

“Female Gaze” Podcast Transcript

Intro Music

Hello and welcome to the Harrisonburg 360 Podcast. I’m your host Elainah Elkins.

The Harrisonburg 360 Podcast is an attempt to capture and record narratives of immigrants living in the Harrisonburg community. Using past and present voices of Harrisonburg immigrants, students in our JMU English class have collaborated to create a space focused on the importance of listening to each other’s voices. Every person deserves a chance to share their story, and we, as a class, are privileged to share these stories with you in hopes of expanding perceptions of what it means to be an immigrant in Harrisonburg.

transition music

Each week, Harrisonburg 360 is produced by a different team of students. This week’s episode was produced by Elainah Elkins, Jordan Zapp, Gabriella Powell, and Electra Ellis. In this week’s episode, we’ll be discussing two female immigrants who came to the Shenandoah Valley, Lynn Buchanan, a Phillipina immigrant, and Hiba Ali, who we had the privilege of interviewing, a Syrian immigrant. While each woman shared many important and interesting details in their stories, their specific experiences as women immigrants sheds light onto the independence, resilience, and empowerment of female immigrant narratives. These two women’s stories in many ways contrast one another, but also come together to both reflect the strength of women, reminding us that there is no one way that a woman experiences things or that immigrants experience their journey. In addition to female empowerment across intersections, Lynn and Hiba’s stories also remind us of the ways in which immigrants either hold on or let go of the culture from their home country, once again highlighting the multitude of ways immigrants chose to forge their own path and live their own story.

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Lynn Buchanan was interviewed in October of 2014 as a part of the *Life In the Valley Oral History Project*. When she was 25, Lynn married a 70 year old American man and came to the United States from the Philippines. She became very close with him, and after immigrating to the United States, depended on him for nearly everything. However, because of their age difference, her husband knew she would need to learn to live a life without him. Shortly before he passed, Lynn describes how she began to regain more independence and autonomy in her life....

BUCHANAN: Just the year before my husband died, he moved me. He kicked me out of the house basically. But I would say, most people would say that but not really that way. He was worried because he was seventy-nine at that time, or close to seventy-nine. Probably he was still seventy-eight something [like that] because he died at seventy-nine and he was worried because I was so dependent. I think, well it’s kind of sad but at the same time, he’s right. Who’s going to take care of the kid? (laughs) Because I’m so used to, I was spoiled. So then it made him a lot more worried that’s, what’s going to happen to me. There’s this girl, she won’t drive, she won’t go to the mall by herself--she has to be with me. I wouldn’t mind if I practiced my driving, but it’s okay with me as long as he’s with me, right there. Somehow I was just thinking that way, like

everything is okay if he was there. So I'm not used to being by myself. So what he did was, like, he said I'm going to need to learn to be on my own because when something happen to him, I have to be ready. But I didn't really believe that's what he was doing, like I didn't understand why I had to move out of the house and be on my own? I enrolled in school. He said, "we're doing this to train you to be on your own because if something happen to me you're going to have to do it." So I went to the National College. I took some computer classes. He would come to school. Check my oil in my car make sure I have a coolant.

Immigrants who marry a United States citizen are eligible for a marriage-based green-card. This status grants them a "permanent resident" title and allows them to apply for a job anywhere in the U.S. While these were the means that allowed Lynn to come to the United States, her husband's death did not allow her to continue to depend on someone else for her economic as well as general well-being. When faced with a lack of support, Lynn did what she had to do in order to create and sustain a life for herself in the United States. Despite coming here with the assistance and dependence on someone else, Lynn was able to make the transition to a life on her own.

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Our next speaker, Hiba came to the United States on a student visa with her son's father, her ex-husband. While she was with him for some time after immigrating to the United States, the relationship was physically abusive. Although Lynn and Hiba had very different experiences immigrating to the United States, each was placed into situations where they were forced to become more independent as single women and a single mother. Both came to the United States with the intention of having a husband or partner in their life, but their individual circumstances did not allow for this to be true. As their lives began to change, each woman found ways to take care of and provide for themselves.

