

The University of the Western Cape

Department of English

MA (Creative Writing, Structured)

Reflective Essay

**Title:** *The Wedding Interviews: A Novella*

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## Introduction

Having no formal background in English literature or creative writing, it may seem unusual to return to university at the age of thirty five to pursue an MA in creative writing. Hankering for a creative outlet, I enrolled in the MA program at the University of the Western Cape with the goal of writing something innovative and unique. Although my prior studies were in Computer Science, Philosophy, and Business I saw the creative writing program as an opportunity to go against the grain and to hone my neglected creative skills. *The Wedding Interviews* is the resultant expression of this desire. It is a novella about an overly confident and idealistic twenty-one-year-old Egyptian-Canadian woman who intends to marry a charming and sometimes insincere twenty-two-year-old South African-Canadian man. The novella explores how people feel compelled to control others' perceptions of their own personal reality, while focusing on the uneasy relationship between culture and religion. The issues and the action of the novella are framed by the fact that the run-up to the wedding is the subject matter of a TV documentary on cross-cultural marriages. The novella thus in its narrative approach mixes media, so to speak. This takes questions of control of perceptions to a different level. Not only is the reader exposed to the way in which the filmed subjects try to control their own images, but one realizes the extent to which the "objective" form of the documentary film is highly subjective, with the director/interviewer operating on the basis of cultural and religious stereotypes and framing events to produce the desired sensational outcomes. In this aspect of the novella, I have used the theoretical

insights acquired in the Documentary Film module which I completed in 2014, taught by internationally acclaimed producer/director, Francois Verster.

### **Themes, Genre and Narrative Techniques**

When I started the MA program, I primarily wrote science fiction stories that dealt with Muslim (and often immigrant) characters coping in dystopian futures. I thought this was a novel take on a classic premise: in trying to create an ideal world, society creates a nightmare. It allowed me, within a speculative mode, to explore how the Muslim subjects of increased voluntary and forced migration into other Muslim and non-Muslim parts of the world cope with cultural and religious difference. Although I considered it a secondary pursuit, I would also write the occasional romantic short story about couples who come from different cultures and/or countries, because it also allowed me to explore similar themes, but ground the story in the present reality. On the advice of my professors, I sent my stories to friends and family and asked for their honest feedback. I was surprised to discover that what seemed to be of most interest were the more relationship-oriented stories. Even the science fiction stories sparked conversations about the characters and their relationships, rather than about the science or futurism. After reflecting on this, I realized that what appeals to me most about my favorite science fiction stories are also the human aspects. For instance, although Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* is about a man who lived with Martians, the heart of the story is really about a human outsider on Earth trying to come to terms with being completely out of place. In fact, how he survived on Mars before he comes back to Earth is never

even discussed. The same can be said for Audrey Niffenegger's *Time Traveler's Wife*, which focuses on a difficult marriage between a woman and a man who disappears through time without attempting to explain time travel; or by Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* which deals with feminism and not, as Atwood famously quipped, "rockets, chemicals and talking squids in outer space." (Quoted in Barnett n. pag.) This opened my mind to the possibility of choosing a topic that focused on relationships, and not necessarily science fiction.

Before I started writing *The Wedding Interviews*, the longest story I had written was approximately 5000 words. I initially planned to write a series of related short stories to fulfill the MA mini-thesis requirement, but the constraints of writing such short fiction made me reconsider. The brevity of the short story generally does not allow for more than one or two main characters, deep characterization or long timeframes. I also considered writing a few chapters of a novel, but feared that an incomplete narrative would not allow me to think through the architecture of the plot and would not allow the challenges of the thematic resolution which closure entails. I therefore decided to write a novella, which is shorter than a novel, but longer than a short story and, according to *Merriam-Webster's Handbook of Literary Terms*, is often realistic and satiric in tone, which blends nicely with my style of writing. For instance, *The Wedding Interviews* is littered with very dishonest and cynical characters even though, on the surface, it appears to deal with marriage, love, and romance. Because novellas are relatively short, I found I had to focus the story sharply and as a result could not explore the full number of themes I would have if

writing a full novel. For instance, *The Wedding Interviews* does not delve into the effects of portrayals of Muslims in the popular media which was an idea I really wanted to explore creatively. This concern was close to my heart because of the especially virulent nature of misrepresentation of Muslims in the media in North America, where I spent my youth, and whose effects my family members and I have felt. I retrospectively think my final choice of subject matter has been good since the focus on romance rather than on more overt political questions, in the bigger context of Muslim “intra-cultural” relations, is more revealing, fresh and interesting than another piece on a generalized Islamophobia, or immigrant experience. My genre choice of the novella also allows for expansion of sub-plots, characters and themes, which could transform my mini-thesis into a manuscript for a novel, which because of its “human interest” and innovative technical approaches could, I hope, find a publisher.

