

Identity of Our Own Making

A Conversation Between Reem Abdul Qadir, Iman Al-Jazairi, Nada El-Yassir, Dina Georgis, and Jennifer Kawaja

Ce groupe de féministes arabes discutent des sentiments qu'elles éprouvent en se regardant à travers le regard des

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autres. Elles partagent leurs expériences de jeunes filles qui ont grandi dans différentes parties du monde, elles parlent de leur sexualité, de leurs identités politiques et enfin, de leurs alliances avec d'autres femmes pour combattre l'impérialisme et le patriarcat.

We bumped into one another periodically at a women's event, a book launch, or sometimes, a demonstration. It was always reassuring to know another Arab woman was there. And the exchange was always similar—we should really get together and talk, there is no place where Arab feminists can go and sit and talk together. Five of us finally did sit down over several evenings; some of us knew one another, and some of us were acquaintances.

Through our discussions we realized that we saw ourselves through many different looking glasses, often not of our own making. We talked about growing up in various parts of the world, about our sexuality, about identity politics, and the importance of our alliances with other women fighting patriarchy and imperialism. Through our dialogue we decided to establish an Arab feminist group in Toronto. The following are excerpts taken from our exchange.

Going to the 'other' side

Reem: My mother had a dream the other day. She dreamt that she saw me in a church sleeping and she woke me up saying "Oomi mama, get up ya mama, get up! What are you doing sleeping here?" I said "I'm tired, I'm happy, I'm relaxed here." She was somewhat disturbed when she said she did not know what the dream meant and looked questioningly at me. I said, "Maybe it means I'm going to become a Christian, I don't know," and I walked away. She said, "Yee aouzobillah (God forbid). Then I laughed

and said "It was your dream, not mine!" Later, as I thought about it, trying to understand what her dream may have meant, I realized that she was feeling increasing distance between us and it was coming out in her dreams. I found it very interesting... The concept of "going to the other side."

Nada: Sleeping in a church and feeling comfortable to sleep in a church, oh that's terrible! The ultimate betrayal! But why is it that we have become the demarcation lines between two warring worlds? Why can't we belong to both worlds?

Dina: For me, the west won the war. I was trying to figure out why it is so difficult to identify with my culture. What was the resistance? I was trying to work this out. I have come to believe that it has a great deal to do with reducing my culture to its sexist tendencies and seeing nothing beyond that.

Iman: I wonder if that resistance to identify with our Arab culture is the same for Nada and I who have grown up in the Middle East rather than the West as Jennifer and Dina have.

Dina: I think growing up here, we are seduced by western discourse and we begin to assume that our countries are more oppressive than the west. Because patriarchal culture is expressed differently here, we are made to believe that our cultures are more sexist. I think that the west creates a standard for us in terms of how we judge all other cultures. This type of western arrogance has been going on for a long time.

Jennifer: I agree with you, I really fell into that trap. I think what you do not have growing up in the west is a broader sense of your culture that you would have growing up in the Middle East. If I experience sexism and other forms of abuse in my immediate family and my extended family, and I don't experience the positive aspects of our culture, then I have nothing that counters the misogyny. Growing up on a small island in the Caribbean all I saw besides the sexism directed at me was the subservience and fatigue of other women. The self-hate gets even more complicated when you are part of a group that feels isolated and is discriminated against and yet are oppressing others. Coming to terms with myself has been a long process. Luckily my first good friend in Canada was an Arab. She loved herself and her culture. Her parents got on very well and they were really accepting of her. They were wonderful gentle human beings. And they ate, drank, and slept Arabic culture! Now that we are talking about it I realize what an impact that had on me, how much I held on to that unconsciously through the years of getting over wanting to be invisible, to be a nothing person.

Nada: A generic brand, president choice person.

Iman: When I was growing up in the Middle East, I was completely proud of being Arab. Although I felt oppressed as a woman living in a patriarchal society, I looked for positive role models in my readings of literature written by Arab women that sustained my pride in my identity. You (Reem) grew up among...

