

Citizenship, Gender, and the Arab World

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We sat on suitcases filled to the brim in the living room of my aunt's house, waiting for an uncle to take us along the scenic airport road to the imminent Delta flight awaiting. My mother turned to me and said, "Don't forget what I have been telling you". I acknowledged her comment with an, "I knnnnnnow, Mom". Picking up on my dismissive attitude, my mom began to unhook three delicate bracelets from her wrist.

The first was silver metal, twisted, with gold beads at every juncture. As she fastened it to my right wrist she said, "When you look down, this bracelet will remind you to be aware of the clothes you wear. Clothes are not just clothes; they reflect upon your intentions and your character". The second bracelet was more gold than silver, a series of diamond shapes chained together. "Be aware of your voice", my mother said. "This bracelet is to remind you not to laugh so loud in public. Your voice is as important as the words that you speak".

The third bracelet was just a thin gold chain; "Remember, you aren't an American girl here", she said. "You may have grown up in the United States, you may have an American education and an American lifestyle, but no one here will think of you as an American girl. You are *bint* Mazen (i.e. the daughter of Mazen), your father's daughter".

I smiled, hugged her, pointed to my left wrist, and said, "I still need a few more bracelets to remind me to be polite, chew my food, and..."

I left the Lone Star State of Texas in the summer of 2009. My first month in Jordan was spent with

my mother, father, and youngest brother, while my other brother stayed behind to finish up another round of summer school. We spent that month visiting relatives and eating. Soon enough, it was time for the rest of the family to go back home while I began my adventure in the homeland.

Below are some of those experiences:

The zipper to an outside compartment on my old Nine West wallet broke about two months ago, but I still carry it around unfazed. It was probably the result of clumsily shoving change and receipts into an already bloated wallet. In the clear plastic cardholder is my Texas driver's license. Although I am from Texas, I have spent the last year living in Jordan and traveling throughout the Arab world as a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar.

There are a couple of credit cards and a few school IDs: high school, undergrad, and grad school. The first flap has some money in it; the second has a few receipts and keepsakes. Each item says a little something about me, indicating decisions I have made to shape my life and my experiences.

Nestled between foreign currency and old family photos, are two 25-page booklets—passports. As an American citizen abroad, I carry an American passport with me. Because my parents emigrated from Jordan, I am also Jordanian and carry the Jordanian citizenship.

The foreign currency tells stories of places I've been, while family photos show where I came from. My

school ID cards are representations of where I want to go in life and who I want to become. But my passports, those were given to me. I did not earn them.

I did not earn my citizenship. I am thankful to have a place (or two places) I can call home; however, I did not earn the luxury, opportunity, and allowances that my citizenships provide me. I have become acutely aware of my citizenship while living in the Middle East because of the pervasive role it has played in shaping my encounters.

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“Her name is Jamila”, our guide explained as he stroked the back of the camel’s neck, “*Jamila*, meaning beautiful in Arabic”. We stood in the yellow desert, ready to mount camels for an excursion around the pyramids. “I know what Jamila means”, I told him, “I’m Arab”. From that point on, I was treated differently – respected more as an Arab woman.

No trip to the Arab world would be complete without a visit to the great pyramids of Giza in Egypt. I took the trip with a Canadian friend of mine, Julie. Julz has long brown hair, bright blue eyes, and pale skin. I have dark brown, almost black hair, brown eyes, and olive skin. Standing next to Julz, people seemed to assume I was Latina on vacation with my white friend.

Two camels were joined together by a less than intricate rope system, and I rode the one in front. We bounced our way on camels through the desert, to the pyramids, and then the sphinx. The sky was a cloudless blue and the air was crisp against the blazing sun.

Along the way, other guides and men selling knickknacks or water would yell out sexual innuendos and other sexually-charged comments in Arabic, sometimes congratulating our guide for escorting two young women.

Our guide would respond urgently with, “She’s Arab! You are being disrespectful!” or “She can understand what you are saying. She’s Arab”,

quickly bringing the exchange to an immediate halt. Then he would turn to me and apologize profusely.

I got the suspicion that had I been Canadian, for example, my guide would not have worked so hard to “defend my honor”. After all, no apology was given to my blue-eyed friend.

Arab women, in comparison to non-Arab women, are held to different standards and expectations, especially when it comes to modesty and sexual prudence. Non-Arab women are expected to be more promiscuous; therefore, more accepting of sexual advances. Non-Arab women, especially white women, are portrayed as sexually active in Western media, which greatly influences Eastern impressions.