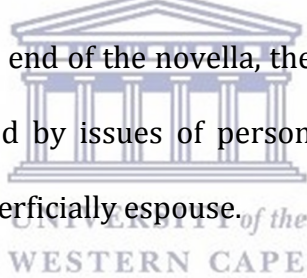


Even though I made a conscious choice not to write directly about dominant perceptions of Islam as a religion, I found that in writing about characters of Cape Malay and Egyptian backgrounds, I could not keep religion out of the picture. However, I made a very important distinction between religion and culture in the novella. Both Omar and Soraya share the same religion, Islam, but come from different cultures. Although religion often informs culture, it does not dictate culture, and this can be illustrated by Soraya and Omar’s families’ attitude towards dating. Although Omar’s family is more practicing of Islam (they pray regularly and often attend mosque), they are open to Omar dating, whereas Soraya’s family, informed

more by Egyptian culture than Islam, frown upon dating and worry about Soraya's reputation. In this way, the story deals with cultural differences even when the cultures in question are informed by the same religion. It also shows the diversity of Islam which is often treated as a monolithic practice and lifestyle in the dominant media, especially popular films, and the glut of airport bookshop literature which has disproportionately presented Islam as woman-bashing and has profitably exploited the link between Islam and terrorism, ignoring bigger geopolitical questions.

I chose to focus on the interaction between Cape Malay and Egyptian culture in the Canadian diaspora since I am familiar with both these cultures. (Taking the idea of diaspora and identity to a deeper level, "Cape Malay" represents an earlier, forced, immigration.) As a Cape Malay South African, it was easier for me to write Omar's Cape Malay family than Soraya's Egyptian family, even though I have some insider access to the Egyptian culture. On the question of Cape Malay culture, besides the many anecdotes related to me by my extended family, Gabeba Baderoon's *Regarding Muslims, From Slavery to Post-apartheid* was instrumental to my understanding of Cape Malay roots and the various forms of servitude of Cape Malays in various phases of history. This history emerges in the personal backgrounds divulged by some of the older characters in the novella. On the question of Egyptian culture, my late father lived in Egypt between the ages of thirteen and twenty six – so I was able to glean some knowledge by reminiscing with my mother about how that affected him, and in turn, our family. I met with three Egyptians here in Cape Town, and

instead of formally interviewing them, I had informal conversations with them about how they met their spouses and how they are adjusting to Cape Town. As far as possible, I tried not only to talk about generic Egyptian culture, but I focused on their personal stories. This helped me to avoid having stereotypical characters. Dealing with culture in any piece of creative writing is very sensitive and also very difficult. Because the characters of my novella are individuals, even if they are part of a culture, they will participate and follow the cultural norms to varying degrees. For instance, if arranged marriage is a cultural norm, it does not mean that all people who are part of the culture will have arranged marriages. Very often also, people claim a religious identity, but, in fact, do not live according to the precepts or the ethos of the religion. To the end of the novella, the central characters, Omar and Soraya, remain more consumed by issues of personal image projection than the spirituality of the faith they superficially espouse.



I originally wrote the story as a series of interviews for a reality TV show which followed the lead-up to the wedding of Omar and Soraya. Besides being topical, this allowed each character to give their subjective slice of reality in their own voice. This technique was inspired by Iain Pear's *An Instance of the Fingerpost* where four characters describe the events leading up to a murder. With each character's version, the story becomes clearer and clearer to the reader. After initially writing in first and third person narration, I settled on an experimental style where I wrote each chapter as an interview in the form of a dialog, akin to a script for a play. It is very unusual for a novel or novella to be written primarily as interviews in dialog form,



and I am not aware of any story being written in this way. Using dialog, which is lively and vibrant, allowed me to avoid using a narrator to explain the story, which can be tiresome for the reader if overused. Instead, I used natural conversation to progress the story, which allowed the reader to get lost in the conversation and feel immersed in the story. I decided to keep the interviews short and frequent with cold, satirical endings which, although at times made the story seem choppy, also moved the story along quickly and gave the impression that time was moving along swiftly.

Although I originally wrote the story using the frame of a Reality TV show, I eventually changed it to a documentary. Reality TV is a misnomer as the genre often uses attention-seeking participants, sometimes even actors, and the producers usually *create* conflict, removing the situation from reality. Reality TV also aims for the tawdry and lurid which would not have allowed some of the deeper issues I wish to explore to emerge. Although the interviewer in *The Wedding Interviews* can be a bit meddlesome, the form of the documentary enabled the characters to present their backgrounds and emotions better than through reality TV. Given my own experience of filming a documentary, I could also write with great authenticity about filming problems and the nervousness and anxieties of subjects who know they are being filmed.