Reem: Americans, they were all Americans.

Iman: Maybe that played into your experience. I experienced self-hatred and internalized racism when I first came to the west. I had to understand the role of gender oppression and the definition of sexuality in my society,

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before I could go back. Not speaking Arabic was a conscious choice at the beginning due to my internalized racism. That compounded my sense of isolation from my culture and community. What brought me back was the love of the language. I really like to speak Arabic. Writing Arab poetry again and creating the language around sexuality broke part of my isolation.

Dina: It is difficult for Arab women to feel nationalistic because there often is conflict between patriarchy and imperialism. I feel that if I am too nationalistic then I am submitting myself to a patriarchal culture, but if I alienate myself from my country then I feel that I am aligning myself with the forces of imperialism. This conflict has been a central problem for me and likely an identity problem for a lot of Arab women.

Nada: But that's normal and it also makes sense. When you make that transformation from the Middle East to the west and then maybe go back to the Middle East for a visit, you go through these oscillations where you are trying to find out what is it exactly in your culture that is good and what is it that needs to be changed.

Reem: The point is that being who I am now and here as an "independent" Arab woman—as my mother always labels me. I guess it's better than loose, it's safe. I find that I have always struggled to be accepted and to be seen for who I am. Yes, I realize I have a different way of thinking than the average Arab does, but I'm not wacky that just landed from Mars! I've been struggling within myself, always feeling judged by my community. Now I'm more angry with the sense of "who are you to judge me?" Getting to the point of no longer caring about their judgment is an ongoing process of my own inner growth.

Nada: We haven't talked about the other part which forms our identity here. In the west, racism is one of the most important contexts of self-definition. When living in

the west you start looking for anything Arab to protect yourself from the racism you face.

Reem: Feeling alienated and isolated. That is what made me look for other Arabs.

Iman: Warmth and comfort.

Reem: Familiarity too.

Jennifer: But for me it will always be a struggle. It's about how you can be who you are and keep in touch with your family and your community, whatever that means. We have to acknowledge that for all of us, even though we come from a certain part of the world that is called Arab, there are differences depending on class, religion, region, right? In the case of my family, how can I be connected to classism, racism, sexism, and homophobia? And then, where and how do you maintain a sense of your Arab-ness? If you have to separate yourself from your Arab community, you have to find a new Arab community. If I am a lesbian, who am I going to talk to?

Reem, Iman, Dina and Nada: Other Arab lesbians!

Jennifer: Yeah but where are they? They are all closeted and then most women, except for a few, are, you know, homophobic!

Reem: Create our own little world in a way. I used to be the type that had every kind of friend. One woman who's *mithajibah* (with her head covered). I think, "I like the way she thinks," and "Okay, maybe she doesn't fit in this part of my life, but she fits in that." My life was like a patchwork, there was nobody or no group where I could be my total self with, but I am no longer tolerant of that. Now I am not as concerned with pleasing others. I look for my own comfort. You have a problem with certain aspects of my lifestyle, then maybe we don't have much in common. I do not publicly declare my life style, but I'm no longer tolerant of playing 5,000 roles for different people. I look around at my friends now, who are mostly Arab, and I know I am comfortable to say just about anything with the them. I am actually finding it more difficult now to be friends with westerners, which is amazing because all my life I have rejected Arabs in a way.

Jennifer: But which westerners? Do you mean white, upper middle-class or middle-class Canadians?

Reem: You are right, I guess I am looking for a certain consciousness, even in the Canadians as I am with the Arabs, because I find that I can not go for the mainstream white folks.

Iman: I look for commonalities in my work with women, whether the work is based on feminism, sexuality, race, but most of all class consciousness.

Experiences of racism

Jennifer: Well, why don't we talk about what our experiences are around our Arab-ness? We do not have the same experiences as Black women, as First Nations women, as South Asian women. What experiences do we have? Why do we have such a strong sense of difference from white culture?

