



## *Exiles and Home*

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**Abstract:** I have been away from home for over 20 years. But what is home in my case? An Arab woman born to a Palestinian father and an Italian mother, married to a German man and mother to an American daughter, I had traveled a long way. I asked my mother once whether “*Hon casa?*” (Is this home?). I was 2 years old then, and we had just arrived at my grandfather’s house in Italy after a long journey from Jordan. I was just starting to talk, but could only do so by mixing the two languages I was born with: “Hon” is “here” in Arabic and “casa” is “home” in Italian. Ever since, I have lived in many houses. I carried many worlds, but kept looking for a home, *the* home. My exile has been layered, a tapestry woven through the course of a diasporic life that could only be completed and reconciled through an embrace of the continual invention of the self. My exile was grounded in the collective sense of exile of the Palestinian people. It was shaped by the unique personal experience of a girl growing amid the reverberation of the 1967 debacle that hit the Arab world. The dialectic between the collective and the personal shaped my alienation as much as my ways to come to term with the person I became.

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*Exile is predicated on the existence of love for and a real bond with one’s native place; the universal truth of exile is not that one has lost that love or home, but that inherent in each is an unexpected, unwelcome loss.*

—Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)

“Give me a face for exile,” he asked, looking at me as I tried to find refuge in my tears. “Exile has no face,” I retorted. “It is sadness, a loss, a nostalgia that cannot be put in words. Exile can only acquire a face once it is overcome!”

I have been away from home for over

20 years. But what is home in my case? An Arab woman born to a Palestinian father and an Italian mother, married to a German man and mother to an American daughter, I had traveled a long way. I asked my mother once whether “*Hon casa?*” (Is this home?). I was 2 years old then, and we had just arrived at my grandfather’s house in Italy after a long journey from Jordan. I was just starting to talk, but could only do so by mixing the two languages I was born with: “Hon” is “here” in Arabic and “casa” is “home” in Italian. Ever since, I have lived in many houses. I carried many worlds, but kept looking for a home, *the* home.

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## ORIGIN OF EXILE

The story of exile started long before. My Palestinian grandmother, who lived in our household up until I was three, was exiled from her native town, Saffuria, north of Nazareth, when she was only 13 years old. She was then being wedded to a man 30 years older than her, and moved to the West Bank in 1926. She was exiled a second time when her town was eradicated by the Hagana (a Jewish underground organization) in 1948, with the creation of the state of Israel. She never saw her siblings again, as they became refugees dispersed between Lebanon and Syria. She only reconnected with some of her nephews, who became Israeli Arabs, after 1967. That war reconnected the land, but reaffirmed the exile; her sons had to leave because of the Israeli occupation and many were forbidden from returning to their place of birth.

My grandmother raised four boys and a girl whom she pushed out of the parochialism of village life by insisting that they become enlightened professionals. However, they were forced to be dispersed across the globe, and she suffered for not having them around her, especially in her ailing years. She spent the last years of her life traveling from one country to another to see them, rather than having them visit her and re-establish the home. It was her deepest sorrow that none of her boys witnessed her last breaths, told her farewell, in her, theirs, native land. Only her daughter stood by her.

Yet, for my grandmother, daughters could never be as good, as validating, as boys. Sons, not daughters, gave my grandmother a sense of place, a prominence in the exiled community she came to live among; if her sons had remained she would have perhaps been able to cope better with her exile, been less sad, been comforted with a sense of power, of the status that could compensate, maybe, for the loss of

home. Although only her daughter dealt with her daily, never really left her, catered for her needs, comforted her in her pain and sorrow, it was the sons my grandmother longed for. Women might well be those who cater for the home; but men are the ones validating the sense of home, its contours and its content, if not its form.

