Special Section: Healing

Trauma, Witness, and Healing: Muslim Women Artists on Domestic Violence

Juliane Hammer

"God was the first to attend to my story." This is the first sentence from Naima's poem, "Paperweight" which she describes as a poem about desire, identity, and finding comfort in another person. It was also the sentence that, for artist Nadia, best represented the theme of the 2011 art exhibit of Muslim Women in the Arts, an organization in the DC metropolitan area that for several years organized an annual art exhibition with works by Muslim women artists. In 2011, she chose "Healing & Empowerment: Violence, Women & Art" as the theme of the exhibition. The image that accompanied this key sentence, a painting by Nadia, shows a Muslim woman with a scarf who is raising her hands in supplication.

In this article, I read and represent art pieces from the exhibition in 2011, on display for one evening, within a framework that connects the story telling of survivors with awareness of various forms of violence against women and the power and possibility of healing for those who have been traumatized by such violence. The artists reflected and refracted layers of their own awareness and experiences of gender-based violence to then produce art pieces that were intended to open up their audiences to that awareness as well. The connection between trauma, empowerment, and healing is powerfully explored in many of the pieces themselves and in the reception of the exhibit as well. The theme of the exhibit was broader than my own focus on domestic violence and reflected the intersecting nature of violence within and around interpersonal relations.

In addition to attending the exhibition, I interviewed over half of the women artists involved. I also participated in several planning meetings and helped set up the exhibition at the Silver Spring Civic Building. I have struggled here again with the promise of confidentiality extended to those artists I interviewed and the planning conversations I observed and the very public nature of the exhibition and of art pieces. I have opted for an approach in which I analyze some of the art pieces in relation to their interpretation by the respective artist while offering insights and stories from the interviews without identifying the artists, not even with a pseudonym.

The structure of the article is determined by a number of themes I recognized in the art pieces, the interviews, and the conversations surrounding the exhibit. In addition to conducting the interviews and observations in 2011, I also took photographs of the art pieces at the exhibit, and of accompanying explanations if there were any. I have been revisiting and 're-seeing' them often

since then and have connected them to the other dimensions of my project on US Muslim efforts against domestic violence.[1] In that way, my 're-seeing' has been shaped by my increasing knowledge of both the faces and facets of domestic violence in Muslim communities and the mosaic of Muslim efforts to end it. My own readings and responses are one particular window into the art and the artists who produced it. Seven themes emerged from my contemplation of the visual art pieces, and they bring together descriptions of particular pieces with insights from interviews and observations.

In what follows, I am taking the reader on a virtual walk of the exhibition the way I arranged it after months of contemplating the pieces and what I knew about them. This arrangement is different from the original exhibition, which did not have such themes. Back in 2011, pieces by the same artist were placed close to each other. There were displays on larger and smaller easels and tables positioned in various spaces in the center. This arrangement created the possibility for viewers to see and recognize the individual pieces and the artists as connected to each other and to the theme of the exhibit. The spatial *situatedness* of the art pieces worked in tandem with the presence and positioning of the artists. The viewers at the gallery had the opportunity to consider art pieces and ask the artists questions. The presence of the women artists also added a dimension of Muslim female embodiment to the physical nature of the artworks displayed. The seven parts of my exhibit are called: *Trauma, Culture, Despair, Solace, Process, Support, and Healing*. The article ends with a reflection on responses to the exhibition on the one hand and its impact on the artists on the other.

Trauma

A woman is screaming, her mouth wide open, her eyes on the camera. She has threaded her hands into her hair and seems to be pulling on it as blood runs down her bare forearms. The blood is very red, the hair is very black, and the photograph is urgent and loud. I want to look away. I don't like the sight of blood, and I want her to stop screaming.

The photograph, called "Inside Out," by Afia, was probably the most graphic of all the pieces in the exhibit. I did want to look away and I hesitated in looking at it every time I considered the art pieces. Afia wanted to let people know that this kind of trauma and pain does happen to people, and it happens in Muslim communities. And it is called "Inside Out" because sometimes the real injuries are not on the outside, but on the inside, and those cannot be seen. She had considered making the woman even more bruised but then decided she would

[1] See Juliane Hammer, *Peaceful Families: American Muslim Efforts against Domestic Violence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019).

instead be screaming and thus would not be a silent victim. She asked a family member to model for her photographs, which I found to be profoundly symbolic in also making the point that DV happens in families and communities, so it is personal and not a distant issue.

Three black and white photographs of three women. The first woman, with bruises around her eyes and blood running down the side of her nose, is covering her ears with her hands. The second woman, partially covering her eyes with her hands, has blood and bruises around her mouth and chin. The third woman, covering her mouth with one hand, has a black eye and parallel, bloodied scratches on her chest. All three women are looking into the camera, imploringly, intensely, and directly. I cannot only be shocked. What can I do?

This series, "Hear No Evil, See No Evil, Speak No Evil," also by Afia, has a different effect on me. The choice to make them black and white moves the focus of my attention away from the injuries and towards the women's facial expressions, which draws me in even deeper. Afia said she wanted the series to help survivors see that they are not alone, and she wanted the community to acknowledge that this could happen to any of them and is happening to many more than we know about. In first reactions, when she shared the pictures, she found that people thought these were real victims. Afia explained that the photographs were staged but that the victims are real. Some people were scared of the pictures and older community and family members did not like the graphic nature of them. She wanted that reaction and found that younger viewers already knew that such abuse happens and were thus less shocked at seeing it.

On a vivid red background, with a chain all around the rectangular canvas, a black record is broken into pieces and only held together by small pieces of white tape, each saying "Hope." The record is partially covered by an album cover, white, with a black heart and the Latin phrase, "Amor Vincit Omnia…" written on it in black pen. In the left bottom corner there are red rosebuds, and the right side of the frame is filled with crushed and broken pieces of rose petals. The piece speaks to me even before I see the title, "How many times can a record break & still play music?"

Nadia, the artist who created the piece, decided to provide an explanation that was displayed alongside the artwork during the exhibit. In it, she explained how love, hope, the record, the album cover, the flower petals, and the chain came together to describe the trauma of abuse, especially emotional abuse. Love, for Nadia, was "a powerful thing but loving something or someone" also gives "them the power to destroy us." The record "symbolizes life and how it turns. In this piece it is specifically representative of how we allow emotional abuse to repeat over and over and over again." The album cover represents the ways in which we

mask what is truly happening in our minds and hearts and keeps the eyes of the world outside away from how broken we are inside. The chain is wrapped around the art piece to "symbolize captivity." We can be stuck and helpless even if we recognize our situation and "there are a lot more obstacles to face in order to be set free."