Dina: I think part of the problem has to do with the ambiguity around our color. Even on a superficial level, everybody knows, in western society, that when it comes to Black people, there is racism. I don't think this is the case with Arab people. So, if we are going to talk about the future, education has to be primary. It has to be made clear that despite white skin privilege that some of us have, we do experience racism.

Nada: I think for me, because of the Palestinian struggle and the colonialism we are still going through, my experience of racism has an added dimension. Algeria was liberated from the French in 1962, and if you go to the

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Algerians in France and talk to them about what kind of experiences they went through, they clearly tell you that they experience systemic racism. They are even killed for being North African Arabs in France.

Dina: What about the Canadian setting?

Nada: In the Canadian setting the way it came to the surface, (and racism tends to hide its ugly face until certain incidents occur) was through the Gulf War. The war triggered the manifestation of incredible hatred towards us as a group. We started receiving hate calls, people were fired from their jobs because they were Arabs, Arab kids were called Saddam, or told to go back to where they came from, and I was constantly under extreme pressure at work from people who were questioning my alliances and what I was doing. I think based on that recent experience we can say we do face racism and that at the root of that experience is our history as colonized people. Related to our experience of racism is the west's animosity towards the dominant religion in the Arab world.

Dina: Yeh, they assume you are a Moslem and you experience their condescension and racist attitudes, but when you tell them that you are Christian, then it is not as bad.

Jennifer: Or it is still bad but not so bad.

Nada: The religion aspect came to the forefront after the fall of the Soviet Union and the need to create a new world threat. Now Islam is all about terrorism and fundamentalism and a perfect escape route and scapegoat for all ills. As in the time of the crusades the notion that there is something inherently evil about Arab culture has re-emerged and this message is fed either blatantly or at a subconscious level through the media and through all kinds of images. We, as Arab people in the west, failed to challenge racist portrayals of ourselves as effectively as other groups.

Jennifer: When we talk about racism against other communities, it is clear we are talking about lack of access, and targeted violence. It's not that I don't think we experience racism, but on the other hand I am questioning it! I have always been hesitant and fearful in North America to say who I am, in university, in hospitals, when looking for a job, but they don't see who I am.

Nada: We are not a big enough group. The manifestation of racism and its expression against Arabs in places like Britain and France and increasingly in Italy is much more explicit because they are seen as a group that is threatening.

Dina: Edward Said says that the Arabs have been defeated enough times to convince the west that we are not threatening.

Semite or anti-Semite?

Jennifer: Maybe one aspect of our experience that also relates to this discussion that we have not talked about is how Israel represents the west in the east and how we, as Arabs living in the west, are juxtaposed against Jews. I felt, or was made to feel, that by simply expressing who I was, by asserting my Arab-ness, I was automatically taking away from their existence.

Dina: It has almost become a dialectical relationship. Whenever you say the word "Arab," the word "Jew" pops to mind. And every time you identify yourself as an Arab, people ask you about your opinion of the Palestinian-Israeli situation.

Reem: I learned what it was going to be like to be a Palestinian in North America when I was 17 years old. I wrote an essay for admission applications to universities on "how history repeats itself." I covered the oppression of Jews in Europe and the atrocities of the Holocaust. I followed it up with what was happening to the Palestinians since the creation of the state of Israel and the atrocities of the occupation process. I received rejection letters from all four universities I applied to. I eventually took the essay to my advisor to rule out the nagging thought that this essay could have been the reason for the rejections. Into the second page of his reading, he looked at me and said "Do you realize how controversial this topic can be?" I was shocked and challenged him with the notion of freedom of speech. Seeing that this is why I was pursuing my education in the so-called free world, I'm telling you this story because I sometimes feel silenced. A lot of the racism that I experience as an Arab has come from that perspective. Not necessarily from Jewish people, but also from those who claim a sensitivity to Jewish people. I find this is a confusing experience for me living in the west.