This is not to say that Westerners are not respected within Arab culture, which couldn’t be further from the truth. The West is many times looked to for guidance and progress, especially when it comes to education. When visiting the Middle East, Westerners are particularly respected as guests. In fact, there have been many occasions when I have played up my Americanness for some special treatment.

Arabie shway ishway, spoken in poor grammar means, “I only speak a few words of Arabic”. It has become a euphemism for “You [any service person] are ignoring my needs, and I would like some help please”. The exchange would inevitably lead to the, “Who? What? Where? and Why?” conversation. I would put on my all-American girl living in Jordan to learn a thing or two about her roots hat, and magically the problem would be solved.

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“I spy something red”. It is amazing how eight hours at the Syrian border can revert your entertainment standards all the way back to the first grade.

The Syrian border is actually a very welcoming place with restaurants, a great duty-free shop, and beautiful gardens. As a Jordanian, I was given a visa upon arrival, which took no more than fifteen

minutes. I was traveling with two Americans, however, and decided to experience the waiting game.

Although we waited for eight hours until finally being able to enter Syria, the men working at the border were exceptionally kind. Throughout our stay, one man apologized for the inconvenience, another suggested places for us to eat, and a third encouraged us to relax in the garden assuring us that he would bring the good news when the time came.

In the end it was a long wait, but not an unpleasant one. The experience was a stark realization of citizenship and the way a small 25-page booklet can control one's movement.

A few months later, I traveled to Jerusalem. This time, instead of being a Jordanian, I was an American.

Unlike Americans who are able to enter Israel/Palestine by showing up at the border, Jordanians must apply for a visa in advance without a guarantee that those efforts will be fruitful. Many individuals with Jordanian passports are also Palestinian; therefore, visiting their land of origin is a special and emotional opportunity.

I traveled with three other American friends; I was the only person with dual citizenship. Because of my background, my citizenship, and my race, I was treated differently and questioned.

I was allowed to enter Israel/Palestine, but not as a Palestinian. I was able to visit the country that my family is from as an American. I saw a tree that my great grandfather planted - the biggest in what once was a small village. My father used to sit under it and study or just read.

My family members waited in anticipation to hear me retell my experience. They asked about the weather, the scenery, the food, the occupation, and that great big tree. Many of them are unable to visit Israel/Palestine. I felt privileged and guilty. I did not earn my freedom of movement...my citizenship.....

I spent some time in the Baq'a refugee camp at an all girls' school getting to know the students. After sitting in on a few classes, we shared a free period together. They were wide-eyed with curiosity, and inquisitive about every aspect of my life. They asked about my family, my schoolwork, my hobbies, and most of all - America.

The girls surrounded me like a football huddle, getting closer with each question. The conversation led to discussions about the Palestinian struggle, their experiences in the refugee camp, forms of resistance, and their futures.

One girl, who was aloof at first but warmed up to me the longer I was there, asked about citizenship. "We have never known Palestine", she said as her brow wrinkled with emotion. "Jordan is the country we have grown up in".

Now, every girl in the room was quiet, intently listening.

"Our teacher asked us", she continued visibly disturbed by the question that would follow, "What country do you love more, Jordan or Palestine?"

Before she could finish the question, another young girl interrupted, "We didn't know what to say. Jordan is the country that fed us, clothed us, and gave us a home".

Another interjected, "We don't want to be ungrateful".

"But Palestine is under occupation. It is not Palestine's fault that we can not live there", a voice from the crowd retorted.

A few girls broke out into side discussions to further explore the topic among themselves; one girl started to cry. Everywhere I looked the girls were emotionally engaged in this very serious discussion, waiting for me to respond. I knew exactly what to say.

I felt like my entire education was leading up to this one moment. I stood there, about a foot higher than

the group of girls surrounding me, most of them looking up waiting to hear my response.

I stood as an American, a Jordanian, a Palestinian, and a woman. I was me, without strategically having to navigate my citizenship, without the exclusivity of one identity over another.

“No one has the right to ask you such a question”, I told the girls.

“It is like asking which arm do you love more: your left or your right. You can love, respect, and appreciate Jordan – the country that has fed, clothed, and educated you. And you can love, respect, and appreciate Palestine – the country where you come from, the country that has given you an identity, and the country that you struggle everyday for”.

I watched their conflicted faces relax. In a few sentences, the conversation turned to pop stars, artwork, and other thirteen/fourteen year old girl topics.

Service Above Self – that is Rotary International’s motto. As a Rotary Ambassadorial Scholar, one of my responsibilities is to volunteer my time doing public service in my host country (Jordan). However, as much as I try to give back, I can never repay the Arab community for the paradigm-changing lessons I learned about citizenship, opportunity, and responsibility.

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