

Hanan Al-Shaifi

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for University of Florida

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Alhadi: My name is Esam Alhadi. This interview is with Sister Hanan Al-Shaifi from Libya. It is now 11:10 AM, Thursday, February 17, 2011. This interview is being recorded in my office, 346 Pugh Hall, at the University of Florida, as part of the Arab Immigrants Oral History Project of the University of Florida Digital Library Collection.

Go ahead, Sister Hanan, and introduce yourself. You may mention any personal information you want to share with us, such as place of birth and any other details.

Hanan: My name is Hanan Al-Shaifi. I was born in Tripoli, the capital of Libya, in 1966. I am currently a Ph. D. student at the Department of Linguistics here at the University of Florida. I came here in the fall of 2009.

Alhadi: When did you arrive in America, and was Florida the first stop?

Hanan: I arrived in America one year before that date, in 2008. I was in Boston. Part of my scholarship was to spend one year to study the language, and in the meantime to search for admission from one of the American universities. My university established an office to advise the students who are being sent on scholarships. They advised me to consider a number of cities and universities such as Boston, San Francisco, New York, and Atlanta. I picked Boston because one of my relatives told me that it is very similar to London. Because I lived in London for

some time, I thought I won't feel too much of a change if I go to Boston. I came to Boston and studied the English language at an English language institute for one year at one of the private universities there.

Alhadi: What is the name of the university?

Hanan: It is called Mount Ida College in Brighton, a suburb of Boston. It is a very nice area. They have an English language institute that offers preparatory courses for foreign students. I finished the first course in four months, and because I wanted to prepare for the GRE, I moved to another school located inside Boston called the English College. They help students to prepare for the GRE, TOFEL, and GMAT exams. There were a number of foreign students, including a Libyan female student that I got to know there. She is from Ben Ghazi and I am from Tripoli. It was a great opportunity for me to get to know a number of students from a wide range of nationalities, and also to start knowing the American people and the American university system.

Alhadi: Would you please tell us about your educational background before your arriving in America?

Hanan: I graduated in 1985.

Alhadi: Could you please start with your early education?

Hanan: I studied in elementary school in Tripoli. The school system was similar to the Egyptian one because of the cooperation between the two countries in this field. After successfully finishing the six years of elementary school, I moved to a preparatory school for girls for three years. Then I joined an all-girls high school

for three years in Tripoli. In Libya, the schools system segregates boys from girls. I obtained the high school certificate.

Alhadi: What is the name of your high school?

Hanan: It was called Tripoli High School for Girls. I remember that the school principal was a very well-educated woman and she graduated from the American University in Beirut. At that time, there were very few women in Libya who were university graduates, and for that reason there was a problem finding qualified women to fill the top leadership positions such as school principals.

Alhadi: How about other female teachers? Were they all Libyans?

Hanan: Very few Libyan female teachers were teaching the Arabic language. For the English language, we had a teacher from Jordan and another Tunisian one who taught us the French language. We also had some male teachers from Egypt. This was the transitional period when the government was working on qualifying native female teachers to teach science and math. I joined the arts section in the high school because I wanted to continue studying the English language. The English language teacher had a big impact on me.

Alhadi: You picked the arts rather than science?

Hanan: Yes.

Alhadi: At what level does the student get to choose which section he/she may join?

Hanan: At the second year of high school. High school is three years. We study general topics in the first year, such as chemistry, physics, nature studies, math, arts, and history. We also study English and French languages. In the second year, for those who pick the arts section, study focus only on the arts subjects.

Alhadi: Such as?

Hanan: Religious studies, Arabic language, English language, French language, history, geography, philosophy, and logic. We also study interpretation, starting with the interpretation of the Greek philosophy up to the interpretation of the Quran. All these were in Arabic language. We also study some additional entertainment topics such as physical education, arts, and music education. After finishing high school, I applied to the English Department at the College of Education and Arts in the university.

Alhadi: Which university?

Hanan: It was Alfatih University. It was also called Tripoli University before 1969.

Five years later, after the revolution, the name was changed to Alfatih University.