Jennifer: I do not find myself silenced by Jewish women or Jewish people but I am silenced by this environment of North American guilt over the holocaust. And there is a lot to be guilty about, anti-semitism is still rampant. But in the east-west geo-political structure, building alliances

with one group means not making alliances with another. And my experience going to college and university in Montreal was that these divisions existed within the women's movement. In one class I had heard the idea that the Jews had made the desert bloom and rescued the Arabs from their tribal ways one too many times. I finally became really angry and emotional. It was not that great for me to be Arab but it was even worse if I mentioned it.

Dina: And it is still okay to be racist towards Arabs and Muslims. The decimation of Iraq tells us that. The treatment of other communities is slowly becoming a part of

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the public consciousness. It is not yet part of our social consciousness that racism is happening to Arab people. It is also not well-received when we try to affirm our identity.

Reem: My identity has actually been denied and sometimes challenged. I've gotten comments such as "You call yourself a Palestinian?" No! I do not call myself a Palestinian, I *am* a Palestinian. Or they try to identify and label me by my birth place. When I clarify that I was born in Saudi Arabia, but I am a Palestinian in the diaspora, I am met with continual questioning of where my parents, grandparents, etc...were born—who were all born in Palestine. Another interesting point I find is that the challenge of my identity is met with silence from those around me.

Jennifer: Affirming Arab-ness in general, but being Palestinian is perceived as being unquestionably anti-Semitic towards Jews. And I know we are Semitic people...

Nada: But that is part of the problem. We are not even recognized as Semitic people. We cannot even claim that part of our history and origin, the naming has been taken away from us. How is it that out of all the Semitic people and that includes Arab, Aramaic, Hebrew etc., only Jews are identified as Semites in the west? At what point has that distortion of history happened? That silencing that we have experienced means that no one can evaluate Israel as anything but a haven for all Jewish people. Yet it is a colonizing country that built itself on the ruins of our society, so why can we not have the right to say that without being accused of being "anti-Semitic," without being silenced.

Jennifer: There are a lot of Jewish women in this city who are working and have been working hard to break some of these barriers and boundaries, and I think it is important for us to build alliances and solidarity.

Reem: These are the ones we can talk to and not only in the feminist community but everywhere.

The colour of politics

Nada: The west is very compartmentalized with respect to the race issue and we are an enigma to them. Arab people have a lot of mixtures from all over the place. It's true that the biggest majority of us are dark-skinned, but there are some white and very white people and that is completely confusing. I know from reactions to me...they are completely confused: "How come? You must have European blood." But, how do you explain that my sister is dark and typically Arab-looking? They cannot compartmentalize us in the same way they do other immigrant communities.

Reem: So then are we women of colour?

Nada and Iman: Yes

Nada: It is not just the shade of your skin, in my opinion, that defines you as a person of colour or not. I don't disagree that it is one of the very important factors of oppression, but our experience of having lived in a culture that was colonized is also an important part of that definition. Regardless of shade, we will face the same kinds of racism, once we are identified as Arab. Let's say I utter something and they find out that my accent is different and so, they ask me where I am from. Suddenly all the stereotypes come out but maybe with a tilt of "Oh you don't look Arab,:" or "I would never have thought you were Arab" said as if it were a compliment.

Reem: I agree with you, but I know that most Arab women have a hard time with the term "women of colour." I don't think that they realize that *khalas* (that's it) you are labeled. You are not part of this society, you are not a white person and I don't mean white as in your skin colour, I mean white in thought and upbringing and being part of that dominant Canadian society.

Jennifer: Yeah, but that's their own racism or racialism, and class privilege in some cases. The reluctance to identify as women of color also comes out of a lack of political consciousness.

Dina: Maybe our reluctance comes from our light skin privilege which makes it possible for us to remain invisible, but the desire to want to remain invisible is also a manifestation of self-hatred. On the other hand, it is sometimes hard to understand racism happening to you because you are not immediately identified as a person of colour.

Reem: We can blend in and we are not that identifiable. If you look at the history of Arab immigrants, you've got the Syrians and the Lebanese who are third generation now, but they blended in because their colour was not too dark and those who were too dark had a hard time. A friend, a third generation Lebanese-Canadian, told me that her father didn't want any Arabic spoken in the home, because he had such a complex of being the only dark kid in the whole town.