Each of the three pieces centers on the trauma that is caused by various forms of violence. There are physical injuries, which seem to have become a given. Perhaps we *do* get used to images of trauma and injury and become indifferent to them? There is so much focus on physical violence, also in legal and criminal justice proceedings and in awareness work that through its very exposure it simultaneously becomes invisible. The art makes the embodied nature of physical violence real and tangible again while also creating a layer of distance from the trauma of real wounds, broken limbs, ripped skin, and bleeding tissue. Even the scars are printed and painted on canvas, paper, or fabric, not permanently etched onto someone's skin. The trauma represented in art provides a space, or a gap, between the viewer and the physical violence but brings her a step closer to the many other ways in which human beings can be broken, hurt, and torn. The scars of emotional violence become physical in the sharp edges of the broken record and the black and white contrast of the imploring eyes of victims.

That the trauma is real for the artists, at least through the lives of family members, friends, and community members, if not in their own lives, becomes clear in my conversations and interviews. I struggled with what I saw as direct disclosures of abuse experiences when they happened and then again when I had to decide how to write about them. I chose here to tell most of the stories in the third person; as if they had happened to someone my interlocutors knew but not themselves. There were stories where I suspected that they were not third person accounts, but the risk of exposing the artists and their lives in this way is great and I see no marked difference in exposing the stories as their own. If these stories were told to them, they would indeed be equally "real."

> One artist told me about a fellow artist friend she lost:
>
> She was a designer, a very beautiful young woman, with four children. One day, at one o'clock in the morning I got an email from the gallery that she is dead. Her husband killed her with a baseball bat, her four children were in the next room, and she was just beaten to death. We were in touch with her; we were going to these shows and exhibitions together, and we had no idea that she was holding back so much. We found out when she died. And then her children had to be adopted by different families. I heard later that two families adopted two each of the children and they bought houses together so that the children could be together.

Another woman spoke about her friend in Europe who "was married against her will, typical relationship, male ego, and everything. She was under a lot of stress, facing a lot of violence, physical, emotional, sexual, and everything. I was here so I couldn't do much for her; that was really bad. I was feeling helpless; couldn't do anything for her other than praying, and at that point praying wasn't enough for her."

One told the story of a neighbor who was married to a man when she was 18 years old. She lived next door to her in-laws and was mentally abused by both her husband and her mother-in-law. They took away her phone and cut her off from friends and family. This went on for several years, and she had two children. Eventually she ran away. The imam of the community got involved, but encouraged her to go back. She could not go back and had to leave her children with her husband. She won visitation rights in court, but her husband would not allow her contact with her children. The artist telling the story pointed out how in this woman's story "the system" failed her as well.

Another artist told me about a cousin who was sexually abused by an uncle and was for years too ashamed to tell anyone. When she finally did, her father refused to cut off contact with the abuser and the young woman was forced to see him at family gatherings. Eventually, the parents of the woman distanced themselves, somewhat subtly, from the relative but he was never confronted or held accountable. In private conversation, the cousin would open up about her fears about ever getting married and having a fulfilling sexual life.

In this exhibition, in the artworks and in the words of the artists, the victims were always present. They haunted me and pushed me to keep writing, even in the face of the secondary trauma I seemed to be experiencing. They filled the empty spaces between the art pieces, and they connected the artists with each other and with viewers as they considered each piece of art individually and all the artworks together.

Culture

A young woman, no, perhaps a girl, is looking into the camera with large dark brown eyes. She does not smile and her head and neck are adorned with a headscarf and collar adorned with shiny beads and gold and silver thread embroidery. Her head is tilted to the left and she seems to want me to see something, to say something, and perhaps also to do something?

It is the title of Afia's third piece, "Child Bride", that brings home the intended message. The girl in the picture is too young to be married; she is still a child. I placed the photograph in this section on culture because Afia explained the presence of this piece in the exhibit through her concerns about Muslim cultural contexts in which girls are forced to get married too early. She had read a newspaper article about child brides in Yemen and wanted to bring this important

issue into the conversation. She had remarked before that with her artwork she wanted to speak on behalf of victims because "there is so much silence in our culture."

The child bride in her photograph is joined by four paintings, all by the same artist, Saadia. Saadia had found the theme of the exhibition very challenging and had struggled with how to convey specific ideas she had. She read materials from the Peaceful Families Project, including the book, *Change from Within: Diverse Perspectives on Domestic Violence in Muslim Communities*,[2] which contains survivor stories and research articles about DV in different parts of the world, as well resources for advocates and imams. In the end, she decided to focus on

> …things in my culture that could be considered to be forms of violence against women. Whatever you see in the media, sure, there is ill that exists everywhere in the world, but sometimes in countries like mine there is more attention given to one or two cases. If you see any of my paintings, I painted what I saw in our culture. It was about freedoms, about veils, about different things that affect our society but that can be changed if a woman fights enough for it.

A child, in a painting that is four feet tall, stands motionless, and shyly looks to the side. She is wearing an ornate outfit, with a knee-long dress, loose pants, a headscarf with a beaded edge, and another heavy looking mantle that frames her small figure. The girl is painted in black and white.

This painting is called "Don't Marry Me." Like Afia, Saadia was concerned with the practice of child marriage and wanted to represent that concern in one of her paintings. She described child marriage as inflicting violence on young girls, which is something that happens in isolated parts of many nations:

> Particularly in Afghanistan I see this a lot, young kids getting married, and they justify it religiously, which is ridiculous. It's not religious, it is cultural. It was interesting; there was an African American woman at the exhibit who saw the girl as an African bride, and another one who saw an Indian girl. But for me it was an Afghan bride who was being forced into marriage, and the black and white was supposed to show her sorrow. She is a little kid. In Pakistan and Afghanistan, they encourage people to get married very young and say that it is to suppress sexual desire – what does

[2] Maha Alkhateeb and Salma Abugideiri (eds.), *Change From Within: Diverse Perspectives on Domestic Violence in Muslim Communities* (Herndon: Peaceful Families, 2007).

> a twelve-year old know about sex or desire? They use culture to justify stuff like this – it is completely ridiculous.