ALI: Actually, it was a bit of, like, a domestic violence issue. Even though we don't open up about these things, and for a long time, I felt like this is something I don't want to share with the world— I felt embarrassed of rather than the other person should have been embarrassed of his actions. I was married for almost two years. And, it wasn't really a good marriage. So, I feel like, for me, being in the U.S. was an eye opener, as a woman, because even though I say we are pretty open as a country, and I do feel like in comparison with other countries and cultures, woman in Syria, are— have a bit more empowerment, but there's still that cultural aspect where you feel like obligated to stay in a relationship— in a marriage, people will talk about you if you get divorced— you'll be looked at differently, and things like that. o, I remember the day I decided to [unclear] that I'm done, I took my son and I— and I went to my parents house. And, at that point, both me and my ex, we had— we were on a kind of agreement that this is not going to work anymore. And, being in America kind of made me feel much more stronger in my decision. And I wasn't afraid, like I said, of the cultural aspects. Rather, I felt that I was doing the right thing.

As Hiba explained in her clip, she first felt embarrassed about her situation, which led her not to leave or share what she was going through with her friends or family. While this is a common sentiment among women in abusive relationships, 1 in 4 women have been the victim of physical

domestic violence and, on a typical day, there are more than 200,000 phone calls placed to domestic violence hotlines (in the U.S.). Oftentimes, like Hiba, women will leave the situation once they feel it has reached a certain point of things not being able to change, or there is a child involved that they want to protect.

Even though Hiba was afraid of how her family would react, she received support from both her mother and sister as she left her abusive situation. While society in the U.S. in many ways empowered her to leave, and Syrian culture and relationships are viewed differently, Hiba importantly stated that women have different forms of autonomy in both areas.

Alternative to above: While society in the U.S. in many ways empowered Hiba to leave her abusive relationship, she importantly noted that women in both Syria and the U.S. have autonomy. However, oftentimes, the institution of marriage and a family's, friends' or even a community's perception of a woman leaving a marriage in Syria may have been viewed differently than it was in the U.S. Even though Hiba was afraid of how her family would react, she received support from her mother and father as she left her abusive situation.

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The stories of Lynn and Hiba provide two different examples across time, cultures, and regions in which immigrant women were placed in difficult situations, and as a result, demonstrated their power, resilience, strength, and independence to overcome these adversities. Lynn and Hiba's stories highlight that there are a multitude of ways women can, and do, find ways to act independently and exercise their autonomy.

Immigrant women, regardless of their experiences and story, find ways to support themselves or their families. As they endure the challenges that can come with the immigrant experience, which is often different or increased because of their gender, women like Lynn and Hiba find unique and different ways to ensure their success and create their own story in the United States.

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Becoming more resilient and independent women is not the only place that Lynn and Hiba's stories intersect; each woman also chose unique and different ways to engage with their home-country's culture after coming to the United States. For Lynn, in many ways, this meant abandoning some of her previous culture and assimilating more to the United States' way of life. For Hiba, however, she kept strong ties to her Syrian heritage, wanting to not only remember and honor it for herself, but also to educate others. While their experiences as women in many ways bonded the two women, making their stories more alike than different, it is important to note that shared gender does not inherently mean shared experiences. Through how Lynn and Hiba chose to interact with their culture, they represent the uniqueness and diversity that comes with immigrant experiences in America.

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When Lynn came to the United States, in many ways, she chose to abandon parts of her culture from the Phillipines to better assimilate into American society. Culture assimilation in the United States is often known as “Americanization,” and often leads many immigrants to adapt more to the way of life around them in America opposed to their own tradition and culture. This often means giving up things like language, traditions, or even religion, but sometimes even physical appearances such as clothing. It can also be deeper and change the way a person lives including their values or family structure. In this clip, we hear Lynn describe some of the ways in which she became more accustomed and assimilated to American culture....

BUCHANAN: I didn't have a lot of Filipino friends. (laughs) Now that I have, when I speak I have a lot more of my Filipino language back, my Bisayan. But for a while I did not have any friends for ten years, Filipino friends. Friends I had were all Caucasian. I've heard a few stories said, "Oh, Lynn is some," this is from Filipinos, "Oh Lynn is Englishera." Because I just kept speaking in English. Well they didn't know that for years, I had to speak in English. And then I have a cousin who married also with an American, but then for me I just think that it's rude to speak in other language if there's somebody here beside me. Because my husband was always with me I'm not going to speak in Filipino if my husband's with me. I think it's rude. If he won't understand what I'm talking about, you know.