Nada: This is the other problem which we really need to talk about in detail, the internalized racism. We really suffer from a huge complex.

Iman: *Uqdat il khawaja*, the westerner complex!

Nada: I think that partly it is self perception; our *uqdat*

il *khawaja* and our own prejudices about shades. In certain areas in the Arab world the lighter you are the more beautiful you are considered.

Jennifer: which came from colonialism ..

Nada: probably, I do not know but I do know it exists. Have you also noticed that women in the upper classes dye their hair blonde? There is a kind of contradiction here because there is also the ideal Arab beauty standard: the brown skin (*el samra*), the dark hair, the big Black eyes.

Dina: It also comes from our own experience. I know when I was nine years old, the women in my family went back to Iraq for a few months to get away from the war in Lebanon. I remember sitting in my uncle's living room and my mom was telling me how the neighbor had rated us (there are three women in our family). She found my eldest sister the prettiest, my younger sister the second prettiest and I came third. It has since occurred to me what was going on. Wanda has light skin and green eyes, Ghada has lighter skin than mine, and I am the darkest.

Iman: Looking at Arabic poetry and novels, it is interesting to see that pre-Islamic poetry up until western colonization at the eighteenth century, women were always described as having long wavy Black hair, brown skin, Black eyes with the white of the eyes very white (*Hawra*). The body proportions were also bigger. During the later part of the nineteenth century and until very recently, light skinned, blond women have usurped the beauty standard in modern Arabic literature. At the present time, especially in the gulf countries, the dark skinned beauty is back. I think there is a relationship between the colonization of our countries by "white people" and the changes in beauty ideals of women. It is interesting that the description of the ideal Arab man in Arab literature has remained unchanged. The most interesting thing is that the authors and poets very rarely touched the "Arab nose," How many Arabs have up turned tiny noses?

Jennifer: God I wanted one of these noses badly! Because my nose was a give away, my sister and I used to sleep with our nose pressed up against the pillow every night.

Dina and Reem: Oh my God! me too!



Artist: Anne S. Walker, Reprinted with Permission of the *wrc*

Jennifer: Isn't it amazing how you are made to hate your body? It's an integral strategy of the colonizer and the horrible manifestation of a patriarchal culture. What a deadly combination. The colonized begin to see themselves through colonialist eyes. My parents are a perfect example. They make people hate themselves, their bodies, everything physical about themselves and their culture. Arab becomes synonymous with dirty.

Reem: I grew up being called that! Stupid American kids who were six years old knew how to call me dirty Arab. What! Is it fed into them?

Iman: Dirty Arab I don't think signifies just physical dirtiness, I think it goes further than that to mentality.

Jennifer: But they say that all the third world people smell, they say Black people smell, they say that South Asian people smell. That's about colonialism and slavery.

Nada: We not only start hating our bodies, but even our names. Especially the Christian Arabs, by the way. I've noticed that because of their earlier contact with Europeans, they have an even more severe case of internalized racism. They will give their sons and daughters European names, especially in Lebanon, but also in Palestine, Iraq, Jordan, Egypt, and Syria. They almost don't want any association with Arab culture as such. They keep telling their kids we are different from the Muslims, we are more civilized. It's about how we see ourselves through western eyes and how anything western is more advanced and more civilized than anything eastern. It's amazing how this works. I was thinking that this is a big contributing factor for the people who come here and blend. They blend because they force themselves to reject everything about their culture that would identify them as Arab.

Jennifer: But that's when you also start looking at how your race and your skin colour do make it harder for you to succeed at doing that (blending in). It is easier to blend in for light skinned, Christian Arab people. Well that's why I have a name like Jennifer. My mother said specifically that none of was going to have Arab sounding names.

Nada: Even for Muslim Arabs. Internalized racism helps them to integrate. Because they think that your name will bring you misfortune, it's a way of protection for your kids. That's how they see it. I don't think it is malicious.

Reem: They don't want them to go through what they went through. They don't want them to suffer, they don't want them to be different.