A woman with a scarf is looking through what looks like an opening in a curtain. One eye is visible and part of her mouth and nose. The split in the curtain is held open by her hands; two fingers on each hand pry it open. One side of the curtain is red with ornate black floral patterns, and the other side is a light yellow with similar decorations.

This piece is called "Piercing through the Veil," and it was intended to represent the ways in which Afghan women are expected to stay home and be seen in public as little as possible. The woman in the painting is looking at the outside, but she cannot be part of it. Even though the use of the word piercing in the title seems to imply the need for change, Saadia said that she also had good and very sweet memories of life inside, "behind the veil" so to speak.

In a colorful room with carved wall decorations and a soft carpet, a woman sits cross-legged, facing the viewer. She is wearing a traditional yellow, red, and green outfit, a headdress with golden coins and a flowing white veil, and her two braids flow down to her lap. She holds a rose in one hand and prayer beads in the other. Behind her stands a figure in a burqa, beige and gray, like a shadow.

In this painting, called "Freedoms," Saadia reflected on the different ways in which women in Afghanistan perceive opportunities and restrictions. She said that many women are content with their lives and that freedom, to do things, to be a professional, to select a spouse, and many others, do not come to them, they have to be fought for. The two women in the painting represent the women who did fight and achieved freedoms and those who did not.

Saadia used the framework of culture in a way we have encountered before, not as the bad counterpart to good religion, but as a framework for understanding different practices and ethics while also allowing for the possibility of change, because in her paintings culture is negotiable, not static. She did accuse particular people in her country, but not her culture, of abusing religion to justify certain practices when it was clear to her that they were not religiously sanctioned.

Culture, with various valences and meanings, appeared frequently in the interviews and preparation conversations. The artists used culture to describe family and community practices of silencing, of ignoring, and of consequently becoming responsible for the plight and suffering of victims. The culture of silence was usually not identified as specifically Muslim or ethnic, but was recognized as universal in the same way all the many forms of abuse are universal. This has of course not prevented those hostile to Muslims, but also to

immigrants more broadly, from using culture as a tool for marking Muslims and their practices as foreign, not belonging in the U.S. and as unfit to participate in American society. On the other hand, culture can be seen in the work of Muslim artists and advocates as a tool to reject patriarchal practices as foreign to religion and a liability for religious activists trying to combat racism and ethnocentrism, as well as sexual abuse and violence.

Several artists juxtaposed the rights of women in this country, the U.S., to call the police, to complain about abuse, to get a divorce with situations in other countries where those rights are not available if victims do not know about them. Women are also further abused by pressure that is put on them to not report, to not complain, and to keep the family together at all costs. One woman described her ethnic cultural context as dominated by gentlemen, hospitable women, and not the stereotypes everyone has about them. Rather, cases of abuse, which she had heard about but that had not happened in her extended family, were considered aberrations from a cultural norm in which women are respected and honored and men are responsible for keeping them that way. I heard echoes here of protective patriarchy that would allow the artist to hold abusers accountable within the framework she had presented.

To one artist, there are aspects of culture that should not exist, but they do and they can be changed:

> Back home, if a woman is abused and she doesn't know her rights, she won't tell anybody, especially in the countryside. She will say, he is my husband, and I am like, he doesn't have to beat you… There are some here, they come and they have language problems, they don't speak English, some men get women from the countryside, with no education. Her concept of life is just to satisfy their husbands, having kids, and staying home. Those are the victims; they can easily be abused. Some of the women are even ashamed to talk about it – that's what I meant by culture, they get shamed by people, they are afraid of their family, the reaction of her parents. And the parents would not be on her side, which is sad. It is a part of the culture that still exists.

One rather fascinating appearance of culture came in the form of several discussions on the acceptance of art as a form of expression in Muslim communities and families. One artist described her art as a fusion between eastern and western ways of creating, and saw herself as an aesthetic bridge between the two. Another narrated how difficult it was for her family to accept that she wanted to express herself visually and in forms that they did not find familiar. Even before this exhibit with its arguably rather controversial topic, her family was concerned about how she would be perceived in the community but also how such perception would affect her (and her sisters') ability to get married.

Another woman artist looked at art making very differently:

> I took a huge step back and asked myself, what is the significance of having art and artists in society? The conclusion that I came to was that being an artist makes you a better human being. And I have always thought that Allah has bestowed a little bit more of a favor upon those of us who are artists because we have a very clear facilitative path to communicating with Him… As you grow as an artist, your subconscious and your conscious become more aligned and often your subconscious and your intuition knows more about what is right than your conscious does.

One artist represented herself as rooted in American cultural ways of "doing art" and referenced several African American artists and writers as her inspiration. She, along with several others, also referred to culture in order to describe their own contributions to artistic production: they were cultural producers, in conversation with different audiences and across communal and social lines. Some also saw themselves as cultural translators who wanted to explain certain issues within their communities to "the outside world" and thus actively challenge existing negative and stereotypical representations.

Despair

A woman with black hair, partly covered by a scarf, sits with her knees pulled close to her chest and her hands resting on top of her knees. Her head is tilted to the side, and she is leaning her cheek on her folded hands. The background looks like a dark window or perhaps the sky has gone dark? Her pose is one of resigned fatigue, she has given up, and there is nothing but despair. At the right bottom corner of the charcoal drawing are two lines of Urdu poetry that read: "When all the hopes have died, why should one have any complaints and keep any expectations?"[3] *Two frames are glued around the woman in despair; one is stamped clay with an embossed floral pattern and the other ripped pieces of red paper that look like drops of blood.*

This piece, by Nida, is called "Despair" but I did not need to see the title to recognize the pose and its meaning. The sadness is palpable and even the embossed frame around the woman cannot raise my (or her spirits). The piece represents a woman, many women, who, because of physical and emotional abuse, have lost all hope. Nida wanted to represent that the violence they are going through comes from men in the male-dominated culture and society of the

[3] This is a couplet from a ghazal by the famous Urdu poet Ghalib (1797-1869) who lived at the end of the Mughal Empire. His poems are very popular with Urdu speakers. I read the lines to mean that he is experiencing so much despair that there is not even any despair possible. I am grateful to Saadia Yacoob for helping me with the translation and with locating the source of the couplet.

subcontinent. The message of both the drawing and the poetry is one of utmost despair. Unlike the artworks I categorized as reflecting trauma, both physical and emotional, the pieces in this group are held together by an overwhelming sense of hopelessness; all energy and will to do anything having disappeared. There is no move to fight back or even to escape, only bleakness.

