

To Be a Child of the Palestinian Diaspora: A Conversation



By Lina Abdul-Samad

“ou don’t look American.”

True, with rich olive skin, dark forest bows and almond-shaped eyes, I talk with my hands like my forefathers. I devour *maklouba*, am obsessed with *waraq dawali*, and my search for *Mackintosh*’s sweet delights at home is always a game of hide-and-seek.¹ I look and act the part, but my tongue is the traitor: In colloquial Palestinian-Arabic it still confuses some syllables. I’ve practiced saying basic greetings over and over and strive to replace my American tongue, aiming to master the lushness of my “true” language, the rich sounds and deep, often multiple levels of meaning that are unique to the language I would be speaking if I had never left the country. And as my tongue carries the burden of two very distinct languages, my sense of self carries the burden of bearing a hyphenated identity: Palestinian-American. I make sure that Palestinian comes first because that’s who I truly am, who I was supposed to be.

“Why did your parents bring you back here?”

Every Arab-American has this answer memorized: “To learn Arabic and religion.” But there are others: To learn that the land of milk and honey tells stories;

to experience that we Palestinians are not defined by our enemies but by the fullness of our culture, even though it is being hijacked; to let me find myself; to provide me with a feeling of belonging.

“Which is better, the blaad (home-country) or America?”

I’ve gone through phases. When I lived in the United States, I made sure everyone knew that the place where I truly belong is Palestine; it’s not Pakistan! Friends learned about the occupation and that they cannot consider Israel a Middle-Eastern country, at least not in front of me: It does not share our culture. My friends know I call my mom and dad *mama* and *baba*. They have noticed that I drench everything in olive oil and that hummus is pronounced “hommos,” and by the way, I don’t buy the Israeli brand. I am picky about where I buy my café latte: purchasing from Starbucks basically means financing the enemy to murder us. Maybe not me, but the rest of my people back home. But I also have another part to my identity, one that is contradictory to the first. Politics can have

“As a child of the Palestinian diaspora, I am bombarded constantly with the same questions that revolve around my identity as a Palestinian and as an American. People from both my homeland and the United States keep asking who I am and with which country I identify more. The truth is: belonging to two very different places is a persistent cause of struggles.”

a way of ruining who you are even before you come into existence.

Things changed a bit in the next phase, when my family moved back to Palestine. *Mama* and *baba* had decided it was time I learned who I really am. I survived the

Art work by artist Hazem Harb.





Solidarity shown by the Palestinian diaspora in Chile. Photo by Ivan Alvarado, courtesy of REUTERS.

infamous Israeli checkpoint (Kalandia) and with “*bismillah* (in the name of God)” on my tongue, I stepped on Palestinian soil, convinced that this was the beginning, here is home. Village children assumed that I were blonde and blue-eyed, a Barbie doll, a typical version of Dick and Jane. I converse in Arabic, yet still they call me American.

I went to a school that follows the American academic system and teaches classes in Arabic language and Islam. The best of both worlds. Crammed into a classroom with other children of the diaspora, I realized that they were a lot like me: A hybrid of two cultures, two parts of a whole – or an attempt at being whole. Students who were more Arab than American blended better into the local culture than the students that identified mostly with their western side; they were more accepted. It is up to you to be more accepted.

Some people insist that I am lucky, even blessed. The perks of having lived abroad include being bilingual. Nowadays, English is the most coveted language, and I never confuse p’s and b’s. Yet, these people do not realize that I prefer to read the translated version of Ghassan Kanafri’s *Men in the Sun*. They cannot

understand that I feel like a fraud, having Palestinian blood whirl though my veins while my tongue is being chained by the twenty-six letters of the foreign alphabet with which I grew up.

“Where is home?”

Paradoxically, home is always the other country. While you desire to be accepted in Palestine, home is Palestine; you are too Arab for America whose mannerisms mix with yours like oil (preferably olive oil) and water. Yet sometimes I begin to wonder if I am too American for Palestine: I actually wait in lines, traverse the streets only at pedestrian crossings, and wear a seat-belt. It’s considered to be slightly strange if you follow the rules in the occupied land.

On bad days I wonder if home is just a distorted illusion, a fairytale that exists only in the imagination. The word tastes as if it does not belong into my mouth. How could I embody both cultures with all their contradictions and not be at war with my identity! And then again, why must I choose with whom I identify more? Why can’t home be a mosaic of my navy and emerald passports?

On good days I know that home is a place that includes me. I come to this

realization when I am with other children of the diaspora. Sure, for us home feels a bit different than it feels for the others who live on either side of globe. But with them, I am included as I construct and bridge American and Palestinian cultures. Recognized. We do have two homes. It makes us a bit special.

“Who are you?”

It wasn’t until I was twenty years old that I learned of the term “diaspora.” With a bit of awe I realized that a word had been created to compact into four syllables the entire enigmatic experience that I had been feeling ever since I’d returned to Palestine at age eleven. Other people had actually felt the same and given that feeling a name.

But who am I? We children of the diaspora are an Earth made of two continents. We are imposters in both countries, trying to fit in with clashing

cultures. Born in Palestine, raised in the United States of America and in Palestine, I am a child of the diaspora. It is such a lonely word, but paradoxically, it makes me feel less lonely.

Lina Abdul-Samad is a fourth-year student at Bizeit University, majoring in nutrition and dietetics. When she is not daydreaming, she posts writings on her blog called Lina’s Thoughts and Words.

ⁱ There is a little joke running among Palestinian children when they are searching for something sweet, and Mackintosh sweets have traditionally been a favorite. In many households, it is a game to try to find where these treats are hidden, as they are usually kept away in interesting places and enjoyed only when guests arrive. When one of the children finds the sweets, he or she often chooses not to inform the siblings, enjoying the treats in secret. Other times, children choose to team up and search for the sweets together, enjoying and sharing their little secret.

Art work by artist Mohammad Joha.