The exile from Palestine and from womanhood was two exiles that inhabited me, probably ever since I was born. I was in my mother's womb on June 6<sup>th</sup>, 1967, when the six day war erupted between Israel and its Arab neighbors. My father had wanted me to be a boy, all the more as he became a refugee himself. He was already known by his relatives and friends as Abou-el-Abid, the father of first son, not first daughter. Like many of his third world generation of the 1950s and 1960s, my father had recently returned from being a student in the West, to build his homeland. He returned to work on a pan-Arab engineering irrigation project on the Jordan River. The 1967 war stopped the project, and with that his plan to go home. He saw his relatives come fleeing from Palestine, which they escaped as Israeli troops invaded the West Bank. They became exiled in Kuwait and other places only to be expelled again in 1990. Like them, he too took his family and wandered from place to place, always with the determination to return.

Before I was six years old, I lived in 3 different countries, witnessed 3 wars, and lived in 4 different houses. The 6 days war in 1967 moved me from Irbid, in north Jordan, to Amman, before Black September in 1970 forced us to Kuwait. In 1973, during the Ramadan or Yom Kippur war, we moved to Dubai, the pearl of the Gulf. By then I had three younger siblings, and a mother on the edge of a nervous breakdown, if not fully in it. But my mother did not consider herself exiled, for she was not forced to leave because of a war or dispossession. Exile does not come with freedom, or with the sense of choice. Those who

choose to leave their homes cannot be exiled, she argued.

My mother rather willingly chose to leave her native land to marry the man she loved. She departed from Trieste, a city that was a haven for exiles such as James Joyce, Rilke, and others. Trieste was a city that combined a central European tradition within an Italy that was open to many different ethnic groups and cultures. My mother carried with her a curiosity and a tolerance for others that had long served her in the Arab world in which she lived. She did not feel alienated, she argued, because she had a clear project for her life and found the partner with whom to attain it. Her project for life was to become a mother who would raise independent and responsible children. She found in my father the man who enabled her to achieve her plan. That was at least what she maintained. She also thought that she married him because he would protect her, and complete her, but she soon realized that these were fantasies. That is what she told me when I asked her at age 12 why she married my father. What mattered, though, was her belief that it was her duty to follow her husband and she surely did. She also understood his urge to return to his homeland. As a child my mother saw exiled people, be they Slovians and Italians, longing to return home, to her native Trieste, the city she never left until she was 25 years old. My mother maintained that she did not feel out of place in the different Arab world she came to live in, for she was at peace with herself, with her choices.

And yet, I felt, before I could articulate, that it took time before she found her home, her place, and how ephemeral this sense of created home felt at times. I remember my mother crying, depressed, and complaining about her kids. I remember her having no Arab friend, only one Italian companion, like her married to an Arab. I remember her telling me that I was of help to her in the midst of her loneliness and despair.

My mother, however much she lived for her kids and her husband, however much her life was confined to the kitchen and to the role of a taxi driver taking her children from one activity to another, however much she spent years trying and succeeding in understanding the different world of her husband, was also an exile, if only for a while, if only in her own style, in a way that was void of any patriotism or sense of nationalist dispossession that her husband carried with him.

I grew up with these two different exiles. I strove, without always knowing it, to overcome them by reconciling the two worlds that made me. On the one hand, there was the Arab identity, a Palestinian fate and trajectory, a vocal proud but broken narrative entrenched in a rich Arab nationalistic tradition, angry at an European colonialism that was not only the cause of displacement but also of negation. On the other hand, there was my mother, an exile from an admired but suspicious West, occulted but deeply profound, connected to a tradition that came from Trieste carrying with it a cosmopolitanism 'à la recherche du temps perdu.'

My exile, though, like everyone's, is unique. It was hard to be an Arab girl born to an Italian mother in a world that was still male dominated. It was hard to become a Palestinian woman in a world of exiled people.

