

How Does It Feel To Be The Enemy?

An Arab Mother's Reflections on the Boston Tragedy

By Lama Zuhair Khouri

I am writing this essay as I sit on a bus heading back to New York from Boston. It is just few days after the Boston Marathon tragedy and my head is pounding with thoughts of those murdered and maimed, and the cries and wails of their loved ones feel almost audible.

I came to a conference in Boston to present on a topic that has been on my mind for a while—namely, the experience of otherness. When I arrived in the West, I felt as if I was landing on Mars, or whatever other alien planet you might think of. I did not arrive here with six months of Peace Corps training, after a diplomatic briefing, or following a reconnaissance mission. I arrived as an adult, a 20-year-old woman, who was expected to be as knowledgeable and fluent in the local language and culture as any American of that age would have been. However, for all intents and purposes, I felt as ignorant as a child. This feeling of alienation never fully left me. It seemed as if I was living in a perpetual state of anxiety and dread, wondering when, where and how I would step into a minefield that would obliterate me.

I thought that this was the predicament of other immigrants like me who had to adapt to a culture that was the polar opposite of their own. But what started as a personal quest on a desk in New York ended in Boston, with a deep sense of sadness and shame.

Initially, I did not want to write about the Arab experience in America per se. I felt that often the word Arab immediately conjured up images of September 11, Guantanamo Bay, terrorism and so on. But the Boston tragedy was a rude awakening. I realized that I was

fooling myself thinking I could separate my experience as an Arab immigrant from the present political reality. However, the more I wrote about the topic the more inauthentic I felt. It seemed to me as if I was going on and on, with rhetorical speeches and banal arguments, and dwelling in the abyss of self-pity and recrimination. I finally realized what was blocking me. It was the elephant in the room—a big elephant that never forgets. Western colleagues and friends politely tiptoe around this animal, rarely addressing it directly, partly out of consideration for my feelings and partly, perhaps, due to their struggles with unconscious feelings, beliefs and inevitable stereotyping. The elephant is my being from Osama Bin Laden’s gene pool and all of the archenemies of the West long before him. To paraphrase W.E.B. Du Bois, the ever-unasked question between me and my friends is: How does it feel to be the enemy?

Yes, I do represent the enemy. Perhaps acts by a member or members of the white majority do not implicate the majority as a whole, but, as it is with most stigmatized groups, an act by any Arab or Muslim tarnishes each and every one of us.

Throughout the ages, from the crusaders to Al-Qaeda, my people killed people considered the majority here, and the majority did not spare mine. It really doesn’t matter if the terrorists are Chechen, Pakistani or even American; as long as it is a terrorist act that has the hint of Islam in it, I feel impacted, responsible and ashamed.

Why was it so hard to write about this topic, you might ask? Well, being the enemy means being *hated*—and hated for crimes I did not commit. It is this hate, I believe, that creates discomfort in my social encounters. Initially, therefore, I felt I needed to allow my counterparts or readers the space to wiggle out of such discourse. A way to avoid looking at the issue straight in the eye—the issue, the main *issue*, is my core identity as an “other” versus the white majority’s identity. I do not mean by identity my name, or height or even country of origin or religion. I mean my core and felt self, my connection to my race and my people. My race, my core identity, is my bond to my ancestors, my heritage and the country where my loved ones reside and with whom I share history, culture and tradition. The people who held and loved me deeply are seen as savages, and the long entrenched animosity between the Muslims and the Jews—as well as the Christians for that matter—seems inexhaustible, endless and vicious.

So, initially, I wanted to mull issues most will agree upon, or at least most of the *Zeteo* readers I imagine would agree upon: Probably, for example, if I raised the issue of the war on the axis of evil and such rhetoric, most will empathize.

I cannot stress enough that I do not intend in the following discussion to make sweeping statements about the experiences of all immigrants, whether Arabs or otherwise. What I will be talking about here is merely my own personal experience and the experiences of other Arabs I have worked with as a psychotherapist.

