious man. He was an Imam in his town. He worked as a butcher and that was a prominent position in the town–

I: Interesting.

R: ... Because they were a bit well-off. My grandfather's family was not that well off. He was raised by his stepfather. What he would tell people is that his stepfather killed his father and married his mother.

I: Interesting. Why would he do that? Was that true or is that–

R: That is what he really believed. Some people said that wasn't exactly true, but he really believed that this was what happened. He says that he bore witness to this. So, I never knew if it was true or not, but it was true for him. I respected that this was true for him. My grandmother's father knew the stepfather, my grandfather's stepfather, and they were married. When they were married, my grandmother borrowed lipstick from the neighbor's house. She put a thread through a flower and put that on her head, which was, I thought, so beautiful. They were married, and right away after they were married in the morning, she told me that she got up and started washing her in-law's clothes. That was something to her that was traumatic.

I: Oh, interesting, okay.

R: She felt like it was traumatic for her to get up as a bride and wash the clothes, because my grandfather had a stepfather, he had very young brothers. So, his mother had younger children, and she would need to help raise those children with her mother-in-law.

I: Interesting, okay.

R: She was really an integral part of the family.

I: Right, right.

R: Then, the issues in Palestine happened.

I: This is the fifties? Is this the sixties?

R: Yes, yes.

I: Okay.

R: They felt fear, and they planned to move to Jordan, not to move to Jordan. They planned to go there for a short period of time just to escape the war and all the things. They were in fear for their life. They fled with just a few things.

I: To Jordan?

R: To Jordan.

I: Okay, cool.

R: They didn't know that they would be leaving and staying in Jordan, so they just took a few of their belongings, not all of their belongings. They left everything in their land. They had land. They would till the land. In Palestine, there are urban and there are rural people. My descendants were rural people. They tilled the land; the land was very important for them. They would grow vegetables. That was part of their livelihood and identity.

R: When they left that land, to them they lost part of themselves, so they held onto the dialect. There's an urban dialect and there's RPD, a rural dialect.

I: Interesting, okay.

R: For me, I really identity with the dialect. I like to tell everyone that I am from a rural background. For me, it's important to speak that way.

I: It's interesting.

R: Even when I went to Jordan, and I lived in Jordan, a lot of people in schools have adopted the urban dialect, but I refused. I refused to change my dialect. People though that because I spoke the rural dialect, I didn't know how to speak Arabic because to them the urban dialect had become the standard.

I: Interesting.

R: Yeah, I still do that to this day. I talk–

I: That stems from your grandparents?

R: That stems from my grandparents losing their land, losing something they identified with, and now that's a part of me.

I: You carry that on. That's cool.

R: I carry that on, yeah.

I: That's cool, that's really cool.

R: When they moved, my grandparents had to live in a refugee camp, first in Palestine, then in Jordan. My uncle just told me this during the summer, he said that when they went to Jordan that a Bedouin family kind of adopted them, they took them in, which is so beautiful that they took refugees in. They took them in, they lived with this Bedouin family. They fed them, and clothed them, and everything. Eventually, they felt like they couldn't return.

I: Are we with your parents now, or with the grandparents?

R: This is my grandparents.

I: Grandparents, got it.

R: My father was born in Nablus. He was born in Palestine. My mother was born in Kuwait, but that's a whole different story.

I: Right, right.

R: They're in Jordan. I believe only my father was born in Palestine, or my father and my oldest uncle, but everyone else was born in Jordan. They took the two children with them and they eventually, because they felt they couldn't return, bought a plot of land. They bought a plot of land in the middle of nowhere because they couldn't afford to buy something close to the cities. My grandmother would say that they would make the bricks, they would actually make bricks.

I: Interesting. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

R: Everyone said that she would carry sacks of bricks and then build the house with her own hands.

I: That's cool.

R: Why this is important is because before she passed away, she had gotten ... It became a three-story house. It was very large, but it was very ... It wasn't updated, but it was large. To her, because she had lost her land, it was everything, this house. She was really, really, sick, and ill before she died, and she couldn't go up and down the stairs. It was a three-story house. My uncles wanted her to buy her an apartment on the ground level because she didn't want to live with anyone. She was very independent. She built her own house with her own hands.

