

## “I AM AT HOME EVERYWHERE AND NOWHERE. I AM NEVER A STRANGER, YET I NEVER QUITE BELONG”

By *Lina Alameddine*

When asked where I am from, I tend to hesitate in responding. I do not know where I am from nor do I think I am alone in this situation. I was born in Lebanon, grew up in Switzerland, and pursued my college education in the United States. Although I lived abroad, I was lucky in that I still had the opportunity to return to Lebanon regularly for holidays. This is the first time since I was seven, that I have spent more than four weeks in my ‘home’ country.

However, Lebanon has played an intrinsic role in forming my feminist perspective within the macrocosmic picture of my upbringing.

Despite the number of holidays I have spent in Lebanon, I lack a pristine Lebanese identity. I speak Arabic, but I am still a stranger. The mistake I made was being born the year the civil war broke out. However, I am determined not to allow myself to shy away from an identity that is mine. However, the quest to unite my distinct worlds is not over. I am coming to terms with the idea that I live between distinct worlds, both of which form an essential part of who I am, and especially who I am as a woman!

My first experience regarding the inadequacy attributed to women occurred at an early stage in my life. It was to happen when I joined a few boys in a friendly game of soccer during one of my first visits to Lebanon. At first they laughed and allowed me to play with them; however, when they noticed that I was serious and wanted to keep playing they immediately stopped. They told me it was ‘*haram*’ for a girl to play with

boys. They were only ten years old. It was at that age that I

was made aware that I was a girl, and not a boy, and that there existed no obvious reconciliation between the two genders. I was mad, and no one could appease my anger, not my mom, nor my dad. The confusion I felt at that moment for ‘only being a girl’ became the basis for my perpetual curiosity in regards to my identity as a woman within an undeniably misogynist society.

Prior to moving to the United States for college, my existence floated between two distinct worlds: a westernized Switzerland and a traditional Lebanon. There could have been nothing more different between my lifestyle in Switzerland and the holidays I spent on the farm in South Lebanon. In Lebanon, I relished in the challenge of trying to understand this essentially inward lifestyle imposed on women. The women I encountered were supposed to be married by the age of twenty two, and from then on, were expected to get involved in the ritualized process of domesticity: the frequent child-bearing, the cooking and cleaning and the premise that a woman will never be equal to a man. In Switzerland, I had not been exposed to these rigid and arcane expectations of women. In school, they were not apparent, nor were they present within my own home life. Expression of individuality was encouraged in all spheres of my life, but it was in Lebanon that I sensed opposition.

During many of the holidays spent in Lebanon, I was young and ready to provoke. The country presented itself to me as an opportunity to question and challenge other women’s lack of awareness and decision making in their own lives. Although my curiosity was innocent, it stemmed mostly from a rebellious attitude of knowing that I was different. I relished in the freedom of choice and expression that I thought I had. I enjoyed being the only girl who felt no shame in running around with the boys, singing as loudly as they did, and even participating in some of their more ‘manly’ conversations. Because I was an outsider, my difference justified these customarily unacceptable actions. At the same time, I used my difference to soothe and justify my

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feeling of alienation from a culture that wanted me to stand on the peripheries.

Unfortunately, the intrigue I felt towards the people of the farm became a burden that I am still reckoning with. As I grew older, I began to resent the stifling and constraining conditions that these women were entrapped in. There was a veil of permanent silence placed upon them that I wanted to evade and help destroy. However, my innocence to the situation blinded me from realizing that my 'feminist' cry was dim in this patriarchal society which was adamantly resistant to change. Over the years, my frustration regarding the narrow-mindedness of both men and women grew into an inbred repugnance of the place that was supposedly my home country. I remember writing in my journal when I was seventeen years old: "I don't belong there, nor do I ever want to belong". My disattachment from Lebanon not only saddened my family, but also led to an implicit resentment on their part. I found myself caught between two worlds, both of which I appraise as my own, but do not completely belong to. In Lebanon, I found that my more liberal educational up-bringing clashed with certain values I felt were archaic. Now, I am seeking to reconcile the disparity of what I was born into and what I have grown up to believe. My western and more liberal education has created two 'worlds' that I appraise as my own, but don't completely belong to either.

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Everyday, I am faced with a familiar uncertainty that plagues my decision making concerning future goals and dreams. I attribute this uncertainty to my culture that has no name. I am finding it difficult to reconcile the significance of Lebanon in my life with that of my education and experiences obtained in Switzerland and in the United States. I acknowledge the influence Lebanon has held on the formation of my identity. Now, I feel that without Lebanon, I would not be the same person. Although in Lebanon I am an outsider looking in, I have acquired an appreciation of certain facets that this world has to offer. Indeed, I am still searching for the bridge that will unite my bi-polar worlds for me.

Like many of you, each day I find myself enticed by a mosaic of opinions, cultures, religions and people. I am at home everywhere and nowhere. I am never a stranger, yet I never quite belong. Today, I am still rummaging for answers on how to create a stronger base for my precarious situation perched in between two radically different cultures. I belong to a culture that has no name. I do not belong in Lebanon, nor do I belong in the United States, and the need to belong is of no urgent importance for me. However, what is important is the knowledge that I will not be ostracized in Lebanon for the person I have come to be: an individual, a feminist, someone with an opinion other than what I am supposed to be thinking and believing.

# Announcement

**AL-RAIDA WELCOMES CONTRIBUTIONS OF CONCERN TO WOMEN THROUGHOUT THE ARAB WORLD. IF YOU ARE A PROFESSIONAL OR FREELANCE JOURNALIST OR RESEARCHER, PLEASE CONSIDER SUBMITTING ARTICLES AND REPORTS ON EVENTS, CONFERENCES, AND DEBATES RELATED TO WOMEN AND WOMEN'S ISSUES. IF YOUR CONTRIBUTION IS ACCEPTED FOR PUBLICATION, YOU WILL RECEIVE A PAYMENT OF US \$100.**