The head of a woman with dark curly hair, her face contorted in a scream so loud that her mouth is wide open, her eyes are closed, and her left hand is pulling on her hair. Around her are yellow and green pipes. One of the pipes has burst and is spraying water across the painting. This is a different kind of despair, the kind that expresses itself in helpless screams. The woman is at the end of her endurance; she cannot go on as she has before. The pipe has burst because it, too, was beyond endurance and filled past its capacity. I imagine the pipe making a screeching, hissing noise, as the water escapes from its body.

The painting, by Fatimah, is called "The Leak," and, like several other works in the exhibit, it had an immediate impact on me as I viewed it. Some paintings needed explanations while others, like this one, spoke on their own. The woman's frustration and desperation were so vivid and palpable; it was hard to look away.

The first thing I see is the dark silhouette of a hand, in the very left corner of the drawing. There is, perhaps, the shadowy outline of a woman, behind a screen, a curtain, or a window. The hand is clearly outlined with lighter areas around it. As I look more closely, the art piece becomes even more eerie: There are two pieces of rope dangling on both sides of the shadow figure. The woman behind the screen would be kneeling, her hand pressed against the cold glass, and her posture one of hopelessness. The source and form of her suffering are obscured and the sense of despair is exacerbated by the shades of grey and black that dominate the charcoal drawing.

This piece is one of Lamia's contributions to the exhibit. It is called "Emotionally Abused" and it is this title that helps the viewer interpret the source of the woman's suffering and despair. Emotional abuse appears often in discussions of DV, and it is regularly accompanied by statements that contradict an old English children's song: "sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never harm me."[4] In these statements and reflections it becomes clear that the injuries and scars of verbal and emotional abuse can run as deep, if not deeper, than those caused by physical violence. Lamia's drawing was intended to draw

[4] The song was apparently meant to teach children to ignore taunting remarks from others.

attention to the potentially invisible wounds of emotional abuse and the difficulty in letting others know that it is occurring because it cannot be seen.[5]

The fourth piece in this section is a poem accompanied by a silk painting, both by Rabia. The silk painting, on a green and pink background, read the words *Allahu Akbar* (Allah is Great) in blue lines of Arabic calligraphy with golden edging. The poem is called, "Agony of the Skies," and Rabia wrote it one day when she felt completely overwhelmed by stories of abuse, war, and crisis in her own social circles and all over the world. Her other silk pieces are usually full of color, of flowers and swirls that represent hope and healing as possibilities, even for survivors of domestic violence. The first stanza of the poem reads:

The world is spinning around me
I see nothing but the webs
The brutality is beyond any thoughts
The cries and the bloodshed

It goes on to describe how the pain of abuse, violence, and war she sees grips her more and does not allow her soul to heal. She wants to close her eyes to the horror but when she opens them again the suffering is still there. The poem ends with her unfulfilled yearning for change and her prayer for mercy.

To include the theme of despair in my virtual exhibit was important to me because too often we forget how prevalent domestic abuse is, how trapped victims feel, both by the circumstances of their current trauma and/or by memories of past abuse that never leave them. In the activist modes of awareness and change, it can become difficult to remember that many victims do not and cannot report their abuse, cannot ask for help, and sometimes cannot even name their circumstances as abusive. It is here that despair reigns and hopelessness is abundant.

---

[5] The United Kingdom passed a law in late 2015 that makes emotionally abusive behavior a punishable offence:
"Domestic abusers who subject victims to controlling or coercive behavior could face up to five years in jail under a new law which comes into force today (29 December 2015). The new legislation will mean the CPS can for the first time prosecute specific offences of domestic abuse if there is evidence of repeated, or continuous, controlling or coercive behavior. This type of abuse in an intimate or family relationship can include a pattern of threats, humiliation and intimidation, or behaviour such as stopping a partner socialising, controlling their social media accounts, surveillance through apps and dictating what they wear. Controlling or coercive behaviour causes someone either: to fear that violence will be used against them on at least two occasions; or, serious alarm or distress which has a substantial effect on their usual day-to-day activities." See Crown Prosecution Service, http://www.cps.gov.uk/news/latest_news/new_domestic_abuse_law_introduced/, last accessed 1/2/17.

There is another dimension to despair I want to remember: Despite decades of awareness work, better tools provided through the legal system, and many more organizations and networks that offer services to victims, the statistical incidents of domestic violence in American society have not decreased significantly. In conversations with DV advocates, this is a dimension of burnout they do not usually directly link with their own fatigue. When an organization or leader calls for the "end of domestic violence in Muslim communities," I worry about the absoluteness of this goal and wonder whether there is a way to put the bar lower, by vowing to struggle for an end to DV in Muslim families.

Solace

A woman with a headscarf, her face in profile, with her head bowed, is resting her forehead on her hand. The painting is beautifully colored with subtle shades of yellow, pink, orange, red, green, blue, and gray. The woman's posture reflects worry and perhaps also despair? Her pose and the colors seem to be at odds with each other. Her headscarf, her face, and her hand are suffused with soft light.

This piece, by Huda, is called "Inner Thoughts." She explained that the painting also has an Arabic title, "Khawatir," which means thoughts or ideas but can also be a form of non-rhyming poetry.[6] To her, the woman is thinking, but she is not hopeless or desperate. She pointed out that both the headscarf and the face of the woman look like flowers when the viewer first approaches the painting. It is large in size, which to her emphasized its focus on beauty and on the play of colors.

There are two large painting next to each other. One shows a woman in profile, her hands raised in supplication. She is a lighter silhouette on a dark brown and gray background. The color of the background is repeated in Arabic writing that covers her scarf, her face, and the rest of the painting. Not all of the Arabic script is legible. What is legible spells two verses from the Qur'an: "And behold, with every hardship comes ease; verily, with every hardship comes ease," (Qur'an 94:5-6; "Fa inna ma'l-'usra yusran; inna ma'l-'usra yusran").[7]

The second painting, with a background of orange and red, shows a woman with a headscarf, her face turned directly to the viewer, and a large tear on her cheek.