The Arabs are a stigmatized group and its members carry with them the criminal record of their people and the history of their ancestors. Fear and animosity between the Arabs and the West bring up primitive feelings on both sides. The enemy is not seen as human—as if one forgets that soldiers or civilians fallen on either side have children, mothers, fathers, sisters and brothers who weep for them.

However, such feelings of aggression, whether expressed or not, are disowned and projected on the other side. Consequently, Westerners are slaughtered, and the Arab is relegated to a sub-human category, which she learns to accept without question. For example, an African-American would be up in arms if he or she were racially profiled for a crime of any sort, but not an Arab. It is as if she agrees that she needs to be measured by a different yardstick. For example, until just a few years ago extraordinary rendition and waterboarding were not questioned. Few question the dress code of a nun or an Orthodox Jewish woman, but in some countries Muslim women's dress is banned by law. For many of us Arabs, the call for prayer, *Allah ou Akbar*, often brings feelings of warmth and comfort. Understandably, in the West, such words can bring chills down the spine.

What happens when an Arab immigrant who was raised in the East moves to the West? In my own experience, arriving in the New World challenged my felt identity, or my subjective sense of myself. The image I saw in the eyes of my friends and family back home was nowhere to be seen here. Suddenly and without permission, I felt cast out of the status of being an educated woman, whose name, appearance, demeanor and heritage commanded a certain level of respect and recognition. Instead, I found myself a minority, misjudged, ignorant and illiterate in the language and culture of the adopted world. Everything I thought of myself and felt about myself was not true here. The reflection I saw in the full-length social mirror of my Western counterparts felt unappealing, unattractive,

stifled, restricted and dangerous. It was an image that had existed long before I was born and that has been forming, probably, since Moses parted the Red Sea.

So, how does it feel to be the enemy? It feels like carrying a bad gene, a dormant virus that might erupt at any moment rendering me contaminated and contaminating. It erupts every time terrorism, Islam or Arab issues come to the forefront of daily life. And it doesn't really matter if the perpetrators are Chechen, Afghan or Iranian—my virus is rooted in history and perception, not in hard facts and logic.

I did not diagnose myself with this dormant virus until my Italian ex-husband and I had to see a divorce mediator. At the end of our first interview, the mediator asked: “But where is the Jordanian part of your home life?” Indeed, my children carry Italian names, Arabic music is rarely played in my home and the main languages of the household are English and Italian.

The other day, as my children and I were sitting at dinner, I wondered, looking at their European-like faces, how it might feel if their father had not been European? It would be heartbreaking. Utterly heartbreaking to know that not only did I bring on them the plight of people like me, but also branded them with a face like mine.

I had hidden for many years behind the shield of being a Jordanian from a secular Christian family. An experience I had working with a group of Arab middle-school boys just a few years ago shattered this façade. The principal of the school where the group met dropped by one day. He came unannounced and seemed to just want to chat and help himself to snacks. He acknowledged the boys' social and academic achievements, but singled out the one boy who was, in many ways, the quintessential stereotypical Arab (or perhaps the group and I had assigned him that role). The boy—I will call him Basem—was in seventh grade at the time, and was often ostracized and made the scapegoat. The principal said, “Basem is not behaving like a man. Manhood is important in your culture, isn't that so? In fact, I think men are given special privileges over women just because they are born male.” That comment was piercing and hurtful to Basem, the other boys and me. At that point I realized that I am a Muslim and a Christian, every Arab child is my niece and my nephew, and every Arab man is my father and my brother. I am a Saudi, a Palestinian, a Jordanian, a Tunisian.

So, what is the answer to the question, “How does it feel to be the enemy?” It feels like being naked. Whatever garment I might take on, be it education, profession or just simply Western dress code, is always transparent—my social deformity is for all to see and the bad odor of my ancestors is pungent and toxic.

