

## This Land is not My Land

I realized I was queer when I was in college in Jordan, despite its very conservative environment. I was always attracted to women, but my first experience was in college when I fell in love with a woman while dating a guy. My boyfriend at the time found out and it created tons of problems which escalated into police being involved. I was forced to move back with my family the last year of college, and my mom caught me kissing a girl, but didn't say a word. Later on, the girl's mother contacted mine and told her we were having an unnatural relationship. My mother freaked out. We denied there was anything between us. That was when I got really scared and felt that I either had to leave Jordan or live a straight life.

And so I chose to escape. But to do that with my parents' approval, it had to involve school. By 23, I had applied to different PhD programs in the US and I ended up in a very conservative state. I didn't care where I went as long as I could leave. But that meant that I had to completely compartmentalize myself. In Jordan, I was the straight member of my big, traditional family. In the US, I was gay and on my own. But what I did not know at the time was that I was not ready for the white, Republican, straight Arabophobic, male-dominated mentality that I found myself facing in the US.

Suddenly, I became an Arab ambassador, enthusiastically answering all sorts of dumb questions on a daily basis. People were confused when they found out I was Arab, Christian, queer, and down with Islam. They found it odd that my family had never been oppressed by Muslims. Aren't all Arabs Muslim and all Muslims terrorists? Turns out that being open about your identity is just as hard as being in the closet.

The hardest part was when my parents visited me a couple of months ago. It was the first time that I allowed both sides of me to meet each other. Of course, I de-gay'd the house and my girlfriend became my best friend who lived with me in my one-bedroom apartment. They went back to Amman convinced that everything in my life was "normal"

– according to their understanding.

I ran away from home looking for the freedom to do what I wanted without being judged, and by escaping, I chose to leave behind a big part of who I am. It remains heavy on my heart. I have never felt that this house is my home, or even that this stuff is my furniture. But if I could go back in time, I would do the same thing all over again, because I don't think I am ready to merge my two lives in Jordan. If I didn't leave, I would have never explored the different dimensions of who I was, I would have never questioned everything the way I was able to in the US.

But the gay community here is not the supportive, understanding community you'd think it would be. Some people are racist or Zionist. They can't understand who I am or where I'm coming from. I cannot relate to anything with them other than sexual preference, which is not enough grounds for me to establish relationships with people. Being queer here is all about being proud and colorful. It's one big party. In Jordan, you don't talk about sexuality even if you're straight. You are simply part of a community and you are modest about it. It's all about being a part of the family and fitting in, which is not necessarily a good thing, but it's our culture.

To me, being queer is not only about loving women, but also about being aware of my family and how they are feeling. Once I went to a group therapy session for gays and lesbians in the city, and one of the guys said to me after hearing my story: "Your family just needs to get over it. If they don't like it, then fuck them. Just leave". What an absurd piece of advice! It is not even an option for me to just leave my family. My world revolves around the well-being of my mother, my father and my siblings because I love them so much. When my family is happy, I am automatically happy. They have done so much for me that I can't just say "yalla, bye" to them. This bond grows with age – it doesn't just disappear.

I have been independent throughout my stay here and I thought it would help me be stronger. And it has. But it hasn't helped me feel that I can come out

to my family. I know my family loves me just the same, but I also know that if I told my mother, she would blame herself and that would kill me. She has given so much to me, to my brother and sister. When my brother got cancer, she blamed herself and her genes. She is ridiculous like that. I panic every time I think of coming out to her. The guilt would kill me, and my mother has done a great job – like all mothers do – of instilling guilt in her children.

I am always hoping to end up somewhere in the Middle East: find a job and “come back”. But I don’t think it will be Amman. I need a place that’s far enough from my family and close enough at the same time. Maybe Beirut, maybe Turkey, I’m not sure. But wherever you travel, wherever you escape to, there is always the burning desire to come back home.

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## My Hijab and I

I have a problem. I’ve always worn the hijab in a funny way. I’ve been wearing it for over 10 years now. The other day, my mom said, “You’re never going to know how to wear the hijab properly!” I grew up in a Shiite Muslim community in the South. All the girls and women in my family and my community are veiled. We were taught that something was wrong with non-hijab girls – that something was missing in their lives. We couldn’t say they were slutty because they included our cousins.