I: Right, right. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

R: She told them, "No, absolutely not. You will not sell my house." They were, "Okay, let's not sell it, but let's just buy you the apartment and then get you someone to help you, a nurse or something." She refused to do that, and would automatically ask people to leave if they talked about her house in any way. She held onto it. Now that she's passed away, my father always says that the house won't sell because she didn't want to sell it. They're trying to sell the house–

I: She's still there, she's still there in some way.

R: She's still there. Because she refused to sell it, so every time my uncles would be, "We need to get this house sold." He'd be, "This is what happens when you anger your mother. This is what happens."

I: Interesting.

R: We want to talk about space, so space to her was so important because she felt like she had lost her home. Now, she didn't want to lose another home. I just thought that was so beautiful. She's my home. I mean, imagine the house ... I keep remembering, when I went back to Jordan, they were in the process of selling the house. Every time I went past the house, I have to cry, it was so difficult for me for them to sell the house. I felt like she was there. She had olive trees, and she had a small vineyard, a tiny little vineyard. It would just break my heart. If I could, I would buy the house.

I: Inside, is that home for you? Is there really where you–

R: She's my home. I know that the space for me means a lot, but the space is connected to memories. I migrated here in 1984 with my parents. I was, I think, three and a half years old. When I came here-

I: Sorry, this is from Jordan, right?

R: I migrated from Jordan.

I: Migrated from Jordan, okay, got it.

R: I was born in Jordan, in Amman, Jordan. I was born to pretty young parents. My mother was, I think, nineteen, and my father was twenty-three. When I came here, I don't know why, I think it was the stories that they told me, but the house was always a part of who I was. I was three years old, it might not have been a true memory, it might be implanted by my parents or something, but I remember calling out from the steps in the porch. I remember I would always attach myself to that because I felt like no, I'm more than this. I'm bigger than this. I want to be attached to somewhere else, too. That space, now that it's sold ... My father feels relief, because my father had felt the opposite of how I felt. I felt that it was beautiful, that I'm attached to this history, the history of building it with your own hands, the history of migration, difficulty, a suffering out of which came something beautiful.

I: Yeah, exactly, yeah.

R: He felt relieved because he felt that his mother was there, and he felt like he's losing her again, and he's losing himself again, and he wanted to rip off the band aid. He grieved again, he grieved again. So, he felt relief.

I: How long ago was it sold?

R: Just six months ago, or seven months ago, something like that. For him, he feels more stable now. When I was young, my father would always say, "Our lives in the United States are

temporary. We're here temporarily. We're here because we need to help, we need to build a future, and then we're going back."

I: Right, right.

R: Up until I was a teenager, he would say this. Then he stopped, and now he feels like, situated in the United States. To me, watching that dynamic was so interesting. When I got married, my husband migrated when he was twenty-four years old. I saw that–

I: From Jordan?

R: From Jordan.

I: Okay, okay.

R: When he came here, he felt the same way for a short period of time, but then he felt like he was American all of a sudden afterwards.

I: Was he the only family member from his side of the family that came over, or did he have family here?

R: He has relatives from his mother's side here, but they're dispersed, and they're not very close to his family. They're third cousins or something. He doesn't know all of their names.

I: Right, right, did he have a similar memory from Jordan that he had a hard time letting go of, or was it–

R: He's a little different because in his youth ... He was born in Jordan, and he lived a very hard life. His father worked in Kuwait for a while. He was well-off, and came and married his mother. There were issues in the family. His father married another woman, while married to his mother. There was a polygamy situation.

I: Right, right.

R: That woman, it was really pressure from the family to do that. My mother-in-law is a very strong, independent woman. She does not follow the rules. She doesn't want us to follow the rules. She's a strong, hard-headed woman, stubborn.

I: That's awesome. Yeah, yeah.

R: She couldn't get along with the family. She was strong because she needed to be strong in her family. She had helped my grandmother raise the children. She actually left school in fourth grade, her mother, and helped her mother raise the rest of the children. So, she needed to be really strong.

I: Interesting. The matriarchs of this story so far are really interesting, yeah, yeah.