---

[6] http://www.huda-art.com/artwork_paintings_figurative_paintings.htm

[7] The chapter in the Qur'an, 94, is called "The Opening Up of the Heart" and addresses the Prophet Muhammad to tell him that God had opened his heart, lifted his burden from him that weighed heavily on him, and raised him high in dignity. After the reminder that with hardship comes ease, Muhammad is told to remain steadfast, once he has been freed from his distress turn to his Sustainer with love.

This painting, too, is covered in writing, in a deep blue, and with words in both English and Arabic. Some of the English phrases are legible: "I wish to see my heart, my inner thoughts… I wish to swim in the veins of my inner thoughts… I wish to see what I can't see in my eyes… so I can feel… I am going… which no one knows…"

The two paintings are both very tall and narrow (almost 6 feet by 20 inches), and in the exhibition, they were placed next to each other. Huda described them as two pieces of a series. In the exhibition the first one was titled "Hardship & Ease" while on Huda's artist website, almost the same piece is called "After Every Hardship There Comes Ease," a more direct reference to the Qur'anic verse it was inspired by. The second piece was called "I wish" in the exhibition but is listed on Huda's website as "Inner Thoughts II" thus linking it with the first painting (above) in our theme of *Solace* as well.[8]

I want to quote Huda here directly to help explain the layers of meaning in "Hardship & Ease":

> It's referring to the healing process that these women can go through. It's black charcoal on plywood and it is also the female face, in the position of making *du'a* with the cupped hands. So it is referring to cultural and religious references, female identity, and reference to healing from the Qur'an, through the selected verse from the Qur'an, "and after every hardship there comes ease." That is true for everything that every woman can go through in her life, or any individual, it doesn't have to be a woman. In our lives sometimes we encounter things that are very difficult but if we are patient enough Allah will replace it with something better, and if we have the real understanding of the secrets of the Qur'an.
>
> The painting is very long, it is the size of a door and that is referring to another thing which is that sometimes we just want to shut the door and forget about things, but this door can also be an opening of good things, if you open it and explore other avenues. The smoky background, it's black, it's dark, it refers to the hardship that one goes through, but you can get out of it. And the best time that you can resort to Allah and to His help is during the night when you are alone and when you can seek his help and guidance to get you through difficult times.

According to Huda, the second painting is the daytime companion to the first. It is colorful and the woman is facing the viewer to show what she is going through, and she is facing society with her thoughts in English and Arabic to make a statement about being a Muslim woman in America.

[8] http://www.huda-art.com/artwork_calligraphy_painting_with_text.htm

The last art piece in this section is a charcoal drawing of hands open in Muslim supplication. The hands are surrounded by what looks like a halo of light or the rays of the sun emanating from behind them.

The drawing, by Lamia, is called "Doua" which means supplication in Arabic.[9] The theme of supplication, of opening one's hands to receive blessing from God has appeared several times already and continues in this piece. Lamia was reluctant to explain any of her pieces during the exhibit when people walked up and asked questions, but she stayed close to her pieces for most of the time. She expressed concern about how viewers would connect her to her art pieces and that they might assume that they were based on her own experiences even if that was not actually the case. If she distanced herself, they would think she did not want to acknowledge any abuse experience in her own life. This exchange illustrates both the complications of asking artists to explain the meaning of their work and to assume the meaning of artworks to be connected to their own lives rather than considering the possibility that they are speaking for and on behalf of others, especially related to this exhibition's theme. I am also reminded of the complicated ways in which non-white artists are often confined to representing various facets of their identity, including poets, novelists, and visual artists, while white artists are perceived as unmarked and thus able to write, create, and speak for anyone they choose. Not only are the women artists themselves identifying as Muslim women artists, but by engaging with the theme of violence they also run the risk of being reduced to victims of abuse themselves and being saddled with the assumption that it was their own abuse that inspired their artworks. This possibility has to be taken seriously as a risk, especially connected to the stigma and shame that can accompany the disclosure of victim and survivor status in Muslim communities and families. It is a risk made even more threatening because the range of abuse experiences addressed in the exhibition included child sexual abuse and sexual assault both within Muslim families/communities and in the context of war and conflict in Muslim majority societies.

The role of religion, Islam, as a source of guidance and solace in the artworks is illustrated by the pieces in this section. Visually, there are Arabic words, specifically quotes from the Qur'an, represented in calligraphy, but also poses of prayer and supplication and perhaps rather ubiquitously, women who wear headscarves. That articles of Muslim clothing, embodied forms of prayer and words, and phrases from scripture are present in the works of self-identified, Muslim, women artists is perhaps not surprising. That headscarves, Qur'anic

[9] "Doua" is how Lamia decided to spell the word – I have spelled it "du'a" in other places in this article.

references, and Muslim prayer poses become easy representations of Muslim authenticity, as well as perhaps tropes of representation, is worth pointing out as well.

In a reflection on what Islam is in relation to domestic violence, another artist opined that Islam had given women rights and that Islam protects women, but sometimes women have no education so they don't know their rights. They have Muslim beliefs, but they do not study what Islam actually says about different things. She was adamant that domestic violence is wrong according to Islam. When I challenged her and asked whether other Muslims would agree with her on that statement, she said: "Everybody who has Islam in his heart, who gets the point of it, who is smart enough to see it, to see the real meaning, yes, they would."

This question was not without struggle for another woman who had heard many times that "the Qur'an said you could beat your wife. They don't follow, what is written, I think. They interpret it the way they want to. It's ironic, the Qur'an, the Arabic is the same, but the interpretations have given it so many different meanings. I have heard people say that it is allowed – I still don't believe that!" She had done some searching and had found that in Surat al-Nisa' (chapter four) of the Qur'an, there were interpretations that linked the verses (she did not remember the numbers) to the permission of beating the wife if she denied intercourse. She was unsure and kept saying that she should know better. But then she also said: "But beating like this, every day, torturing the woman, no, that is not permitted, it is not." In the process of doing research, finding legal interpretations and applications of passages in the Qur'an, she realized that there are many interpretations by different scholars, in different languages and from different time periods. She trusted things she found in her native language more than information in English. She decided that the Qur'an needed to be interpreted according to the time the interpreter lives in and according to what is considered appropriate. I was struck by her repeated reliance on authoritative scholars as sources of acceptable opinions, which she combined with the demand that one should only follow majority opinions that have been confirmed by many other scholars. In direct contradiction to this statement, she repeatedly said that in her heart she always knew that abuse and violence in a marriage were wrong. This was by far the most direct statement from any of the artists reflecting the ethic of non-abuse as pre-existing and conveyed through conviction as a feeling in the heart.