(Interviewer) MOSES: What was your first impression of the United States? When you came-- new country, never been here before, what were the first things you noticed that surprised you or--

BUCHANAN: Well, what I notice is that people live so different. In the Philippines, in the morning there you can see your neighbor you can already talk to your neighbors, and in here--it was in the spring that I arrived, in April of '98. It's cold and then I noticed like your neighbors always in a rush, everyone's going... You don't talk to people; don't get to hang out that much. And the distance of places to go. Because for here I guess--because we drive it's a lot easier. You have our own car. Because where we lived we have to go get on a jeepney in the Philippines and it's not that far but we get there. But here everything is a distance but still we can make it.

Like many immigrants, Lynn chose to let go of certain aspects of her own culture to better fit into life in the United States. In order to do so, it also meant avoiding any association or contact with other Phillipino immigrants in the community and their way of living. Unlike Lynn, Hiba has strongly held onto aspects of her Syrian culture. From food, to music, to even her own personal characteristics and ideas of family and community. Although Hiba chose a different path when it came to culture, their stories highlight the multitude of ways in which women immigrants chose to act once they arrive. There is not one “correct” way to be an immigrant, especially when it comes to how one chooses to live their life once arriving in the United States.

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Hiba shared how important it was for her son, who was born in the United States, to experience, learn about, and better understand the culture she loves so much. Additionally, Hiba expressed very strong interest in sharing her culture with others in the Harrisonburg community. She wants people to understand Syrian culture and the beauty and excitement of the region opposed to viewing the Middle-East as a place overtaken by war and violence. Hiba even created a business

idea for a cultural center in Harrisonburg where people could gather and learn more about the history and culture of Syria.

Historically Syria, notably Hiba's hometown of Damascus, has been a place filled with history and culture. Known to be the oldest city in the world, Damascus provides a wealth of history, culture, and tradition. Many of these traditions and values, as expressed by Hiba, are centered around family. These important ideas related to family and community are values that reflect how Hiba has chosen to live her life in the United States, and how she has continued to pass along these values to her son.

ALI: Most of our people are like. You would not go to somebody knock their door and not be invited in. [unclear]- Seek help and not feel like, you know, they're gonna let you go you always have somebody answering you or welcoming you in the social life—the family being there for one another.

Hiba's connection to her culture represents a way that many immigrants still honor their home-countries. Many immigrants, like Hiba, chose to celebrate and honor where they came from by holding onto the characteristics and traditions that define their culture. Some, like Hiba, even want to take this a step farther and bring others into their culture and educate the community and share their love for it. Like, whenever— wherever you walk in Damascus or in Syria, you'll find, like, this— this building belongs to this civilization, which was, like, maybe 1,000 years ago or [unclear] hundred thousands of years ago, rather to say. That's always, like, in— gives you such an enrichment, you know, background. and I feel like that's how my idea of for the business, let's say—

(Interviewer) ZAPP

Oh yeah!

ALI: — came up. I wanted something to link my memories and stories that I tell my son, but it's something that he can feel because, for me, like if I have a certain smell— like a jasmine smell— Damascus is known to be the city of jasmine. So I'm like, "that smell reminds me of Syria." You have— you're always— I always feel like you have to sense something to relate to it, you know. So, I was— coming from Syria and be having the war there, you feel like a lot of people have the— not the right idea of Syria, especially if you haven't been, So, I really wanted to have like a cultural place where people are able to know one another. and I love the mix of cultures. So as like, the only way for me right now to— for my son to know where I came from, is to cook the stuff for him. I would cook some food, and then I'm like, "I ate that at my grandma's house when it was Christmas, and it's so beautiful— and then I would show him pictures, I'm like, "Do you see that? One day you'll go that— we'll go to Syria and you'll see it"

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We hope that after sharing the stories of Lynn and Hiba, we have provided a greater and comprehensive understanding of the experiences of women immigrants. As women around the world are linked by the common experiences of their gender, they become strong, resilient, and independent. While these characteristics connect them, there is still great diversity and individuality in the choices, lives, and cultures of immigrant women.

Thank you for joining us today on Harrisonburg 360. We're grateful to Hiba for participating in an interview with us as well as Lynn for her past participation in an interview. Their willingness to share their stories and personal experiences is both humbling and appreciated. Our host today was Elainah Elkins. Interview with Hiba Ali was conducted by Jordan Zapp. Our research and content producer was Gabriella Powell, and our audio producers were Electra Ellis.

We would also like to thank Kate Morris, Bodeene Amyot (*bo-DEEN* AM-ee-ot), Sarah Roth-Mullet, and Kirsten Mlodynia (Kearsten Mlody-dean-ya) for all their wonderful help with this project.

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