R: When he married another woman, that woman left because she didn't want to be in that kind of situation. She knew that my father-in-law was really attached to his wife, and she felt like she was the third wheel. She didn't want to be that lady.

I: Right, right.

R: She ran away, and then they moved to Egypt. So, my husband lived in Egypt in his youth.

I: With his mother?

R: With his mother and father. His father came from Kuwait, they got married, they had my husband in Jordan, and then they went to Egypt. They were really well-off in Egypt. My mother-in-law was a seamstress, so she worked, and he worked, and they were doing really well. When his mother, so my father-in-law's mother, said that she was ill, he went back with his family to take care of his mother.

R: When they came back, they lost everything they had in Egypt. They just went home suddenly. He was, "My mother is going to die. I need to go and help." When they went back, they lost everything, and then they were impoverished. They lived for a long time in poverty. It was very,

very difficult. My father-in-law, he wants to keep up with the Joneses. He would take out loans to have dinner parties for guests.

I: Interesting.

R: My husband hates that.

I: Was that just a social pressure that he had?

R: A social pressure.

I: Okay, interesting.

R: Because he was well-off, his family expected him to do that, so he just kept it up. He got immersed in more and more debt, and accumulated more and more debt until finally my husband started working. His sister is a hairdresser, so she started working. His other sister started working in college, and they picked themselves up. They helped each other sustain themselves. It was really difficult.

R: My father-in-law became a taxi driver during that period of time. He'd have so many stories about people he picked up. I mean, I just want to sit and listen to stories and write a book about that. Beautiful stories. First of all, he had a private car, like a limo, what is it called? He worked for a limo service.

I: Right, got you, got you, yeah.

R: He would interact with these people that were working for the king. You never know if it's a hundred percent true, but he has beautiful stories. This person, I don't know, he was the bodyguard to the king, and he would do this and that. I would wonder how class would factor into that. You're helping these people, then you're living in poverty. It's such a difficult situation.

I: Right, right.

R: When my husband migrated here–

I: What year was that?

R: He migrated before we got married, a year before we got married, 1997.

I: Okay, and this was after the Gulf War of '91?

R: Yes, yes.

I: Was he at all apprehensive about coming to the United States after that?

R: Not really. It affected me more than him, I think. I don't know why.

I: Really? How did it affect you? Because you had already been here for–

R: I had been here.

I: So, you had been here at the beginning of the Gulf War. I think you were in school, right?

R: Yeah, I was in school. I'm sorry, I'm a storyteller, so I keep telling you stories. They're not exactly answers, but they're–

I: No, well, they are. Yeah, I see the answers.

R: When I was in school during the time when there was the Gulf War, I remember my father opened up a pizza shop. My mother's family have pizza shops all over California. So, he wanted to take up that business. He saved for a long time. He worked for them for a long time then he bought a pizza shop. Shop owners, during that period of time, would go and learn how to shoot guns because they were afraid.

I: Right.

R: So, they would go and purchase guns.

I: Just for protection of the business and their employees.

R: They felt like people would come in. They were really afraid.

I: Was this because their identity and how they…okay, interesting.

R: Yeah, it's because they perceived themselves as the outsiders during that period of time. They felt like they were in danger, that people would see–

I: Because of the Gulf War?

R: Because of the Gulf War. I remember that my father didn't purchase a gun, but he was on the verge of learning how to shoot a gun. He didn't want to purchase guns because he has a background ... He was part of the military in Jordan during the time when there was war between Palestinians and Jordanians. He didn't want the violence. He was, "If I buy a gun, what if I shoot someone? Then, other people come and shoot me, then it becomes war." To him, the Gulf War meant more in the United States. That's what he perceived it to be.

R: We were friends with other Arab families. I was at my grandmother's house, and I remember this. My school was very near to my grandmother's house, so what I would do is I would go home to my grandmother's house, then my mother would pick me up from there, to my maternal grandmother's. My friend's house was right next to the school. It was Westlake School in Daly City. I was playing outside. We would play outside, not like kids these days. That shows how old I am. We would go outside, and no one would ask us any questions.

I: Right, right, yeah, yeah.

R: I heard two gunshots. I didn't know. The next day, when I went to school, I learned that my friend had gotten shot by her younger brother.

I: Interesting.

