

## **Identity: the need to belong**

### **Anjum A. Ali, Tools for Change August 2009**

By nature, humans are social creatures. Generally they seem to have an innate need to belong. This led me to the question, at what point did I as a human feel that I had a particular set identity? Did I choose it or was it imposed? Why did I hold onto it? How did it benefit me? And more importantly, was the identity I clung to innocent, or had I fallen into the trap – as so many of us have – of unassumingly donning a politicized identity that others had created?

I spent much of my life in an “identity crisis”. Born in the USA, my father was a Pakistani doctor, my mother was a nurse. We moved to Riyadh, Saudi Arabia when I was small. My first close friends were Swedish and Scottish, Lebanese Maronite Christian and Muslim, Palestinian, Turkish, Phillipino, White American, African American, Pakistani, Egyptian, Afghani, Jamaican, Canadian, Kenyan, and, of course, Saudi. An ideal world. Our family traveled to the US, France, Britain, and Switzerland. I believe it was an extremely privileged childhood.

Around 6<sup>th</sup> grade I began to understand that although I was calling Saudi Arabia home, the Saudis themselves regarded me as an alien and simply a guest at best. Part of the reason it began to even matter to me that I should be Saudi, was because the nationality that I did have (US) I did not like. My experiences at the Saudi Arabian International School-Riyadh (SAIS) were bitter to say the least. Being called a “Paki” threw me into the world of colonized and colonizer. I recognized my skin was brown, that I was indeed the native and they the settlers (as Franz Fanon terms it).

My parents focused on ensuring my sister and I had a good Islamic education and upbringing. They used to express how they would be so proud of us if we covered our hair when we went to school. I was a parent pleaser. But ironically, although I lived in a country where covering head to toe was the law for women, within the confines of an American run institution I was mocked and humiliated for being so different. But then again it is precisely institutions like schools that encourage and perpetuate “cultural conformity” and as it was an American school you had to look, dress and act like one to be accepted.

This is when I realized that I was not allowed to be whomever I chose. I learned to fear. I became frustrated with my insecurities and somehow determined I could never be an American because Americans seemed like cruel and extremely arrogant people. This made it all the more important that I consider myself a Saudi: it was the home I loved; the people were of a religion and faith that I loved. But we did not receive Saudi nationality in spite of my father’s best efforts to make it our permanent home. As I grew older I discovered how imperfect the country I called home was in its treatment of women and in its prejudices. Yet I had to reconcile this with the fact that some of our closest and kindest friends were Saudi.

So there I was, not caring to be Pakistani (I took it for granted but it was not my homeland; it was my parents. And how could I belong to a land where the people made fun of my accent when I spoke their language?) Neither did I want to be American. The only identity I wanted – Saudi – I was not allowed to have. So I went back to the US for boarding school and was stuck with the label of “foreign student” for the next 8 years.

The one identity that no one could determine for me, that I had complete liberty to choose and which gave me a sense of control over who I was and to whom I belonged, was that of my faith. Islam was an

identity no one could question. It represented all the ideals I loved. So in my second year at university I decided to wear the head scarf. I was determined to show my faithfulness to Islam and I wore my identity proudly wherever I went.

But what gradually occurred to me was the respect and kindness I was receiving in the USA. Indeed, when I wore the scarf to college, my professors were even more kind and attentive to me. People asked me to share my faith with them. It was amazing. The same Americans who had hurt me before were now welcoming me. By time I graduated I was proud to be an *American* Muslim.

But in my recent self-searching, it occurred to me that when I had put the hijab on, I had not done it from religious conviction. It was to take back control of choosing how people would identify me. If I wore the veil, then people's attention would focus on my religion and not my skin color and ethnicity. I believe I fell into the trap of manipulation of identity. The hijab was not innocent; it was done with an ulterior motive, though at the time I would have been unable to recognize it myself. Only in retrospect I recall the emotions and the pain of being labeled.

My religion made me fearless. I chose what identity people would focus on, not what they wanted to impose on me. This is still true today. The only difference is that I have had to ask myself sincerely whether or not I believe the hijab is something religiously mandated. If I were simply wearing the hijab for identity, I should remove it now even here while at Caux in order to remain true to myself. Otherwise it could be said that I too bought into the politicization of identity.

Let me share with you a quote from an article I read recently entitled "Identity and Victimhood" in which the author Diane Enns asks: "...does the need to belong become an absolute and exclusionary need only when it is threatened by external forces, only when thorough discriminatory practices one's belonging suddenly becomes an act of resistance? Do we ask only how hatred has been made into a community but never how that community has been made out of hatred?"

Facing discrimination in my youth undoubtedly led me down a path I may not otherwise have chosen. If it were not for a boy who laughed at me and told me how stupid I looked with a scarf on my head, perhaps I would never have felt the urgency to wear it as soon as I got the courage. If it weren't for the fact that Saudi government did not allow me to call that country my own, I may not have become so fierce in demonstrating my religious identity.

Then again, if it had not been for the excellent education I received and particularly the kindness and the respect shown to me in my later youth in the United States, today I might have been among those who still hated the majority and would have remained stuck in a victimhood mentality.

Clinging to Islam was also a spiritual survival, but if I am honest, I have to admit that wearing the hijab at the time that I did was a form of resistance. Nonetheless, the ultimate question I must ask myself regularly to reevaluate my life and my mission is: have I fallen into the trap of the cat and the rat? Am I seeing myself as a victim in the world of politicized identities today, or am I taking the initiative to be who I want to be? Have I already been defined by others so that I can no longer choose to define myself? Why must I be the rat in a world of cats? I'd rather be a giraffe whose line of vision goes well beyond what can see.

If it took me so long to discover and only partially get out from under the politicized identities imposed upon me, how much more difficult is it for those helpless in conflict-ridden areas in the post-colonial and post-9/11 world to escape the defined boundaries and the labeling they encounter? I strongly feel

that what we are doing here at Caux, is stepping in the right direction. Because although Conflict Management practices have brought attention to the identity discourse taking place, what they have not done sufficiently yet is to (as Diane Enns says) “interrogate identity itself, neither what we consider what we consider a human need to belong, nor the dangerous transition from what we might call an innocent belonging to a deadly one.”

I believe it behooves those of us who have had the privilege of experiencing Caux to look inward and ask of ourselves: Do we cling to our identities and those of our parents because there is a benign need to belong, or is it an act of resistance due to historical trauma and insecurity? For years it became quite comfortable for me to live within my shell of having only a Muslim identity. It was not until IofC's Connecting Community Fellowship Program in the United States that I regained my sense of identity as a human and that I shared it with all of humanity.

What will my children go through when they are discriminated against for being Muslim, with relatives who are Shià (my husband is Iranian) and of Pakistani heritage, and in my daughter's case, of being female? What I do hope is that I can instill in them what I have learned here. That they must first and foremost identify with their Creator and with all of humanity. Only after that must they consider their other identities as relevant to who they are.

**Anjum Ashraf Ali** was born in the United States and is of Pakistani heritage. She spent her childhood in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where she still often visits to see her family. Anjum continued her studies in Boston, Massachusetts, where she obtained her BA in International Relations and French Cultural Studies at Wellesley College. She then went to McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, Canada where she earned her MA in Islamic Studies, concentrating on Islamic Law and the rights of women and children within it. Her Master's thesis was *Child Marriage in Islamic Law*. Anjum has worked as an Islamic legal advisor for a Virginia-based law firm where she helped found the Advocacy Center for Muslim Women. She recently obtained her Post Baccalaureate certificate in Paralegal Studies. Anjum serves as co-chair of the Board of Directors of Hope in the Cities.