Only one of the artists mentioned that she did not need Islam to explain that abuse and violence were wrong, "as a human being, I know what is right and what is wrong." Her skepticism came in part from her frustration with religious leaders and authority figures and the ways in which she had seen them handle (or rather, not acknowledge) cases of abuse. She was not interested in involving any

of the leaders in the preparations for the exhibit because she feared that they would overwhelm the group of women artists with their claims to authority. At the end of our conversation, she acknowledged though that, "even if I don't need Islam to know what is right, for other women Islam is important and knowing the right interpretations can be empowering the same way or even more than the art pieces we are creating." For her then, the solace did not come from religion, but from the making of art. She gestured towards the important tension that existed between the preparation of the art pieces and the exhibit, the planning and fund-raising, the negotiation of deadlines, commitments, and catering needs on one hand, or in short, the *Process*, and the presentation of the art as a product and event on the other.

Process

Pieces of tile, in blue, brown, green, white, and beige, irregular in shape, are embedded in beige, sandy grout and surrounded by a rough wooden frame painted in a brownish gray. The tile fragments have sharp and sometimes jagged edges. One object is rectangular and the second is a square.

Both pieces are called "Broken." They were among several more three-dimensional art objects made by Jenine. She was an architect by training and profession and engaged in mixed media artistic work "on the side." For the exhibit she had created pieces that "reflect on stories I have heard from friends of mine who have been victims of violence… My art reflects on their stories as well as on stories you hear in the media. My pieces focus on the idea that women who have been victims of violence often feel invisible or that their stories are not known to the people close to them. Instead, they have this façade and, in my pieces, I work with this idea of the façade and the real faces."

The "Broken" pieces are mosaics but they are also trays. She described her work as sustainable and explained that she had gathered the mosaic pieces, with jagged edges and irregular shapes, after smashing several old tiles from her architecture firm. "The actual process of smashing the tiles was a release and it was me reliving what my friends are going through and expressing their anger through the process of breaking the tile pieces and then putting them back together. It was like the separation of their lives into all these pieces but then, how do they come back and create this whole person who has to sustain herself in front of everybody else?"

The mosaics appealed to me in a special way and connected to my thoughts on trauma and the possibility of wholeness. One of Jenine's broken mosaics sits across from my desk as I write, as a reminder of the significance of this project and the power of visual and artistic representations. Several other pieces, including a set of images of women's faces made from old fabric and a set

of miniature tiles in similar ways were ways for Jenine to consider the process of piecing together lives wrenched apart by experiences of trauma and violence.

On a black fabric background, a set of copper bowls, ranging in size, about twenty in total, are arranged roughly by size. Some are open towards the viewer while others are overturned. This could be a galaxy of copper stars, a set of play bowls for a child, or an attempt to collect rainwater for a garden. The canvas they are mounted on stands upright on an easel, so perhaps collecting water would not be possible.

This object, by Mawadda, is called "Noise." It was accompanied by a small slip of paper, which the viewer could take along, that read:

> "Noise" is a series of copper bowls made to symbolize the different processes one feels and experiences after being a victim of abuse. The different size bowls symbolize small flashbacks one gets in their daily lives, and the big bowls symbolize the agony of reliving the moment. The malleability in forming bowls in the series "Noise" literally mimics physically fighting back. The hammering noises in making the bowls symbolize the blocking of thought and the distractions that block reality.

She explained that she usually makes jewelry, but that she felt compelled to create a metal art object in order to respond to the theme of the exhibition. She spent a long time thinking about the possibilities of the metals she worked with and wrote notes and thoughts down for several weeks. She considered what different forms of violence and abuse might be like and decided that for her, at that point in her life, rape would be the worst thing that could happen. She thought about the "anger that would be building inside, the reliving of the moment, the fighting back, and the going back to everyday life, and the ways it would affect the person in the long term." She thought that it would change the person completely and shift their outlook on reality. She wanted to make a piece that required most of the senses, both in making it and in viewing/experiencing it. "After I finished the piece, I realized that it doesn't have to be about rape, it can be about other bad experiences, about violence, but also about a mean comment someone made when you were younger that you keep replaying in your mind. So it could be for anyone."

In describing the process of hammering the bowls she referred again to the noise that it made to do so. She also decided not to polish the copper in order to reflect on the connection of beauty and ugliness in the copper as a formable material and the process of giving it shape.

On a bright red background, lines of Arabic calligraphy form the shape of a woman's head in profile. The script is golden yellow.

This piece was created by Huda, and it represented the theme of the art exhibit in Arabic, rendered in beautiful calligraphy. Huda explained that she wanted to connect the face of a woman with the words that formed the theme, but she did not want to imprint the calligraphy onto the face as she has done with other paintings. Instead, the words form the face and head of the woman. She is seen in profile because the piece is not a critique, the woman pictured does and does not want to tell about her abuse, and so she is not facing the viewer. Her turned head also represents the shame associated with disclosing and discussing abuse in some Muslim cultures. The spacing between the lines and letters was an important point of the calligraphic process because even when women tell their stories, the stories contain the silence of things that are unspeakable. And women often are silenced into not speaking about their abuse. These silences are carved into their histories and into their memories, and eventually they shape who they are. The picture of the woman is intended to remind the viewer of an ID picture because eventually a victim of abuse can be reduced to that one identity.

Support

In a charcoal drawing, two hands are reaching towards each other. They do not quite touch but the effort to do so is obvious. One hand looks real while the other one is more of a shadow, perhaps from behind a screen?

Lamia's "Reaching Hand" begins to tell the story of how abuse victims try and find support and how they, at least sometimes, do not know how and do not know who to approach for help. It is a reminder that support is out there even when victims cannot always see it. Of course, finding support and navigating the complicated structures of the state, private agencies, and non-profit organizations can be extremely challenging for victims. Similarly, taking a first step to acknowledge abuse and the need for support can pose insurmountable hurdles for women. The hands in the drawing represent this struggle and reflect the complicated ways in which victims who need support do not always find it or even know that it exists.

Two rectangular pieces of pottery, glazed in warm shades of ochre, brown, and soft white, are arranged next to each other. They are shaped like bowls or trays, with the corners and edges curving upward. The ceiling lights are reflected in the luster of the glaze.