Let me share with you the following vignette, which I hope will illustrate this sense of nakedness. It is an incident that took place in the same group of boys I mentioned above. A boy I will call Tamer was the most Westernized in this group of newly arrived Arab immigrants. He insisted on speaking English at all times and was a fan of American football. One day the boys were chatting about their experience as Arabs. Tamer said, “But I don’t feel different from the Americans. I don’t think they would misunderstand me.” He continued, seemingly contradicting himself, “I was going on the subway the other day and had a large camera with me that I carried in a black case. The police stopped and searched me. They were extremely apologetic when they saw that I only had a camera.” Tamer said that, as he entered the train, the speaker announced, “If you see something, say something. If you see any suspicious activity on the train or bus, do not keep it to yourself. . . .” Tamer did not need to finish his sentence. We could all see him plastered to the door, avoiding the piercing gaze of petrified subway riders, and we burst out laughing. A nervous laugh, because we knew how it feels to narrowly escape incarceration, where we would be guilty until proven innocent.

I am not Chechen nor, for that matter, am I Muslim. However, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the 19-year-old second bombing suspect, with his dark eyebrows, black wavy hair and wide eyes, could easily be my son. In fact, the Arabic version of his name is my father’s first name.

Let’s be honest, what are you thinking right now? What would your reaction be if I was the mother of the two men who intended to amputate the legs of marathon runners? What would your reaction be if the blood of little Martin Richards was on my sons’ hands?

Usually, at this point of such a discussion, my audience or friends or colleagues feel uncomfortable. They squirm in their seats and say something warm, compassionate and disengaging, such as “My roommate from college was from Egypt. I’m still friends with him.” Or they vehemently and wholeheartedly criticize American policy in the Middle East: “I can’t believe what George Bush has done to your part of the world.”

To paraphrase Du Bois: At these I smile, or am interested, or reduce the boiling to a simmer, as the occasion may require. To the real question, “How does it feel to be the enemy?” I answer seldom a word.

The psychiatrist Henry Stack Sullivan said that we have as many selves as we have relationships. Indeed, I do not walk around feeling scared or targeted. I know I am not smelly or rejected. In fact, I often feel loved, nurtured and accepted. I can confidently tell you that I managed to build a life in the West I could have never imagined building, certainly not if I had stayed in Jordan.

However, beside my happy, contented self lives an ashamed, scared and reticent one, a self that tags along, often casting her shadow in the crevices of my mind, questioning every action and reaction. Her presence is so strong at times that she takes me over and I feel as if I just got off the boat. To survive I try as hard as I can to be invisible, minimizing my exposures, keeping quiet, dodging imaginary bullets shot by what I perceive to be the superior white race. Unfortunately, this state of mind is at times so strong that my unsuspecting counterparts fall prey to my unconscious scheming by fulfilling my prophecy and proving my otherness and vulnerability.

Despite the fact that being an Arab is an important and difficult aspect of my life, we are all, as Sullivan noted, “more simply human than otherwise,” and, therefore, my day-to-day issues are like most people’s: just “problems in living.” My therapist, who, by the way, is a white male, listens compassionately, keeps alive, keeps well and keeps awake.

I wanted to end this essay on a positive note, which turned out to be a lot harder than I thought. How can I end it on a positive note when the wails and cries of those grieving the maimed and murdered in Boston are still audible? How can I say something positive when the 19-year-old second bombing suspect, the boy who could have been my son, was captured less than a week ago?

I decided therefore to lean on Erich Fromm’s wisdom. So, to answer the question “How does it feel to be the enemy?” I chose Fromm’s response in *The Art of Loving*: “Love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence.” Love, Fromm said,

is not primarily a relationship to a specific person; it is an attitude, an ordination of character which determines the relatedness of the person to the . . . world as a whole, not toward one object of love. . . . [Love] isn't

something natural. Rather it requires discipline, concentration, patience, faith, and the overcoming of narcissism. [Love] isn't a feeling, it is a practice.

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