Iman: I've met a lot of people who have come here as adults, some of them Muslim. They change their names. Everyone is called James and Michael and they refuse to speak one word of Arabic and they deny the fact that they can even read it or write it.

Reem: Someone tried to change my name, saying why don't you drop the second part of your last name, to what? Abdul?

Nada: That doesn't make any sense

Reem: Exactly, and then I would get stuck with “are you related to Paula Abdul?” Another incident was in a job interview when a woman said to me “Reem Qadir, gosh, if I didn’t know better, I would think it was an English name.” I was telling this to another Arab woman and she goes “gosh that’s great, get rid of the Abdul and everyone will think you’re English.”

Iman: Going back to the question Jennifer raised, coming to the west, I did not know what the term women of color meant when I first heard it. I also had no idea that I had white skin privilege and remained invisible to other women of color. The recognition did not come till after the Gulf War.

Nada: There is general confusion about the definition of women of colour. In some circles now people want the definition to include Jewish women, regardless of their origin and in others the term is completely based on color of skin and that will include Italians, Spanish, Portuguese, but not some white Latina women. My sister who is dark would be included but not me.

Jennifer: Women of colour is a strategic reference. It is both an oppositional construct to ‘white mainstream culture’ and a structure for solidarity building that has been a very useful and important one for ‘third world’ women in the last ten years. Maybe we’ve gotten to a point in our history as women of colour working for change, as feminists, where using that term isn’t as easy any more. Our experiences with white cultures are very different depending on the communities we are from. And then we have all the intersecting differences around class as well so it gets really complicated. And maybe what has happened is that we have become seduced by the construct as well so it is backfiring on us within the movement itself, but I think as a group we have to understand that you can carve out difference within that construct. In fact you have to if you have any political consciousness.

Dina: The difficulty with this is that because we might not be identified on a cultural level as people of color, then it does not really make a difference if strategically we are, because we still experience alienation. Right now we are neither white nor dark until such a time when people identify us with the term person of color regardless of our shade.

Nada: It’s always been a problematic term but I haven’t seen any alternative come forward and in a way it is a useful term. There must be no bones about us saying that skin colour is one of the most important factors in racism and therefore never dismiss its importance, and carry on to say that it is not the only factor. Women of colour is useful as a frame of mind and reference upon which our alliances are built. As Arab Women, we have faced the dilemma of being rejected by the white society which definitely does not see us as white and yet we are reminded that we can easily pass as white.

Iman: I am not racially white. My experience in this world is not of a racially privileged white person. My first tongue is not white. Yet it is problematic to be accepted in

that structure because white feminists are continually challenging my identity as a woman of colour.

Jennifer: Well, fuck that. What I think is important to concentrate on is that if you look at the women’s movement, all different facets, communities, groups, Arab women are few and far between, in Canada at least. I know that in the States it’s a completely different story. But doing political work with women of colour to strategize around issues of change, we are not there in large numbers. Historically we have not been there and that has to change. Or maybe the ones who are invisible? Come out, come out!

Nada: I really think there is a change now. The Gulf War made a huge impact on the alliances made and the way we are interpreted within the feminist movement.

Jennifer: It is ironic and bizarre that we get together and because of the way that this society operates, we end up looking for these signifiers to group ourselves, so that means we have to get together based on our Arab-ness. If we did not have other things in common, our Arab-ness would be irrelevant. If someone has class-consciousness but is homophobic and not a feminist, it’s difficult to work with her. For me it is about what their consciousness is about their place in the world. If you are privileged do you have a consciousness about your privilege? What do you do with it? Are you working through your racism and racialism? Homophobia? Those are the things that are most important. It comes down to the question for me that I am Arab and am identified by my Arab-ness. Some people say what kind of Arab are you? I have so many things intersecting because I don’t speak the language, because of where I am from, and so on. So, it is about remembering what struggle I am engaged in this world. Am I working for change and are the people around me working for that same change? Hopefully I have as many points of commonality as possible across race, class, sex, etc. If they are Arab, great!

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