## EXILE AND LANGUAGE

Exile carries with it a sense of banishment, an irremediable loss, loneliness, a feeling of being out of place. Loss was a central element in my history, in the story of my father, in the reality of my grandmother, in the negation of my mother. The challenge for me was to define which loss I experienced and what exile I am living, one that might well descend from that of my parents but is still distinct from them.

Is it the exile from the nation, the land, or the exile from the self? Is it the exile from the parents or the exile from the outside world? Is it the exile from the language, and in this case which language? Italian, the first language I heard and learned, that of my mother, but which I speak with an accent? Or is it Arabic, the language with which I first engaged the outside world, but which was replaced by English, a language that I mastered but with which I never really feel at home?

“L'exile de la langue,” which Jacques Hasoun wrote about, was real to me. Language as a sense of displacement often mirrored my sense of exile in this world. I often felt I was living within a Tower of Babel, as I learned to master five languages, but I only felt at home in Arabic. It was at times unbearable to hear these languages resonate in my mind, to witness how they created segmented worlds, in me as much as in the outside world. It was hard to feel and realize that these languages could not meet, that they could not converge, for if they did, my language would become incomprehensible.

Italian proved to be the language of the womb, of my mother, of warmth. It remained the language with which I relate to my mother. It did not carry with it a sense of loneliness, although it did give me a sense of constraint, of limitation. Arabic was the language that allowed me to separate from my mother, to become a separate identity from her. It was tied to my father, but not confined to him. It was the language of my siblings, of the outside world I connected with and of the world of which I was made to be proud of. It also represents for me the language of desire, of poetry, of life. That is at least what I felt, what I feel today.

Yet, English became, after I left home, the language of the intellect, where I learned to be articulate, scientific, in which I acquired my university degrees, and with which I related to the outside world ever

since I became an adult. It also became the language I shared with the partner I married, and of the new home I eventually built. I still do not know if it is the language I choose, or the one I just had to take in order to communicate with the Babel outside me, with the external world I ended up living in since I was 18. Yet, it still remained a foreign language, not really mine, one in which I feel somewhat exiled, despite its being today the language in which I best express myself.

My exile has been layered, a tapestry woven through the course of a diasporic life that could only be completed and reconciled through an embrace of the continual invention of the self. My exile was grounded in the collective sense of exile of the Palestinian people. It was shaped by the unique personal experience of a girl growing amid the reverberation of the 1967 debacle that hit the Arab world. The dialectic between the collective and the personal shaped my alienation as much as my ways to come to term with the person I was becoming.

## **EXILE FROM PALESTINE**

Growing up Palestinian was alienating as much as inescapable. Exile from Palestine was not simply the banishment of my father from his land and from his mother. It wasn't only about being away from my grandmother and cousins. It was above all a deep feeling that I should have been born somewhere else, should have had my life over there, in Palestine where my father wanted us to be, not wherein my childhood ended up unfolding.

My father moved to the Gulf but never settled, although he lived there 25 years. His stay was temporary, a station on the way to return home once the land was liberated. He saved money to remit home, but he also continued his activist work for Palestine, an activism that predated my birth.

Like many of his generation, he witnessed the end of colonisation in the Arab World in the 1950s as well as the creation of the State of Israel on Palestine. My father believed in political action and was involved in its various forms, from student activism to political party involvement. With the debacle of 1967 he joined one of the political parties of the Palestinian liberation movement and became active in its diplomatic core. Given that my father studied in Europe and married a European, he mastered a number of foreign languages that made him, together with others, an emissary for the Palestinian cause. Those were the days of the height of the Vietnam War and mass opposition to it, as well as of the 1968 revolts. It was the time when members of liberation movements were not insurgents but members of a legitimate resistance struggle, the struggle for self-determination. My father travelled to Europe, taking me with him when I was only a child. His mission was to explain the cause, foster links with Palestinian youth leadership, and to sow the seeds of European support for the Palestinian struggle. I was a baby then, carrying a broche with the PLO emblem on it. I, with that emblem, became a code by which he and his other Diaspora compatriots could identify themselves to one another. It seemed that I was (pre-)destined to carry on the torch of the struggle, at least as far my father saw it.