Alhadi: Does the name “Alfatih” refer to the first day of September?

Hanan: The name before that was Tripoli University, and it had only two colleges. One of them was the College of Arts and the other one was the College of Sciences. After 1970, many colleges were added, such as those of engineering, medicine, and oil engineering after oil was discovered. Also, colleges of veterinary medicine, and pharmacology were added. It became a big university with all fields of arts and sciences. I graduated from the English Department of the College of Arts and Education after studying there for four years.

Alhadi: What did you do after graduation?

Hanan: I worked as a girls’ high school teacher. I was a teacher for the second and third year levels of high school.

Alhadi: Where is that school?

Hanan: It was the same school that I went to in Tripoli.

Alhadi: You were earlier a student, but now returned as a teacher at the same school?

Hanan: True. There weren't too many schools there, and also because of the transportation problem, I found it a good idea to work for the same school. I had a very serious desire to continue with my studies and join a graduate studies program. There was no graduate studies program in the university when I graduated in 1985, except in Arabic and Islamic studies. I joined this program and I earned a diploma in 1987. I was working and studying at the same time. After that I moved to work for another school called the High Institute for preparing female teachers, located on a main street in an area called Omer Almkhtar in Tripoli. After opening an English language graduate [course], I decided to join it.

Alhadi: Was it at the same Tripoli University?

Hanan: They opened a new school in one of Tripoli's suburbs called the Green Hill and [the school was] called the Academy of Graduate Studies.

Alhadi: Was it actually for graduate studies only?

Hanan: True. It was only to grant the M.A. degree.

Alhadi: Was it specialized in arts subjects only, or did it include other topics?

Hanan: At the beginning, it was only in the arts subjects. The teaching staff came from many Arab countries such as Egypt. They started with study programs of Arabic, economics, and English language. They later added a program in accounting. The plan was to add a new program every year, depending on cooperative programs with other schools.

Alhadi: Let me go back a little bit to your period in the University of Tripoli. What was the ratio of female students to male students? Were they equal?

Hanan: Not in all programs. Our College of Arts used to be nicknamed “College of Fatima,” because the number of female students was way bigger than that of males. Boys focused on Arabic and Islamic studies and few of them go to the History or Geography Departments. In the English Language Department where I was a student, we were a group of twenty-five students including ten females and the rest were males. There was a high demand for English language graduates to work for oil companies or to go abroad. In other science colleges such as medicine and engineering, the number of female students was very small. These were the females who came from families where the father used to work for a foreign company and the mother may be Italian or things of the like. These were considered to be non-conservative families who allow their girls to work as doctors or engineers, which was not the norm.

Alhadi: What was the role of your family in your educational decisions? Were they ever involved and did they used to encourage you or it was always up to you?

Hanan: My father, God rest his soul in peace, always encouraged me. My mother was a school principal, and she also gave me unlimited support and encouragement to continue with my studies.

Alhadi: Why do you think your mother gave you this unlimited support?

Hanan: She always believed that education is the key to success in life. This was her guiding principal when she was working in a school, and this was her advice to

her students. She used to tell her female students that education will guarantee them employment.

Alhadi: Were there some role models for her in the family that made her so supportive of females' education?

Hanan: Yes, her sisters. Her farther always encouraged his daughters to study. At that time, girls usually didn't go to school, and because he sent his daughters to school, all his brothers stood against him and cut their relations with him. My mother was brought up to be fully convinced of her father's ideas, and for that gave unlimited support to me and my other two brothers in our school life. I was brought up carrying the same ideas and thoughts of my mother that education is the key to success in life.

Alhadi: Let us move on to talk about your education after you obtained your diploma.