The placement of these two clay pieces by Jenine in this section on *Support* comes through their titles. They are called "Hold" and "Cradle." At first I thought of them as nouns but it makes more sense to me now to read hold and cradle as verbs. The pieces are meant to do something: to hold and to comfort like a cradle would an infant. Jenine also referred to the process of shaping, painting, and then glazing the pieces as reflective of the layers of women's lives. Several of

the artists saw their participation in the exhibition as an expression of support for victims and survivors of abuse, whether they were people they knew or the many unnamed and invisible victims and survivors that surround all of us. They also found support for this endeavor in each other.

In several interviews and conversations, artists described the initial reactions of family members and friends to their art pieces. Even when they first expressed shock or concern about the pieces and their impact as part of the exhibition, most eventually came around and supported the project. This validation and support for their art was important to them and they saw the closest circles of family and friends as both their first audience and as a support network. Similarly, artists described their emergence as artist, whether professional or as amateur artists, as a process of negotiating their need and drive to express themselves with the reactions of family and friends. Attitudes to "art-making," as we saw in the discussion of culture above, ranged from full support and the deep appreciation of art as a reflection of divine beauty in this world to some doubt and lack of understanding. Eventually, their artistic drive was recognized as a calling for many of them and family members, especially parents and siblings were described as expressing pride in their accomplishments. At the exhibit, it was clear that a number of artists had invited friends and family members to attend and they had done so in significant numbers, and as a show of support, for both the artists in their families and friends circles, and in support of the theme of the exhibit.

Support for the project also came from a number of organizations including the Peaceful Families Project, Project Sakinah, and Muslimaat al-Nisaa, the Muslim women's shelter in Baltimore. Mildred Muhammad, the author of *Scared Silent*, was there to sign and sell her book and to promote her organization, After the Trauma.[10] Several other organizations had sponsored information tables at the exhibit and showed their support through their presence there. They also provided information about DV and available services in the DC metropolitan area. Other sponsors included the Interfaith Community against Domestic Violence, Montgomery County in Maryland, a county that has been a leader in developing structures and services for DV victims.[11]

Brought together, these layers of encouragement and support helped make the fruition of the project possible and were meant to provide support to survivors and empower women who had experienced various forms of violence and abuse. The theme of the exhibition very intentionally included both empowerment and

[10] See Hammer, *Peaceful Families*, p. 25-52.
[11] See Hammer, *Peaceful Families*, p. 152-187.

healing, because the artists and organizers wanted to do more than raise awareness of the issue – they were invested in both the possibility and the necessity for healing and for the empowerment of women.

Healing

Lines of handwriting, in English, that are almost but not quite legible are at the center of a large piece framed in black. The writing is partly obscured by ornate flowers and vines, in red, blue, and yellow, that grow out of the top left and bottom right corner of the page. There are red felt pieces, looking like clouds and flowers, and thick black threads of felt that somehow threateningly encroach upon the story. I want to read the lines, but the handwriting is not really legible. There is a story here, but it cannot be read easily.

The artwork is by Kamila, and she called it "Desert Story." It appears in the final section of the virtual exhibition on healing because the making of the piece, the process for her, was one of working through her own experiences and she described it as an important way to bring closure to a particular part of her life. She employed lines that looked like language, like writing, because she was interested in the idea of meaning and form, and she wanted the viewer to stay long enough to try and read what was written. This piece tells the story of her abusive marriage. The story begins with a road trip across the United States she took with a friend before she got married. Her marriage of ten years ended in 2010 and her friend called her up to ask whether she wanted to take another trip through the desert, and she did. The felt pieces on the artwork were made right after the first trip, and the dryness of the material reminded her of the desert. There were feelings of anger, of hurt, and of fire inside that reminded her both of the heat of the desert and especially the nature of the cactus plants she saw there.

Making the piece was her way of letting go, of working through the experiences of her marriage and divorce, and of finding the strength to move on. She presented the artwork as her closure and wanted to both help herself heal and show others that closure and healing are possible.

There are shapes and colors, pieces of newsprint, and the crumbled lines of the paper that the artist painted on. The shapes and colors, purple, red, yellow, blue, form the face and torso of a woman. She wears a headscarf, her eyes, nose, and neck are dark spots, and her expression is unreadable. Her posture looks a little bit stooped, and the feeling of the painting is strangely neutral.

This mixed-media painting, by Fatimah, made it into the *Healing* section of the exhibit because of its title. It is called "Confidence: Self-Portrait" and I read it as a reflection of the self-confidence the artist had gained through her work. It conveyed that such confidence was possible again, and that self-expression had allowed her to reach this point.

In what I thought of as a key exchange in a preparation meeting, two of the artists discussed the significance of art and art therapy for the process of healing and perhaps also empowerment.

This juxtaposition of the ugliness of violence and abuse and the beauty at the forefront of healing can be found in many examples of artworks produced by survivors of trauma and abuse. For example, in looking at art pieces displayed on the website of Vera House (a DV advocacy organization in New York), I noticed how the art pieces made by survivors can be divided into two categories: those that reflect on the abuse and its consequences on one side and those who represent things, colors, thoughts and feelings that are beautiful and intended to counter the ugliness of the abuse.[12]

The theme of healing was most compellingly brought out in the decision to invite Marta Sanchez to lead a workshop on the evening of the exhibit. Sanchez was born and raised in Panama and is a self-taught visual artist, poet, and an activist. In one statement, on the website of an advocacy organization where she was a featured artist, she stated: "When I speak, I speak for survivors of sexual violence. I do not represent them, because it is virtually impossible to represent a silent, isolated community that rarely makes its voice heard. I speak for them, so that they will know that the violence they experienced was not their fault, and so they will know that they are not alone."[13] In a small book with her writings and artwork, called *Beauty Unbalanced*, she writes: "Her paintings are autobiographical, capturing her journey from victim to survivor of sexual violence. Her creativity has been key to her survival. Through her artwork and writing she transforms each experience into something useful and positive. Her work focuses on hope, the importance of self-love, and the way we deal with (or ignore) sexual violence."[14]

At the exhibit, Marta, carrying her baby in a soft brown scarf, wrapped snugly around him, she started by asking everyone to stand, "because I am so excited that you are all here to take a stand, to take a stand against violence." She engaged the audience through an interactive poem in which she would read lines

---

[12] See http://www.verahouse.org/domestic-violence-sexual-assault/survivors/survivors-art-poetry. Vera House is a DV advocacy and service organization in Central New York, created in 2005 through a merger of Vera House and the Rape Crisis Center. Vera House was founded in 1977 by Sister Mary Vera, a member of the Congregation of St. Joseph, a Catholic order of nuns.