R: He was playing with a gun, and he shot her.

I: Oh, okay, okay. Was she okay?

R: She died.

I: Really?

R: She was shot. Her mother later on would tell us when she was shot, she was outside of the car, but then she flew into the window.

I: Wow, do you know what kind of gun it was?

R: I don't know. I mean, why was I there it hear? It was traumatic for me.

I: Right, right, interesting.

R: I would always associate that with the Gulf War after that, so it always brings up some emotion because I would remember this is the product of violence. This is the product of people, and for what reason?

I: What do you think the perception of the Muslim identity is in the United States? Was it shaped by the Gulf War?

R: I think that 9/11 did something different.

I: Okay, so how was 9/11 different? I mean, there are many distinctions between Gulf War and ... But, for the Muslim identity, what was the distinction there?

R: For me, I mean, after the Gulf War, Arabs were the outsider, not necessarily Muslims, I think. But, I think after 9/11–

I: So, Gulf War they didn't equate the other as Arab, or as Muslims. It was Arab.

R: Yeah.

I: But, in 9/11, it was Muslims.

R: Muslims, even Sikhs with beards would be attacked. Another who looked Muslim would be attacked. That was a very distinct difference.

I: Did 9/11 affect how you interact with other people in your daily life, or how other people interacted with you?

R: I remember a period of time right after 9/11, the mosques would advise hijabat, women who wore hijabs, not to go out. They would tell us not to go out. I did go out, obviously. I didn't feel like I should live in fear because of something that I didn't do.

I: You were living in California at the time, right?

R: I was living in California.

I: Got it. How old were you at this time?

R: I want to say I was nineteen. Let me see, I was born in 1981, so maybe twenty, twenty years old.

I: Right, okay.

R: I had a young child, and I was pregnant at that time. I had to go out. I didn't feel like I was subjected to any direct racism or prejudice, other than what I had been acclimated to. I had been spit on before.

I: Interesting, really?

R: Yeah. I had been spit on.

I: That's awful.

R: When people look at you, I really hated that people would think that I didn't speak English.

I: Interesting. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

R: I don't know why, as a child people would go, "What time is it?" I would hate that. I mean, I had gotten used to that kind of thing.

I: Okay, interesting, interesting.

R: It would be just a normal part of life, unfortunately, unfortunately, but I didn't feel like I was in danger. However, I wasn't working at that period of time, or I was working in a library, so it was insulated. I would go from home to the library. California, I think, it was a diverse place, San Francisco was a diverse place, so if there was a racism, they were hesitant to show the racism. They were hesitant because the norm, during the 90s…this was not the 90s, but 2001.

I: Right, this was right after the [crosstalk 00:25:42].

R: During the 90s people were all about tolerance. I think that they were hesitant to say something, but older people would spit at me.

I: Right, interesting.

R: Yeah, yeah.

I: From Gulf War, through 9/11, until today, has there been any improvement in the perception of the Muslim identity in the United States?

R: I think that this triggered a movement in Muslim populations to better explain what Muslimness meant to them, and discuss issues that were really thorny. For example, issues of polygamy, issues of arranged marriages and how they relate to Muslimness. They were more open to discuss difficult issues because then that helped other people understand where they came from, and understand that Muslimness is an ethical religion. Even the word religion doesn't encompass, for many Muslims… for some people the word religion, in English [crosstalk 00:26:52]-

I: Right, you equate it to some sort of institution or some sort of infrastructure.

R: Exactly. It's more ethical for me. It's more ethical.

I: Okay, would you equate it to a lifestyle?

R: It's a lifestyle, yes. It's a way of interacting with others, a way of interacting with myself, with my family, with my ideas even. I feel like it's a dialogue with myself and with the community.

I: Interesting.

R: I love it. For me, Muslimness is dialogical, it's a dialogue, it's a dialogue with who you are. It's how you treat yourself and you treat others, and how you understand who you are in relation to others. There's always this interaction and self-reflection.

I: Interesting. I know, being Catholic, it's heavy on the institution side. Interesting.