Hanan: After obtaining my diploma, I joined the Academy of Graduate Studies, which was a sort of a private college. Although school fees were not that high, my salary was not enough to cover it all. I had to move to work in a company where they were in need of someone to act as a mediator between the Indian manager and the Libyan manager who both spoke different languages—Arabic and English—that made it impossible for the two of them to communicate with each other. I got a very good-paying job, which made it possible for me to pay my school fees. I was a part-time student and I used to go to school in the afternoon and work in the morning. The things that I learned from my work were the basics of commerce, opening credit accounts, and dealing with banks and other companies. Although the Indian manager and I came from different cultures,

religions, and ethnic backgrounds, he always encouraged me to learn more. He had his M.A. in economics from Delhi University in India. He offered me every guiding instruction, experience, and explanation that I needed. I became the manager's top secretary. When his contract expired, he pointed to me and told them that he left behind him a daughter of his and assistant manager. After that, I moved to another company as a translator and assistant manager.

Alhadi: Was all this in Tripoli?

Hanan: It was all in Tripoli. That is the city where my house is and my family resides.

It wasn't possible for me to leave Tripoli. It is also the main center of education and commerce activities. I obtained my M.A. in January 2000, and got married.

Alhadi: Is your M.A. in the area of English language?

Hanan: Yes. It was specifically in the area of teaching English language to non-English speakers.

Alhadi: Did the M.A. study follow the course system, or was it by research?

Hanan: We were required to study four courses, then we spent six weeks in a university in Britain to collect more data for the thesis. My thesis focused on the word order and differences between the adjectives in the Arabic and English language. It also presented some suggestions that should be taught to Arabic students to help them avoid making mistakes.

Alhadi: Was this the topic of your thesis?

Hanan: It was.

Alhadi: Do you remember its title specifically?

Hanan: “Errors in Word Order Made by Libyan Students in Writing Essays.” I was instructed to focus my research in a very specific area, and I picked essay writing. My supervisor was a graduate of a British university, Stratford University. He directed me to specific references in Britain when we went there. It was the time when we got to know how to use the computer and the Internet, which were not available in Libya due to the embargo imposed on the country after 1984. We also had a chance to study research methods and to know more about British Universities.

Alhadi: When was this?

Hanan: It was in 1999 when the relations between Libya and Britain were resumed.

Alhadi: How long did you stay in Britain?

Hanan: Six weeks. It was a period of very intensive study. Our lectures started at nine and finished at four. After that, we used to go to the library for more study and research.

Alhadi: Were you married at that time, and did you go alone, or accompanied by someone?

Hanan: No, I wasn't married at that time. I got married after 2000. I was accompanied by a big group of students and supervisors. One of the supervisors was my cousin who was a university instructor at that time. She was the one who supervised the girls, and another male professor was in charge of the boys. The trip was under the academy guidance and support.

Alhadi: Did you go outside Libya after that trip?

Hanan: Yes. I got married to a businessman who owned a company in Britain and another one in Cyprus. This gave me the opportunity to travel a lot, to the degree that my passport was entirely filled with visa stamps.

Alhadi: Where did you go?

Hanan: We went to Europe, where we visited France for two weeks to visit my husband's brother and his family. We also visited Italy, Switzerland, and one or two cities on the German border. We also went to Cyprus to visit my husband's Greek friends who he came to know from his previous job at a contracting company in Libya. I got to know about the Greek culture and language. I found some people who use some words in their Greek language that are very close to Arabic. This might result from the influence that was caused by the Islamic expansion and invasion. I also noticed that there was a mosque in Cyprus that was built by a wife of one of the early Islamic leaders. We also visited some countries in the East such as Beirut and Egypt.

Alhadi: All of these sound like short visits. Did you live for a long period of time in any Arab country?

Hanan: No, except my home country, Libya.

Alhadi: Did you visit Tunisia and Morocco?

Hanan: Yes. They were also short visits, either for the purpose of tourism or for my mother's medical treatment at one of the diabetes specialized clinics.

Alhadi: Have you ever been to South America?

Hanan: I went with my husband to check on some work he had with a company in Colombia. He told me that he was going for ten days to finish a deal there and he

asked me if I was interested in going with him. I thought that would be a good chance to know about the Portuguese and Spanish culture in that region. It was a nice trip.

Alhadi: How about Italy, and do you speak Italian?