Palestine became inevitably the promised land, and I became the Jew of the Jew, as one of Elias Khoury's characters described us in *Bab el Shams (the Sun's Door)*. I lived a diasporic life in the Arab/Persian Gulf, among Palestinians dreaming of returning home. I felt disempowered as much as exiled during the 13 years I lived in Dubai, one of the better cities of the Gulf, one which, however, still did not give me or my parents permanent residence. I grew up in a neighborhood populated by exiled Levantines: Lebanese, Palestinian and Syrian people. My school was run by Lebanese; my friends were Palestinians. Although

Dubai buzzed with different ethnic groups, who were unofficially segregated along occupational categories, my life remained confined to a Levantine world.

I did not have local friends, or friends who were Europeans or Asians, although I saw them in the street, shopped with them in the stores, frequented them along the beach. These divisions were self created as much by each ethnic group that came to make money and return home rather than mingle with others, as by the city's policies. Dubai was an international city but not cosmopolitan. It attracted and accepted every immigrant who wanted to work and mind his/her own affairs, but did not seek to melt them into any new identity. Each community was welcomed to create its own schools, businesses, sports clubs and restaurants, not to engage in local or regional politics or question the fully unprotected free market system. Dubai was a place to make money that can be remitted home, not a place to replace one's original home.

Thus, in my world of an exiled teenager, it was Palestine and exiled Levantines who continued to matter, especially as the Israeli invasion of Lebanon erupted in 1982. I was 15 years old at the time and I saw for myself what war and dispossession meant. I managed then to participate in my first conscious political act. I participated in a demonstration, one led by women and children, to denounce the massacres of Sabra and Shatila. It was the only one allowed in a country that forbade any form of political participation. It had no impact though, and it gave me no sense of empowerment. The press was forbidden from reporting on it. The fact that it was organized by women gave it a "humanitarian" rather than political touch that needed to go unnoticed. That first experience of political activism accentuated the sense of exile, both as a Palestinian and as a woman.

Palestine remained the real thing, the only place where the struggle mattered, the only place where home was possible. The

longer my life in Dubai continued, the deeper was my sense of dispossession and the more I felt the need to own Palestine. Palestine was mystical to me. My father's story of his childhood in his village, my grandmother's yearly visit telling me about the Israeli atrocities and about the Palestinian's resistance, the unfolding of the Palestinian tragedy with the war in Lebanon, and the exile of the PLO to Tunis, were among the things that created this sense of mysticism, as well as of the deep sense of collective tragedy. But I also needed to own Palestine—to make it mine, even if it remained inevitably linked to my father and the whole community to which I belong. Palestine became real to me when I visited the West Bank, with my mother and siblings, whenever the Israeli government gave us permission to be there. I constructed my own relationship to Palestine, by creating new friendships, discovering my aunts and my cousins, and by being in its landscape, among its olive groves. Palestine gave me, paradoxically, a feeling of freedom and authenticity that I could not feel in my life in the Gulf. It gave me a sense of empowerment. In Palestine people who resisted the Israeli occupation had a clear sense of their lives. They were on solid ground—however much this ground was being encroached upon by Israeli settlements. They were there to stay, like the resilient olive trees, never to give up, never to leave.