R: Some people would say that Muslimness ... I say Muslimness, I'm not saying Islam, by the way. Why I say Muslimness and not Islam, is saying Islam makes it homogenous. It is Islam, the religion, but saying that is homogenous. It's become homogenous. People perceive it to be something in the past, it doesn't live nowadays. So, I say Muslimness because I want people to know that there's an agency in that, that we are interacting with religion. It's not just a monolith.

I: Very interesting. We're going to switch gears here now. We're going to go to the idea of marriage. I guess my first question is were you married pretty young?

R: I was married very young. I was married at sixteen.

I: In the American culture that's young, but in Muslimness is that normal?

R: It wasn't really related to religion, being married young. Because my family were here in the United States, predominantly my father-

I: This stems from the Gulf War?

R: From the Gulf War. He felt fear and he felt like an outsider after that.

I: Interesting, okay.

R: He lost hope. He lost hope that he could build a future in the United States. So, he went back. He was afraid for us. I'm the oldest daughter, so to him, he didn't understand what it was. To him, I wasn't a stereotypical girl because I had worked with him in the pizza restaurant, hours, and hours, and hours, and hours.

I: When did you start working there?

R: Not officially worked, because that's illegal.

I: Right, right.

R: I had helped my family business.

I: You helped out, right.

R: I had helped since I was maybe eight years old.

I: That work ethic was just from a very young age.

R: Oh, I worked sometimes until two in the morning. It wasn't my parents forcing, I just felt like I belonged. I was productive, I was doing something. My father needed assistance. He needed us to help him because he went through some issues during that period of time. He lost hope and we were all rallying behind him. I became a young woman when I was fourteen, so he didn't understand that. I was working with him. I was doing what he did. All of a sudden, "Oh, my daughter is becoming a woman." He didn't know how to grapple with that. He was, "Let's go back to Jordan."

I: Interesting, okay. Sorry, don't mean to cut you off, but were you the only sibling that was working?

R: Yeah. When my younger brother became eight, he started helping out. We would do some major stuff. We would shred cheese, and roll out dough, we would make dough. My brother, right now, he works really, really hard, so I think that was a good thing. For us, it was a good thing. For some people, it might not be a good thing. It was because we weren't forced into it.

I: Right, right.

R: I think we missed our father. He was away working all day–

I: Working on his… right, right, right.

R: We needed to be with him, and that was a way to be with him. Unfortunately, it comes down to this–

I: How did your mom feel about you guys spending time in the pizza shop?

R: When I became a young woman she was, "No. It's enough for you. You need to settle down." I remember crying for days, "I want to go and work," because I felt good about it. There would be drunk people coming into the restaurant, but they were so nice to me. They would use profanity and they'd say, "Pardon me, young lady," so it made me feel good about myself.

I: Exactly. Yeah, yeah, yeah, interesting.

R: It wasn't the norm. For my uncles, they had daughters, none of them would go and help out or anything. Even my uncles looked down upon what we were doing. We were the outsiders.

I: Were the uncles in the United States at the time, too?

R: Yeah, my mother's father, he migrated to Puerto Rico, and he married a Puerto Rican lady. Then, they got divorced and he married my grandmother. They moved to Puerto Rico, and then they moved to the United States, to the mainland–

I: Got it, got it, okay, cool, cool.

R: …To California. My uncles, from my mother's side, they speak Spanish. They've lived in California forever. Some of them were born there.

I: Okay, so going back to the marriage, you're in Jordan now at sixteen, was it an arranged marriage? Did they set you up together? How did all that work?

R: I don't like the word arranged marriage because I feel like it categorizes, not necessarily Muslims, Arabs as other. We have The Bachelor on TV. No one says anything about that. People set people up all the time. Arranged marriage to people means that woman is forced into marriage, that she doesn't see her spouse, or he doesn't see his spouse until they get married. That's not the reality for most people. I'm saying most people because there are some people who go through those types of issues.

I: You say issues. That's interesting. Is it sort of a backwards way of looking at marriage, to not see your spouse before you get married?

R: I don't know.

I: Do you think that's wrong?

R: I don't even know people who went through that. My grandmother a long, long, long, long time ago didn't go through these types of things.

I: Is this the grandmother from your father's side?

R: Both grandmothers, because my maternal grandmother also got married pretty young and they knew each other. I don't think that. I think that arranged marriage is a stereotypical way of understanding Arabs.