[13] http://www.arte-sana.com/featured_artist.htm

[14] Marta Sanchez, *Beauty Unbalanced* (self-published, 2009). In my copy of the book, which I bought at the exhibit, she wrote: "To Juliane, may beauty and balance be with you, always."

and the audience had to respond, loudly and convincingly, "Stop." She said that if we all said it loud enough and with conviction it would carry through the universe and truly stop violence. She showed pieces of her artworks in a set of slides and spoke about her own life experience, her journey, and her pain, because she could only speak from that place of personal experience. Part of her journey was to love herself again, to paint and draw angels that guard every one of us, and to eventually find a partner and have a child with them.

We all spent some time writing messages to each other on pieces of paper, testimonies, notes of encouragement, of support, and of love for each other. She collected them and read several out loud. There was a genuine sense of community that permeated the room, a powerful connection and a kind of warmth, appreciation, and love that I would not have thought possible in a roomful of strangers.

I thought it was both meaningful and significant that the keynote speaker and workshop leader for the exhibition was a survivor of sexual violence. Throughout my research, I have recognized the boundaries that are sometimes drawn around different types of interpersonal violence and the deepest silence that surrounds issues of sexual violence, be it in marriage, against children, or against women. Marta's presence, her outspokenness about the nature of her trauma and the ways in which she connected sexual violence to other forms of oppression and trauma, brought back together the often-disparate strands of awareness work and activism.

For the many ways in which the artists and organizers navigated Muslim communities, DV organizations, and state institutions, and for the complicated ways in which feminist ideas and practices permeate work related to gender-based violence, it also mattered that Sanchez identifies as a feminist. In her essay, "The Feminist Evolution of an Artist, Survivor, Conjurer from the Tropics," she writes:

> I became a feminist at creation, not at birth, but between conception and light. Feminism named me, while my grandfather strung binding words together beneath a tree. My father nurtured me a feminist. I was a feminist when I was raped on my way to Paradise. I was a feminist when I worked at the Feminist Women's Health Center in Atlanta, shedding light on my own abortion experience. I was a feminist the day I became an artist, fell in love, and every day that activism guides me through this world.[15]

[15] Marta Sanchez, in *Click: When We Knew We Were Feminists*, eds. J. Courtney Sullivan and Courtney E. Martin (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2010), 145-154.

Conclusion: On Impact and Reception

The three-hour art exhibit attracted a large crowd and was considered a big success by the organizers. Many lamented that the artworks could not stay on display longer and thus reach a larger audience. Representatives from Montgomery County, including Lily Qi, from the Office for Community Partnerships, and Council President Valerie Ervin, offered opening remarks and messages of support. Qi made explicit connections between the theme of violence in Muslim communities and the presence of the same or similar issues in other communities and societies.

Nadia said at the opening: "This is a very unprecedented art exhibit, not only for Muslim women artists but really in our community, to be speaking out about domestic violence and sexual abuse and other forms of abuse, against women and children that happen, shown through the medium of art." Artists, advocates, friends, family members and visitors, some Muslim, and many others not, mingled at the exhibit, discussed issues of violence with officials and artists and looked genuinely impressed and moved at many of the artworks.

In one of the planning meetings, the tension between self-expression and the urgency of awareness of violence on one hand, and the interest and needs of organizations in the artworks as means for visibility on the other, were discussed:

> Some people and organizations are interested in purchasing art pieces or the copyright so they can use them for their awareness work by making greeting cards and buttons. But they are selective; there was one that wouldn't put our link on their Facebook page because it showed Lamia's drawing and they found it disturbing. One thing about this art exhibit is that we are not afraid; we don't censor the reality, which is that there are all these issues, and we are not going to try and shun the discomfort of this, but we will see this through. Even on the day of the exhibit, there will be some controversial topics and pieces; we are not doing this to please a particular crowd. It's first of all for us, to have reflected on the theme and worked through it for ourselves. There may be opportunities to sell our work to groups that work specifically in domestic violence and to Muslim groups.

One of the artists had expressed similar concerns in an interview:

> It was a difficult idea to digest, to sit down and think: "What do I do that is not gory?" As artists, we do this as a passion and not only as a hobby, but sometimes it is nice to sell your work, too. A lot of these pieces were on sale and you are sitting there thinking: "What can I do that is not going to be gory but gets the message across and people would actually say, okay, I want to hang this in my living room?"

Between the advertising beforehand and the outreach work to garner support from Muslim communities and DV organizations, the exhibit attracted a

great deal of attention beyond its audience on that evening. Several of the art pieces, by Afia, Nadia, and Jenine, were displayed at a fundraising event for the Peaceful Families Project at George Mason University that same year. Other pieces were displayed at a mosque in Maryland and when I last inquired, other Muslim community centers had expressed interest. At one point there were discussions about creating a traveling exhibit, but this project never materialized. The creation of the art pieces, the process itself as art therapy, the building of a community through the organization as well as the exhibition as an event, all came together to form one of the most powerful and memorable moments in my research.

It had a similar or even deeper impact on the artists themselves. This impact is best represented by describing one last art piece and framing it, not with an explanation by the artist, but with a comment by one of the other women artists after the exhibit.

The left side of the painting is a woman in profile, her face outlined in black and white. Her black hair is flowing into the painting and from her open mouth, a thick chain emerges and then breaks in the center of the painting, with small pieces flying in all directions. The background of the painting, a dark red, increases the intensity of the painting.

It is called "My Voice" and was painted by Saadia. It reminded me very much of the Singaporean AWARE pictures, but the message was clearly very different. The chain that had been holding back the woman's voice was breaking and she was able to speak or scream, boldly and without fear. One of the artists remarked that it was a very powerful experience for her to be part of this group. She felt proud and important and a little bit like a star. She might even have spoken for the other artists involved in the exhibition project, so she will have the last word in this article:

> We made a point, we did! The point was that you have to face it: violence against women exists. Every day women get beaten up, get hurt, and you have to face it, maybe more for Muslim women because of the religion and the culture. We are done with that; we are so tired of it! Afia's photographs and especially Saadia's painting of the woman screaming, she is saying, for all of us, 'Enough!'