

# The Multiple Identities of Arab Women in Israel

Dalia Fadila

*Dr. Dalia Fadila is Deputy President of the Al-Qasemi Academy, an Arab College of Education in Israel.*

I would like to open with the question: “history” or “her story?” This is the question that has been debated since the 20<sup>th</sup> century among different groups of women in developed societies. Those women have really moved along the continuum from “history” into “her story,” though they are in different stages and are still moving. Yet, women in “developing societies” are not there yet. I would like to preface this with a note on the function of English grammar here. There is nothing developing in “developing” societies. The “ing” is a grammatical technique to perpetuate our static condition. Women in developing societies are still asking the question of whether to write the self, the subject that precedes writing history and which should be the narrative voice. They are still asking the question of why politics, ethnicity, religion, economy, and technology are hindering the writing of the self that ought to be writing history and any narrative of the self and society.

The complexity of holding multiple identities, of being a woman who is Arab, Muslim, a member of a minority and Israeli, must be emphasized. This complexity is a dynamic of clashing variables and it is also the status quo. The clashing variables can be described as follows: Arab contradicts Israeli, Israeli contradicts Muslim, Muslim contradicts women, women are being marginalized by Arabs, Arabs marginalize Israel, Israel marginalizes everybody else and the rest of the world marginalizes all of the above. These clashing variables are going nowhere as they love to clash, which is why they are the status quo. Where does this leave the multi-layered identity of women? In an arena of tension between her own two ambivalent attitudes.

## Envy and blindness

On the one hand, she wants to belong to her own society, her own tradition, to be the mother, the daughter and the partner. She is also aware, however, that this indigenous culture, with its heavily suffocating tradition, places variable rings around her neck, her mind, her body and her future. She is ambivalent. On the other hand, we look to the other side, to Israeli society and admire its liberal lifestyle. We envy our Jewish sisters who are

in an advanced position toward liberalism and self-fulfilment. Yet we are aware that this society is the same one that hinders our integration into the liberal community; it visibly and invisibly places obstacles in the way of our acceptance. There is blindness on the Israeli side, and I have a personal story to illustrate it. A few months ago I met a Jewish professor in my college, Cosimi College, which is an Arab education college in an Arab Muslim town. He said to me, "You're married to an Arab and you work in an Arab college. I admire you." I admit it took me a while to realize that he assumed I was not Arab, an example of how strong the stereotype really is.

In this tense space between ambivalent attitudes, I have to tell you that this leaves the community of Arab-Israeli Muslim women in a situation of total poverty and ignorance. Only 22% of them are in the workforce while 80% never pursue higher education. This is due to something called the "disguise of the good Arab woman." This disguise promotes the adage, "Keep the homes shining and the husband will be smiling," which is the model of the good Arab woman. This proverbial shining of the windows of the home and of the husband's smile leaves no time for a career, self-fulfilment or self-expression. This is the question I started debating with my husband 10 years ago, when I went from home oriented to career-oriented. He said, "I'm very supportive of your career, but the home needs to be clean and the kids need a hot meal." This is the paradox: The new Arab man supports his wife to be ambitious in an international career but asks her first to clean the bathroom.

### Focussing on the text books

I searched for a sector where women are most represented, or rather not represented at all, which is in education. I am not going into politics or economics because there is no data there for my research. In the Arab education system in Israel, 99.99% of teachers and 100% of cleaners and servants are women, while headmasters and vice headmasters are men. Parents' committees are made up of fathers, the only mothers committees being in kindergartens, because only here can they handle decisions. A further point here concerns the textbooks used in the Arab education system, especially the mother-tongue books used for teaching Arabic to Arab children. These books should be the arena where cultural identity is introduced, developed and evolved, and where a collective memory and identity, a mirror of sorts, manifests itself. The reality is rather different. In 2000 a series of books called *The Pioneer* was introduced to replace one that included texts translated from Hebrew into Arabic, which had referred to the Israeli flag, the Yarkon River and Independence Day to teach Arabic.

By 2000, the State of Israel had realized that the Israelization of these Arabs was not going to work and they had better give them their own committees for writing books, their own text, heritage and means for identity formation. Most of the texts used are from between the 1920s and 1960s, from Egypt, Syria, Iraq and Lebanon, and have nothing to do with the Arab community in Israel. More importantly, none of the texts are written by women from within Israel or in the Arab world, so to find the presence of females I had to look for mothers.

I found that for the fifth grade there are almost 70 texts, out of which only four deal with women. One is called “The Mother,” the second “To My Mother, the third “A Letter to a Mother” and the fourth “Smile,” which is the most intriguing. In this text, a girl is addressed by a poet who advises her to keep her virtue and purity as this is more important than knowledge; this can be read as encouraging nothingness, no life experience, and this is what is expected of our girls. In the third-grade books, two texts struck me: “In the Market” and “Anisa and Her Father.” In the first, the plot involves a mother and daughter shopping in a market, culminating in the search for, and purchase of, the right dress. In “Anisa and Her Father,” Anisa complains to her father that it is too rainy outside for her to play, so he gives a lecture on ecology, science, biology, animals and the environment. The mother



*In the Arab education system in Israel , 99.99% of the teachers are women.*

from the first story is knowledgeable but in fashion only, while the father is knowledgeable in everything.

## Breaking the paradigm

This paradigm has to be broken immediately. Toward this end, I decided to write my own texts, though in English. These texts teach identity through English and vice versa. They lead children from age four, stage after stage, in the formation of self-awareness. They learn about self and other, particular and collective identities, though in a context of contradiction, knowing they are a minority in a state that is ethnically, or politically, Jewish. The protagonists in my texts are equally girls and boys. I needed to regain the respect of my mother tongue, so I started teaching English not from the “ABC” but from the “m,” “n,” “b,” and “a.” These are the sounds that Arab children learn first and which are thus already cognitively established in their minds. I flipped the paradigm so that once they study “m,” “n,” and “a,” they have to form a word. They start with three letters in a word, then another letter is added to make more words; thus, as a result, they can bridge the gap between sounds and words. At first, people insisted this is not how English is taught, but it turned out to be the fastest way for Arab children to start reading English, by connecting letters to words. In order for these books to be used, there was a need for a framework, an educational institution, so I had to construct one. I called it “Q School,” which is like an alternative “school after school.” It now has more than 400 children and 12 teachers, mostly women. “Q School” offers opportunities for Arab women who need another woman to create opportunities for them.

## The Q School solution

I established Q School three years ago, juggling it with an already demanding career. My mother, a very loyal guardian of the tradition like many Arab women from an older generation, told me, “First, take care of your husband. Second, do you need money that much, creating more and more work?” I replied that it was, in fact, necessary as I wanted to buy back my respect, my mind and my future. I needed to be not only an active partner in my family but also a leader in society, and for that I needed a lot of money. As Virginia Woolf said in *A Room of Her Own*, I think a room is not enough. An institution or a business would be enough for women who are Arab, Muslim, a minority and trying also to be Israeli, to buy back their future. We need to reshape a vision of a self, an “other,” and a direction for the future into something that is hopeful.

*This article is based on her presentation at a TEDx conference.*