Writing a novella, I also had to adjust my writing process to facilitate a longer story. The short stories I had written in the past did not require a grand plan because they were relatively short, focusing on a single character, event or experience. My novella, however, had a large cast of characters with complex interactions and spanned

almost three years in time, tackling a number of themes. In *Writing for Dummies*, Randy Ingermanson and Peter Economy describe a technique of formulating a complex plot which likens to a mathematical fractal where each side of a snowflake can be replaced by a more complex line to create more and more intricate snowflakes. Similarly, to create an intricate story, we start with a single sentence describing the plot. Once the sentence is finalized, we expand and replace that one sentence with up to ten sentences that give more detail to the plot. Once these sentences are finalized, we divide each of these sentences into up to ten more sentences and continue this process to develop a very complex plot. *The Wedding Interviews* was summarized in a single sentence as follows: *Soraya and Omar agree to have their wedding filmed for a documentary which inadvertently exposes their insecurity and dishonesty.* This sentence was divided into four more sentences which formed the structure of the novella: 1) *Soraya, Omar and their families agree to be filmed for a documentary.* 2) *Soraya embarrasses herself, Omar and her family by losing control of her own bachelorette party which shatters the “perfect couple” illusion.* 3) *The couple makes up but is very insecure.* 4) *We find out after they are married that they still manage the illusion of the perfect couple but are still insecure.* Although I often veered very far from the planned plot, it did give a general direction for me to follow, which made it possible to write a coherent story.

Because the greater part of my novella is written as pure dialog, I looked for ways to write the interviews in a realistic, yet lively and entertaining manner. I started to write the novella at coffee shops, especially in busy malls, so that I could eavesdrop

on fellow patrons and listen to how people actually speak. This is a slight variation of Robert J. Sawyer's technique of recording conversations and actually transcribing them to capture realistic speech patterns. Sometimes when we write we are *too much in our own heads* and this can lead to stale and unrealistic dialog. But listening to real, unscripted speech challenges our writing and provides a yardstick with which to compare our own dialog. I also started to read my novella aloud to hear it externally. Text actually sounds very different in one's head compared to reading aloud. In April of 2015, I presented a creative piece at the *Writing for Liberty* conference at Lancaster University. I noticed that some of the writers who presented their creative pieces not only read them aloud, but actually acted out the dialog, akin to acting out a play. It created such a powerful impact on the audience that I immediately started acting out my own writing while editing and I believe this helped me create even more realistic and vibrant dialog. Because of the nature of my project, I have thus focused more on creating vivid, realistic, multi-faceted dialogue than on poetic descriptions using lyrical and symbolic language and imagery.

### **Narrative Drive**

*The Wedding Interviews* is written in the context of the filming of a documentary and the reader is always teased with the question, *what really happened*. The reader observes the interviewer subtly intervening and constructing the story of Omar and Soraya for the fictional TV audience. The reader also observes the dishonesty between Omar and Soraya as well other family members as they tell their version of events. For instance, Omar thought Soraya was disappointingly dim for "falling" for

a standard pickup line, whereas Soraya thought the same of Omar for trying such a common line to begin with. Each one patronizes the other and they start dating, yet amazingly, months later, when they are engaged, they still do not know that each one has been patronizing the other all along.

Although there are small snippets of third-person narration, there is not a definitive indication that the third-person narration is the ultimate reality. I purposefully omitted key facts in the third-person narration to tease the reader with an incomplete version of key events. For instance, Omar's father says in one of his interviews that there was drinking at Soraya's bachelorette party, a claim strongly denied by both Soraya and her father. (Drinking of alcohol in the context of Muslim families would be a sufficiently big lapse in cultural and religious terms for the wedding to be called off.) Although one of the sections gives a narrated version of events, I purposefully never mention whether or not there is any drinking. The reader therefore never really knows that happened despite the intervention of the third-person narrator. The interviews and sections of third-person narration thus hold up mirrors, one to the other, where sometimes facts are confirmed, but in other cases, the reader is left only with doubts. It is with this "guessing game" that I have tried to keep the reader focused and tantalized.

The novella concludes with Soraya and Omar, less than two years after the wedding, snidely arguing about whether they should participate in a follow-up interview to the documentary. Despite their antagonistic and adversarial behavior, they immediately become incredibly affectionate with each other when Soraya's parents

visit them. This indicates to the reader that even two years after the wedding, they are still trying to craft how they are perceived, even by their loved ones. Right to the end thus, the light and mirror tricks are sustained, keeping the reader attentive.

## Conclusion

Writing *The Wedding Interviews* started as a journey of self-discovery as the novella was initially semi-autobiographical but evolved into something entirely fictional, but which paradoxically was enhanced by my tapping into a lot of personal (and sometimes embarrassing) memories. I tried to fight, however, simply documenting my personal history. Although the story centers around a seemingly culturally diverse and unique couple, there is a certain universality in the idea of two lovers from different backgrounds struggling to belong to one another, as well as stay true to their family or heritage – the classic Romeo and Juliet scenario. Further complicating this is the fact that their heritage is dichotomized between their adoptive Canada and their original homeland. Perhaps the most unique aspect of the story is how, although both Muslim, they have different cultural ways to express their Islam that further complicates their romance. Writing this story has therefore allowed me to understand my personal observations of an increasingly urbanized and multicultural Muslim society bonded by an interwoven, and sometimes tangled, web of culture, nationality and religiosity.

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