My attempt to own Palestine and overcome the collective exile I inherited was an attempt to materialize the dream of return. But this return had to be prepared for and ultimately pass through another exile, that of leaving the Arab world to go and study in the West. My decision to move to the West and study political science was undertaken with an eye to return home, where I wanted to put my acquired knowledge at the service of my people. My father provided a role model for me in this respect, but above all I also wanted to prove that an

Arab woman, not a man, can follow, if not outgrow, his footsteps. Thus Palestine became alive in my student activism. I took upon myself to explain the cause to others, through students' demonstrations, lectures, and collaborative projects to organize westerners to visit the land and see the effects of Israeli occupation. I also had to define the Palestine to which I wanted to return. I was brought up to believe that the only solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a secular democratic state in which Jews, Christians and Arabs will all live together. That was the motto of the PLO at least until 1974 and officially until 1988. But by 1987 the Intifada erupted against Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and in 1988 the PLO declared the establishment of the state of Palestine based on UN resolution 242. Arafat by then had accepted the idea of partition as the only solution for Palestine, calling for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. That was where my father came from, where my cousins were living, were my idyllic, really wonderful summers were spent.

The dream of return materialized in 1998 when I was being offered the job of my life in Palestine. I was hired for a policy advisory post in a Palestinian think tank which would help build the infrastructure of an independent state. It came after spending 13 years in Europe and after marrying a European man. I returned to the West Bank for a year, at the height of the Oslo peace process, when there was so much optimism for peace and independence. I was hoping to find the answer to the end of my exile, personal as well as collective.

But the reality proved to be far off the promises and expectations of Oslo. The situation on the ground deteriorated rather than improved, as Israel failed to implement the signed agreements and Palestinian leaders were more concerned with consolidating their power than with building

the country's institutions. The Oslo peace process had divided the West Bank into three major zones, fragmented from one another by over 150 Israeli settlements and 250 miles of bypass roads. Israel had been using the checkpoint and permit policies that locked people up in their enclaves whenever it perceived a threat of a suicide attack. Rather than getting closer to freedom, the Palestinians saw their movement become more restricted and their horizon more constrained. Over 76 new settlements outposts were created during the Oslo years and the settler population doubled to over 370,000 by 2000 and 460,000 by 2008. The Palestinian economic situation deteriorated, as per capita income fell by 30% between 1992 and 1996 and again by over 50% between 2000 and 2006. Unemployment soared to over 25% and poverty to over 60% by 2007. My job, for its good intentions, proved incapable of improving a daily reality that was worsening. Like the rest of the country, the scope for action remained determined by what Israel decided was compatible with its security, not with the Palestinian's right to independence. Despite all the good work and intentions of many returnees and residents to obtain Palestinian independence, economic and social development, they remained dispossessed of control over their destiny.

Yet, the people continued with their resilience. They continued with their lives and with their determination to build institutions. Universities continued their work, new houses were being built, NGOs and financial institutions expanded their outreach and services, and Palestinian workers continued to work on Israeli settlements. The Palestinian state was dead before it was born and separation between Israelis and Palestinians was no longer possible outside an apartheid model. It became clear to me that exile from Palestine can only be overcome through a new project of statehood. Palestinian exile could not be conquered by return, rather by embracing a

universal inclusive humanist agenda that I still needed to define and elaborate together with others.

## EXILE AND MY MOTHER

Exile from Palestine tormented me but it also defined me. However, it did not resolve the other exile that inhabited me, the exile from my mother.

Growing up as Palestinian was a given, unquestionable, and un-debated. I sought to redefine it for myself and separate what was collectively inherited from what I consciously choose to be. What was not officially recognized, or fully accepted, was the fact that I was also the daughter of an Italian woman. I felt that for my father the fact that my mother was Italian was *accidental* to the fact that I was Arab. It was not a central, albeit specific, element in explaining the *kind* of Arab I became. So while I was aware of an Italian/western heritage, I did not seek to dwell on it or claim it. I refused to think or talk about what is Italian in me, although I always spoke Italian with my mother, visited Trieste annually, and fondly loved my maternal grandfather who meant the world to me. I felt segmented whenever I went to Italy, as if the month I spent there annually had nothing to do with my life back in the Arab world. I wanted, like any child and later a teenager, to conform to my surrounding in the Arab world. Yet, I remained different from my friends because I was the daughter of the foreigner. At school, as well as back among my larger family and in my father's village, I was considered an anomaly for I spoke Arabic well, behaved respectfully as expected from Arab girls, and was obedient, *despite* the fact that my mother was Italian. I felt insulted at such comments and felt I needed to prove more than others that I was the real Arab, the real Palestinian.

The exile of my mother was hard to define, let alone deal with. At times, I am not

too sure if that sense of estrangement was more a product of me feeling her distant from me, me exiled from her, or the result of her being exiled from her world. My mother symbolized the West, a world perceived in clichés in the Middle East, even if it was admired. Yet, she did not correspond to the stereotypes of the cold, sexual, decadent, and oppressive West. She cared about her home, dedicated her life to it, and did not want much to change the world. She was not an emancipated, free, career woman and yet she was independent in a paradoxical way. She was not scared of challenging my father's opinion even if she followed him wherever he went. She was not possessive of her kids, did not expect us to live with her, although she lived for them. She appeared to be able to be alone, to be an individual and not to need people around her. At times, I could never really know what she thought, she was unreachable, away in her own thoughts, untouchable behind the cigarette smoke that put an aura around her, as if that cigarette represented for her a "room 'of' her own."

My mother's exile was hard to understand, for she negated it while I felt it. It was not spoken of, unlike the exile of my father. It was unadmitted by my mother for she maintained that she chose to leave her home. It made me want to empathize with her, but also made me feel that there was a world to her I could not share, one in which I did not know my place. My mother did not overtly share her Italy. She took it upon herself to bring up Arab children. She was not nostalgic for Italy and she never talked about what it meant to leave her home, although she transmitted her Italy in her food, her habits, and her language. I remember listening to one of Verdi's operas when I was 14 years old when I discovered by pure chance that my mother was able to repeat all the lyrics. When I asked her how come she knew them, she laughed and said that these songs were for her what dabkeh and dal'ona are for me.<sup>1</sup> I realized then all

what she left. When I was 15 years old she took me once on a tour to explore Italy and get to know her historical heritage in Rome and Florence. She considered I was old enough to understand and appreciate her cultural heritage. I was also well grounded in my Arabic heritage not to feel shaken by western influence!!! The West could only come *after* my being an Arab, an Arab produced by an Italian mother.

And yet my mother's world, that Western culture as much as her example of womanhood, was in me as much as around me. I could not escape the West, nor did I want to. I wanted to serve my country but also to know about the West. I did not want to be like my mother, I did not want to occult my culture, but I was fascinated by her sense of self, of what I call her independence. I was far more rebellious than my mother and far more ambitious.

My years as a teenager oscillated between Dubai and London where I went to study. Again I felt a sense of fractured identity as I was trying to reconcile the East and the West in me. I had the hardest struggle with confronting my femininity, both in terms of its content and in terms of my response to it. The West was alienating, with all its clichés about the Arabs, with all its individuality that forced me to discover and face mine. I felt alienated by the gaze of the "other" that often made of me the exotic Arab, who was either underdeveloped or a terrorist, a repressed woman or a fantasized sensual object. I actually wanted to dissociate from being a woman. I was afraid of being an object of desire. I did not know how to handle my femininity in the male world I encountered in the university as well as in my professional life—in the West as well as in Palestine. It was easier to be asexual, untouchable, an ungendered Arab who defended the Palestinian cause.

But I could not escape my gendered

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<sup>1</sup> Dabkeh and Dal'ona are traditional Palestinians dance and songs.

identity, even when I was trying to be ungendered. I fell in love when I was 14 with a Westerner who then became my husband. That encounter and marriage helped me confront my femininity with some ease, to accept to be desired and to desire. It also helped me shape my gender identity away from the example of my mother and father. But that was not easy. Before marriage, our relationship was based on a sense of equality. When we got married, I wanted to prove that an Arab woman, not man, can marry a foreigner without losing her identity. I was still hoping that my husband would follow me to Palestine, thereby reversing the story of my parents, the traditional gender role I saw in my family. But that proved impossible, for my husband refused to re-enact the inverse of a story that was not his. He was not going to follow anybody and expected himself as much as me to be equals.

Yet, sorting out what equality meant in a gendered multi-cultural relations proved to be very hard. I lived in Europe as part of my effort to "build my resume," but I missed home. I struggled to find my place in the Western world of my partner, with the career that he was defining for himself. I was alienated in the language we spoke for it was not Arabic. Unlike my mother, my project was not to have children and follow the husband. I had my work, I continued to engage on issues related to the Arab world, to go periodically to Palestine often without my partner. But I was again fractured; the Arab world was something I lived alone, the way my mother lived her Italy alone. At the same time I remained an Arab in an alienating West of which I was a part. I owed to it my intellectual development, my years of struggle to adulthood, my love story, my yearning for a home. My marriage did not escape the torment of exile and self-definition, of depression at times and of despair. It also gave me a sense of home, a redefinition I was not willing to renounce.

## COMING TO TERMS WITH EXILE

I continued oscillating between Palestine and my husband who remained in Europe, until an opportunity came for my husband to go to Boston for work. This third major migration in my life gave me an opportunity to come to terms with my exiles, to reinvent myself. I do not know if the place mattered, or if the state of mind in which I was in mattered more in enabling me to make Boston my home. In a way, Boston was a neutral place for me and my husband. It was neither Europe nor the Middle East. It was the U.S., the country of immigrants for people like us who were becoming eternal immigrants. It came above all at a turning point in my life. I had left Europe to work a year in Palestine, but my return home, for all its value in reconnecting me with my language and family, also had its limitations. While it gave me a sense of grounding, it also set limits to my horizon, and did not prevent me from feeling segmented. I became aware that Palestine was an important pillar in my life, but not the only one. Palestine as a quest for return proved its limitation. I wanted to carry Palestine along with me since living in it did not provide all the answers to my angst.

The decision to come to Boston, though, was somewhat ironical, for I never thought of going to the United States. The U.S. after all was the bastion of imperialism. In the Arab world, America, as we call it, was the cause of lots of evil. It did nothing to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and if anything proved more and more to be the univocal supporter of the Jewish State. The European part in me looked pretty down on the American culture that was considered dull and shallow compared to continental humanism and culture. I never wanted to study in the U.S., although most of my friends from school aspired to go there. I never had an American dream for I did not seek to make money, nor was I seek-

ing a refuge from my own world. Moreover, the job offered was given to my husband, not to me. I was following my husband, not he me.

Boston, however, represented an opportunity to create my own space while building on my history. It allowed the reconciliation of the personal and the collective sense of exile, the private and the public sense of loss. My husband told me at the time that we do not need to worry much about the move that it will only be for few years, that we can always go back if we do not like it. I laughed for I did not know where 'back' was. I simply told him that I was not going to Boston with the idea that it will be a temporary stay. Out of Boston I was going to create a home, not a house.

And indeed this is what I strove to do. What I meant by home was to create an environment in which I felt I could express my various dimensions, rather than occult one for the sake of the other, or live one at the expense of the other. I needed to express my Arabic, Palestinian dimensions as much as be with my German husband. I needed to speak Arabic as much as communicate in English with the world around me. I wanted to create a family as much as remain connected to mine. Home for me is accepting to oscillate between worlds, to be here and there, to accept the tension between my various dimensions, rather than seek to reconcile them.

My first step toward creating a home was to find my cultural and political space. At first, I sought the Arab community. Although a hyphenated group, the Arab-American could relate to my sense of music, my nostalgia for home. They provided a possibility to speak my language again, if only for a bit, if only with an accent, if only with an American culture that I was to discover. I also found exiled Arabs like me, who were not Arab Americans, who shared with me the eagerness to speak our language, the ability to make the same cultural references. I was soon able to make a group

of friends that came from similar backgrounds, as my own; people who lived in various countries, who combined two cultures, one Arab, the other American or another. Sometimes they even shared with me a similar trajectory of exile, having either lived in the Gulf, or having married somebody from a different country, or/and having struggled with their womanhood each in her way. I wanted to create the surrounding of a large family of like minded people.

I also sought to recreate the Middle East in Boston. I joined Arabic reading groups, became fussy about traditions that I wanted to re-establish where I now lived. I started celebrating the feasts of back home, endeavored to host large dinner parties that grouped all the exiled. I looked for Arabic cultural activities, and sought to promote Arabic dancing and literature. I soon realized that I cannot recreate the Middle East here however much I wanted, for I would be creating a false copy of something that is elsewhere. I risked locking myself in an exiled static world that lived off of nostalgia rather than of new ways of expressing one's culture.

Boston allowed me to create a sense of empowerment out of my exile. I became vocally and organizationally active for the Palestinians cause. I increasingly did that through my work, be it my thesis, my book and later my job in academia, or through grassroots work with Arabs as much as with Jewish, often lesbian, women. Whether through writing, speaking or rallying, I attempted to influence the U.S. public. I was actively engaged in talking about the cause, explaining it to a public that was not given the means to know its causes and its tragedy. At first it puzzled me, and maybe irritated me, that the major supporters for the Palestinian cause in the U.S. were Jews, and in context I found it in Boston lesbian women. I soon realized that the fear of any accusation of anti-Semitism, so diabolized in the U.S., makes American Jews the best spokesperson for the Palestin-

ian cause. I also was aware that marginal, outcast, groups were naturally going to join together. The membership of these groups underlined the impending moral obligation of questioning power and hegemony in all its facets, as well as the universality of the quest for justice and respect. Activism for Palestine made me aware of the depth of activism in America, something that I would not have known to exist were I just to stick to the image of the U.S. transmitted through the world.

Another means by which I sought to overcome my exile, was through my evolution concerning the best solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both as a result of my research as well as my activism, I became increasingly aware that the two state solution cannot be a viable solution. The fragmentation of Palestinian land through Israeli occupation eroded the physical territorial infrastructure of a potential Palestinian state. My activism, particularly with Jews, showed the limitations of nationalist struggle and the inevitability of an inclusive open strategy for freedom. The one state solution became evidently for me the only solution, the only humanist solution. Never before had anybody in my family pursued a dialogue with Jews, let alone define together a strategy of independence. Boston, however, made that look so evident and so emancipatory.

Yet, what probably most helped to cope with my exile was psychotherapy and the birth of my daughter. Therapy allowed me to rewrite my story, to discover my own trajectory from the lineage of my family history, and to accept and embrace my contradictions. My daughter enabled me to come to peace, to be at home, in a way I never thought possible, and probably feared. Becoming a mother, though surely not as naturally as some people claim, has enabled me to connect to my womanhood albeit in a quite traditional way. It enabled me above all to reconnect with my mother but on a completely new level of consciousness and

understanding. My mother became closer despite the distance, as if I could understand her better, hear her better, feel her closer.

My daughter, above all, gave me a sense of home in ways that I still cannot put in words. She enabled me to reconnect with my language, Arabic, the language I found myself speaking naturally to her. At times I wondered why that was the case, for, after all, my mother is Italian and the first language I heard was Italian. But Arabic has been the language of my soul, of my childhood and youth, of my consciousness of the world. Arabic is the only language I speak without an accent. With my daughter I found myself speaking Arabic every day, overcoming the need to search for a friend with whom to speak my language, the weekly phone calls of my father, the news on Al-Jazeera. Meanwhile, though, I sang to her in Italian, for those were the songs I was taught as a child.

My exiles are not over, but I am learning to live with them. The many faces of exile are shaping up, and they are finally bearable.