I: I think people will be very surprised to hear that. It's such a stereotype.

R: I didn't know anyone.

I: Right, right, that's interesting.

R: I don't even know anyone whose marriage was structured in this way.

I: Right, that strictly, yeah.

R: I think, marriage means different things to different people. I mean, the ideal is not necessarily… though, I would like my children to find someone that they love, and say, "Mama, that will help me out." I wouldn't have to set them up with people.

I: Right, right, it's just [crosstalk 00:34:10].

R: If you need to, I don't feel like there's anything wrong with setting your daughter up with someone or setting your son. Your husband, no, you should not set your husband up with someone, but your daughter or your son.

I: Right, right.

R: People do that all the time. You could be proactive. If you know that they want to find someone to love, you could be proactive about that, if they wanted you to. But, if they don't, I would back off, I would back off.

I: Interesting.

R: I don't want to be intrusive in their lives. I have gone through a situation where there have been friends who have tried to set my daughter up with someone.

I: Okay, got you.

R: They have told me, "He's a great guy. Can we come and visit you?" My daughter wants to finish college, so automatically I would apologize. I just wanted you to get to know this guy.

I: Right, right, and for you does that fall under the loose framework of arrangement, or is that something else entirely?

R: I don't know if that's arranged marriage.

I: I agree, I agree.

R: I don't know what people mean when they say arranged marriage.

I: People have to be careful with how they define the terms?

R: Yeah. Marriage means different things to different people, so we should not label something as arranged. It could be oppressive. It could be forced. For Muslims, forced marriages are not marriages at all. It's against the ethical code. It could be annulled. If it's a forced marriage, it's annulled. It doesn't even exist to us. I don't know that that would be necessarily something that Muslims would want to do.

I: Right, right, interesting. So, how did you meet your husband?

R: My husband, he picked us up from the airport. I remember that so very vividly. I was very young, very young. He was older than me. He's seven years older than me. Some people might feel like that's strange, but I really didn't feel that it was strange. We had the same interests and the same hobbies. I think that he was open-minded enough to understand me, this person who…I was raised in California, then I went to Jordan.

R: I spoke very little Arabic. I was able to read and write at first grade level when I got to Jordan. I was put in public school. When I was in ninth grade I was put into a public school. I asked my parents, "I need help." I read very slowly. They said, "No, either you make it, or you don't." That's the way it is. They pushed me.

I: Do you appreciate that now or are you still–

R: It made it necessary for me to learn really quickly. I would go to neighbor's houses and ask for help. I would go to my cousin's houses. I would stay over for days and have them help me. What a friend told me was, which is so significant since I identity with Muslimness so very much, he told me to get the Quran and just copy over and over and over. That would help me write quicker. So, I did that. Then, that's what helped me really.

I: Interesting. Going back to a public school in Jordan, did you ever feel…for most of your life, most of your memory you spent time in the United States. Was that a hard transition for you to come back to Jordan?

R: Unusually, it wasn't hard. I mean, I felt like it was harder for people to accept me. I feel like I had been there all along or something, that I was living with them without actually living with them.

I: Right, right, right.

R: We would talk to them on the phone. This was during the period of time when people would tape a conversation or tape a discussion with, "Hello Mother. This is what we're doing." They would tape that and then send it to people. So, we would do that as if they were right there with us. I mean, we were in conversation with them. I was in conversation with them, with my family, and with the culture constantly. I'm saying a conversation because I felt like it wasn't homogenous, so I would make it what I needed it to be. When I went there it just felt so organic for me. But, they didn't accept–

I: I was going to say, how did the other kids treat the new girl from America?

R: I was the American. I was the American in school, that they wanted me to do their English homework for them. I had this issue with doing people's work. I didn't feel comfortable.

I: It stems from–

R: From working. I believe in work. People did view me as the American. I felt like I was both. Why are you denying a part of me?

I: Interesting, interesting.

R: Yeah, I think even my cousins early on, they would automatically assume that I was uppity, or I was conceited, or something, because I didn't know how to express myself. They would assume I didn't want to talk to them because I couldn't talk to them. I didn't know how to express myself.

I: Interesting.

R: One of my cousins took me in, and she would be my translator for a period of time. Then, she helped me learn how to read and write.

I: From ninth grade, did you go all the way to graduate high school in Jordan?

R: What I did is I… this part is difficult for me. I had enrolled in twelfth grade, so I did ninth, tenth, eleventh.

I: Got it.

R: I enrolled in twelfth grade while my husband was here in the United States.

I: You had been married within this timeframe here?

R: Yeah, in twelfth grade I got married right at the beginning of twelfth grade, so I was sixteen, almost seventeen. I was engaged, though.

I: While you were engaged, he was in–

R: He left for a year.

I: Interesting.

R: Because they were living in such poverty, he left to be able to do… there were rituals, that I don't believe in by the way, but he was the first son to get married and they wanted a wedding, and they wanted–

I: Okay, so does the groom pay for the wedding?

R: Yes.

I: Interesting.

R: Yes, the groom pays for the wedding, yes.

I: For him it was important to be able to–

R: His family needed it, they really needed it, and he didn't want to let them down. He really didn't care. I was okay with having people come over to our house, and we could just have a party. That was good for me, that was good for him, but his parents had gone through so many difficulties, he felt like they needed it.

I: Interesting.

R: Now they look back at it as something amazing for them. They remember, they watch the video constantly, and it makes them feel good. That was the good thing about it.

I: Was the ceremony in Jordan?

R: It was in Jordan.

I: Jordan.

R: Yeah, it was in Jordan.

I: How did you come to the decision that you were going to marry him?

R: It was amazing that my parents were so open to him being around without me being engaged to him.

I: Would the people around looking [crosstalk 00:41:51]-

R: They were okay with it.

I: …People looking–

R: No, they were okay with him being around, and people were okay that he was around, because we had just moved there. We needed help purchasing things, we needed help with transportation. We didn't know what to do, where to go. Even though my father had been born there and raised there, it was different when we went back.

I: Right, right.

R: We welcomed the help and people felt like he was helping us and [crosstalk 00:42:22] help, so it was okay. They were open. For the first year it was "your friend." I respect that. There wasn't much of anything. I need to learn to speak Arabic. I'm really not interested in this kind of stuff right now. There wasn't any dating or anything like that in the United States, because my parents didn't believe in that kind of thing.

I: Right, right.

R: Then, his parents said, "Our son has talked to us." They talked to my parents, so he didn't talk to me first.

I: Got you, got you.

R: He would like to court, so imagine courting, "He would like to court your daughter." They came and said, "What do you think of [inaudible 00:43:07]?" I said, "Hey, I don't know." I was, "I'll try, I'll try," to me because I was so young. It didn't really mean marriage. It meant, okay, this is a new experience.

I: Get to meet this guy a little bit better, know him a little bit better.

R: He would take us to famous libraries and beautiful architecture. He was a computer programmer, so I would be so in love with the language, like the computer languages. He would show me.

I: Code and everything.

R: We shared hobbies, so I loved talking to him. So, to me it was okay, we'll have fun. It didn't mean that I wanted to get married when I was tiny. Then, later on, after about two years, we made the decision that we were going to get married. There was [foreign language 00:44:04], which is just a promise between families to court.

R: Then, two years after that, we sat down, and we talked about it seriously. I told him, "I'm really young." I didn't know how to drive. I don't possess the skills that you'd expect. I don't

know how I would be able to do these things, to take care of children. I didn't think that I was capable. I didn't think I was capable of doing that. He was, "I'll help you. I'll help you. You can depend on me, and I will help you through it." I told him that I wanted to finish high school and I wanted to go on to college. He was so okay with that. To me, that sealed the deal. He was open to me getting an education.

I: Interesting, so you get married in twelfth grade?

R: I enrolled in twelfth grade. He was away. Then, he came back and said, "I want to move to the United States. I want to live there." We weren't sure that he wanted to live there, but when he came back, he's, "We should go live there. It's a better future for us. Let's try and go live there." I was okay with it because I was raised in California. I was okay.

R: I dropped out of high school, and I had children, so I didn't go back to high school until I was, I think, nineteen. I was pregnant with my second child maybe. No, I was eighteen, almost nineteen, and I was pregnant with my first child. I'm not sure, no, my second child. I went and got my GED.