Hanan: I visited Italy, and yes, I speak Italian that I got from my aunt who studied in an Italian school. There were many Italian schools in Libya before the revolution. They used to teach girls sewing and ornamentation. I understand Italian more.

Alhadi: It is known that Libya was an Italian colony. Is the Italian language the second language used in Libya?

Hanan: The Italian language was the state official language until 1980. At that time, if you went to fix a car for instance, the technician would speak to you only in Italian, and would use a lot of Italian technical terms.

Alhadi: Has the Italian language disappeared now?

Hanan: It is still being used, because there are many Italian companies.

Alhadi: How about the signs on the street and stores?

Hanan: When the Cultural Revolution decree was issued in 1977, the Arabic language was declared the state official language. Accordingly, all the foreign names were removed from the signs.

Alhadi: Now, we go back to where we started earlier about your life here in America. What do you think about the education system here, and do you think it suits you better than the European system and why?

Hanan: The American system differs from its European counterpart. It is more advanced and better prepared. The European systems adapts methods that allows the

student to go deep in his field of specialty, while the American one covers a wide range of topics and leaves it for the student to pick what he wants. This makes it good in the sense that it gives you a space and many topics to choose from. It is also more flexible. You can take courses from different fields and add them to your field of specialty. This is the major and minor system which is very good. You can find students who major in science and minor in arts. In Europe, it is hard to get these together in one study program.

Alhadi: What are you studying here in Florida, and what are your research plans?

Hanan: I want to do a comparative study on Arabic and English languages. I also want to study the theory of language and meaning-making.

Alhadi: What are your plans after you finish your study?

Hanan: I will go back to my country and to the university that sent me here on a scholarship, to work and teach there.

Alhadi: From your experience here, do you encourage Arab and Libyan students to come here for study?

Hanan: I encourage everyone to experience studying in an American school. I had some problems in my first year because the basics of my education was founded on the European system. I faced many difficulties, even at the level of writing dates, because here they put the month first, while over there they put the day first. If a student started his education by going to American schools, it will be easy for him to continue with his study here.

Alhadi: How do you [interact with] the Arab community here in Florida, and what relation do you have with the members of the Arab community here?

Hanan: I came to know some families and ladies in the Islamic Center and also some teachers in the school. They are very nice and kind, and they got very happy to see an Arab female who is here for study.

Alhadi: Do you think that the Arab community offered anything to the greater Florida community?

Hanan: Here in the university, I found many teachers doing research projects. I got to know one professor who is doing research and writing books, named Sara. I also came to know another professor named Youssef who is doing studies in the field of sociolinguistics.

Alhadi: What about the big community outside the university? Do you think that the Arab individuals are playing any role and offering any contribution to their surrounding community?

Hanan: Yes. When I was in the language institute, I noticed that some Arab students were doing volunteer work by cooking food at their houses to give to the homeless on the downtown streets. These came after announcing their activities by posting some ads. The language institute asked us if we wanted to volunteer and we agreed. When we went there, I found that they were mostly Arabs. Some of them were of Lebanese or Syrian origin, but they are American naturalized with Arab names. It was a very good environment that created many close relationships between individuals of different ethnic or country backgrounds.

Alhadi: My last question before we conclude this interview is about your relation with your family back home in Libya. Are you in touch with them, and how often do you get in touch with them?

Hanan: I contact my mother by phone every other day to assure her that I am well and doing fine. I also contact them through the Internet by using the messenger or webcam. I always get in touch with my brother because he has a store and he is almost always online. I consult with him if I have any computer problem and he advises me on what I should do.

Alhadi: This means you get your technical support from Libya.

Hanan: That is true, because he is more knowledgeable than me in computers. Also, these online discounted phone cards and other aspects of technological advances made it easy to talk to my mother, as if she is sitting next to me.

Alhadi: That means you are keeping constant contacts with your family and relatives.

Hanan: Yes, that is true, of course. I always contact them when there is an event, and social and religious occasions, to give them my congratulations.

Alhadi: Thank you very much, Sister Hanan. This is quite enough today.

Hanan: You're welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW]