MY MIGRANT MIND

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This creative writing essay explores a racialized Muslim woman's encounter with tradition and autonomy, homeland and Canada, bringing her back to wearing the hijab.

Ce texte de création littéraire explore la rencontre d'une femme musulmane racialisée avec la tradition et l'autonomie, la patrie et le Canada, ce qui la ramène à porter le hijab.

Winter brings out the worst in people, winter brings out the best in people, and I have only ever lived in Summer. This melancholy of the migrant mind is not a thing until you have lived it, and having lived it; you are barely anything. Where does that leave me: an international student, temporary worker, a brown woman, a minority but part of Canada's second largest religion, a–

> Moslem? noun a follower of the religion of Islam.

Letters my mother never wrote, tell me:

> "Darling, neighbors back home still whisper about your absence from the mosque. The empty house echoes with the sound of a call to a prayer you never went to answer, while your lusty bones have crawled out of your dusty body to dance with a Northern dervish wind that pledges to war with the village mullahs on your behalf."

I confess that in my sleep I sometimes still hear:

> My mother singing as she cooks;
> Roast lamb with saffron rice, and the crisp smell of a chapati I took for granted as item number (3) on my long List of Things that I would willingly exchange for the lofty ideals of freedom and equality offered by a progressive Western culture in my Adopted Homeland, my Benefactor, my proudly Feminist, and Upholder of Human Rights: *My Canada*.

Therefore, it made my mother, a sixty-something visibly devout Muslim woman, supremely happy *but concerned* when one day, years after having emancipated the self from the —

> Islamic Republic
>
> noun
>
> Name given to several states in countries ruled by Islamic laws

her daughter again chose to wear the hijab in the streets of the city of Toronto, the place she proudly proclaims the Diverse, the Most Multicultural Metropolis in the world, and chose to call —

Home

noun

the place where one lives permanently.

I wanted to tell her that when at age seven she tenderly covered my head with a scarf that was bright yellow, so yellow that it was like carrying the sun with me, bathed in the purity of her love and care I felt above all things, secure and strong. That feeling travelled with me into adulthood until that sun I had carried so airily on my person for all these years began to feel heavy with gender implications. I realized that the piece of cloth, which to me was just a piece of cloth, made me a second-class citizen in a country which regulated the rights of individuals based on archaic principles bent and altered to suit patriarchal agendas. It began to define and restrict me in ways strong women will never want to be defined as and suppress my intelligence in ways no secure woman could let happen. My hijab was a symbol of decency, but in a society ruled and defined by individuals hijacking a culture and religion to enforce personal agendas, it hid everything about me but the fact that it is a woman body behind the drapery. It captured and insulated the features, curves, and lines of my body, so that the cloth became the ultimate seduction, and began to feel to me, an indecency —

> What cannot be seen, cannot be had. What cannot be had, must be had.

Instead, I choose to tell her about my life now as a student in one of the leading universities in Canada. I discuss with her ideas old and new, debate matters of politics, society, and ethics, repeat lessons from philosophy and world history that I continue to have the privilege to learn in my undergraduate studies in a secular society that supports rational autonomy, and encourages intellectual independence. My favorite professor, I tell her, openly identifies as an atheist, whose lectures I attend and drink in religiously because his intelligence and knowledge knows no bounds. I tell her about my peers who come from all backgrounds, race, ethnicities and social classes. I also told her about my best friend, a lawyer in the making, who wears the hijab every day despite the negativity surrounding her culture and religion and my decision to don the hijab was in part to stand in solidarity with visibly devout Muslim Canadian women such as her, because she reminds me of the bravery of another such woman.

My mother who was homeschooled, had by age nine, learned by rote, the Qur'an. At age fourteen she completed her undergraduate at a time when most women around her barely got their high school diplomas. As a single mother of progressive thinking living in a system of patriarchy, she successfully brought up four children to value independence and equality along with a deep-rooted respect for a religion that has suffered abuses and misrepresentation from all corners of the world, near and far. So, when my mother, out of sheer fear, reading news about a mosque attack in Quebec and increased incidents of Islamophobia against hijab-wearing women in My Canada, became more concerned than happy over my choice to wear the hijab, even if for a day, in a letter I told her:

> "A society that continues to strive for equality irrespective of religion, caste, ethnicity, race, and gender cannot for long let live discrimination against one of their own. A country whose leaders shun politics of division and fear-mongering, and instead focus on building better communities and equal opportunities for all, will prosper, despite the antithesis polemic of a few. A nation that stands with strong and empowered women, free to make their own choices, at home and outside, cannot be defeated by the hatred and ignorance of a handful."