When I was nine, I really wanted to wear the hijab. I wanted to be a big girl, like all the women around me. My mom said I had to wait till puberty, when I would be about 13. She tried to distract me by offering me my usual short tomboyish haircut, something special that only I got. But I followed her around the house with a hijab until, finally, she caved in. In any case, I got my period when I was 10. So everybody won.

I guess I started having a problem with it just before I came out to myself at age 14. Around that time, I began to discover the world outside the South of Lebanon. I was someone who always stayed home. I would go directly from home to school, and then from school to my room. I was molested around this time as well. I guess that was my way of dealing with it. In the summer, I didn’t go out either. And if I did go out, I didn’t stray further than the garden.

During that time, I just watched TV the whole time. That’s where I came into contact with the Western world. That’s when I started to hate my veil. I wanted to look like what I was seeing on the screen. At the same time, I was coming out to myself. I still had short hair. I started to really want to dress differently. I felt I didn’t fit in with everyone else. I refused to wear high heels. I wanted to be more of a tomboy. Since I was a kid, I was already a big tomboy. I would wear jeans and tennis shoes. I wore two shirts on top of each other and stuck my collar out. I would tuck my hijab into my shirt.

But it still wasn’t enough for me. I started blaming all my problems on my hijab. I thought it made me look “uncool”. I wanted to show off my short hair. I wanted to announce my “dykeness” or butchiness. I wanted to make my hair spiky. And I wanted to wear short sleeves in the summer, not the long sleeves you have to wear with the veil.

Mostly, I craved to send a signal out to other women that I was a dyke. With the hijab and its required clothing, I felt that was impossible. I really just hated it. It wasn’t the way I wanted to look. At some point, I started imitating my straight sister’s way of dressing: tight clothes, long skirts. Then I realized that this style was designed to attract men and I wasn’t comfortable with that. Other people thought it was very cool but I was attracting the wrong sex!

It was then that I switched to wearing really baggy clothes, like my mom does. And everybody protested about this. The whole family. They would say, “You’re still young, why do you want to dress twice your age? You should wear things that attract boys’ attention!” That’s when I became completely

convinced. In my mind, if I wasn't attracting women, I didn't want to attract anyone! Then we moved to Beirut. And the second phase of my life started. I was 18. When I was at school, I would go to work and come back home right after. I didn't meet any new people. Anyone I met, I met online. And that's how I found two people in particular who really changed me: an American and a German. Both were lesbians. At no point did they ask to see a photo of me without my veil. I realized that these two people, living in the "cool" society that I wanted to live in, thought my hijab was cool. My American friend loved it. She would always compliment me in my hijab, as did my German friend. I reached a point in my life where I had to decide. Either I had to take off my hated veil or learn to love it. The easiest choice was to learn to love it. Taking my hijab of nine years off was out of the question. That would have been like ripping out a part of myself. It would have also caused a lot of problems with my family. And I didn't want to deal with that. People would start to look at me differently as well. A girl who takes off her hijab is considered an even bigger sinner than the one who doesn't wear one in the first place. At that age, I wasn't ready to take it off and deal with all the repercussions. I didn't have the weapons or the support. So I had to learn to love it.

Then I met the lesbian community. And I was faced with a new set of problems. The first thing I heard from them was: "A dyke wearing a hijab?! How can you be both?!" I got this from a lot of people. Or

I could see it in their eyes. I can count only four women who didn't have a problem with me and my veil. I used to really lose my temper. Finally, I sat one of the girls down and explained to her that sexuality has nothing to do with a veil. It's not like I suddenly lose all sexual feeling when I cover my head. I was really worried that I wouldn't find any acceptance among them. I wanted to know why a German woman could accept me but Lebanese lesbians had a problem.

I also faced the problem of not fitting in socially. Most girls in the lesbian community liked to go out to bars and drink. I don't like to do any of those things. If I was interested in dating a girl in the community, I would have to make sure first that she was ok with my hijab before I asked her. I thought it was unfair. I wasn't judging any of the girls because I didn't share their party-going fervor and drinking habits. Why should they judge me like this? I started to feel I was undate-able.

My friends convinced me that if someone felt awkward dating me because of my veil, they didn't deserve me. I get along with great friends from other religions. One is very respectful and never drinks in front of me. You would be surprised. My hijab even protects me from being objectified by other women. One thing I love about being veiled is that people aren't paying attention to what I'm wearing or my hair style. They're listening to what I'm saying. Either they like it or they don't. And, girl, do I have a lot to say.