I: GED, okay.

R: I got my GED. I was passed that age. You could go back to high school, but it wasn't feasible for me with children.

I: Right, right.

R: I got my GED. I enrolled after that in City College.

I: Where did you move back to the United States?

R: To San Francisco.

I: To San Francisco, okay.

R: We moved back to the place where I was raised.

I: Got you.

R: My uncles were there. They were supportive.

I: Family was there and all that. Okay, cool.

R: My parents came back after that.

I: Oh, okay. Did your other siblings come back, too, at that point?

R: My siblings are a different story. My parents pushed me. They put all of us in public schools. They pushed me, "Either you make it, or you don't. That's your decision." I was desperate. I needed to finish high school. But, my brother went to school for a year and then he couldn't, he didn't survive there. I'm using the word survive, but I don't mean that literally.

I: Right, right.

R: He wasn't able to feel like he belonged.

I: Got you. Was that because you grew up in the United States?

R: Yeah, yeah. He was born in Jordan, but he went there when he was a baby. He's two years younger than me.

I: You moved when you were three and a half?

R: Yeah. I don't know if that makes a difference or not. He left and went back to California.

I: Got you, got you.

R: My uncles are here. My other brother followed him after a year, my younger brother.

I: But, you stuck it out.

R: I stuck it out.

I: Interesting.

R: Yeah, I stuck it out. Now, they do know how to read and write in Arabic. They know how to read the Quran, but they wished that they had learned more from the culture. Now they're taking their children back every summer, so that their children don't feel like they don't belong.

I: Right, interesting, interesting. In our final minutes here, to move on to education. You did mention a little bit before that your husband was really open and supportive of you in that. Was that unusual? Did you expect that your husband would be so supportive of you seeking a college degree?

R: Women are really educated. The women I know in Jordan are very educated. I feel like more women are educated than men. This is my perspective. I think it's statistically true also that more women go to college because there is a burden of providing. Men carry the burden of providing for the family, so a lot of men leave and don't get a college education, so that they could have families and get married, and things like that. I expected it. My husband was more open to that than my parents were.

I: Interesting.

R: My husband was very open to me getting an education and working. Like I told you when I became a young woman my father all of a sudden, he felt like it was strange for me to be out and working.

I: Right, right, the other family members also had some reservations about you working, too.

R: Yeah, my uncles, here in the United States. In Jordan, my cousins had been educated. They'd gone to college or had become, like I said, hairdressers, or had worked in different occupations. That was pretty okay.

I: Right, okay.

R: My grandmother was so invested in education. She believed, she would do [foreign language 00:49:13] tiny religious schools in our house, so she was really invested in education.

I: That's cool, yeah.

R: Yeah, yeah.

I: What is your end goal, I guess, in terms of employment, in terms of education? What would you like to do?

R: I…

I: Big question, I know.

R: Big question, big question.

I: I guess, what are you pursuing now? We'll start with that.

R: I'm pursuing a doctoral degree in the English department. My focus in trans-nationalism and migration, with a focus on gender and race.

I: Okay, why that topic?

R: I feel like migrancy is an inherent part of who we are in the United States and because after 9/11 the world has become more open. I feel like we need to pursue and examine these issues in greater depth.

I: Right, right.

R: Trans-nationalism and migrancy are two different things. There are issues of privilege that we need to look at, mobility. For example, people with American citizenship, when they go to different parts of the world, they're privileged because they have the ability to move, and have the ability to be socially mobile and economically mobile. In the United States, if you feel like you're marginalized when you go to a different country, you become the privileged person.

R: That dynamic I think is really important and that people I feel like it's part of human nature, migrancy. Migration and migrancy, and cultural contacts, so-and-so, part of what makes us human beings. We're social beings, right?

I: Right, right.

R: We interact with others. I think we need to look at that and how that has been subjected to some global forces that have caused a great deal of issues. I want to look at the structural issues and the human individual issues, too.

I: Awesome. That's great. Well, I think that's all we have time for today. I want to thank you again for being willing to sit down and talk with me about these different topics.

R: Thank you for being such a great interviewer.

I: Well, thank you. All right. We'll stop, press pause.