The judge convicted her but did not pass a sentence. He ordered her release on probation for one year, during which she was directed to prove her good behavior. (Report in Monash, January 1978).


9. And in a way she is—few works with an Indian background have so few cultural references to India that are not negative stereotypes. A novel by another South Asian living in the West, Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children (Great Britain: Jonathan Cape, 1980; New York: Penguin Books, 1991), is a good contrast. In that novel the language is imbued with the rhythms of Bombay streets and Bombay films; in Mulherjee's work, the action could occur anywhere which is exotic and terror-ridden. For a forthcoming essay on this aspect of Mulherjee's work see Fred Pleitgen's "No Basta Teorizar: In-Difference to Solidarity in Contemporary Fiction, Theory and Practice," Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices, eds Karen Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal.


11. This has already begun happening. Sikh men, who wear turbans, are often taken for Iranians, for the Ayatollahs also cover their heads similarly. Sikh men have been racially harassed on U.S. streets during upsurges in anti-Indian sentiment.

12. For more on the working of U.S. power through discourses about "terrorists" and "fanatics" (often Muslims), see Edward Said and Christopher Hitchens, Blaming the Victims (London: Verso, 1987), and After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives (New York: Pantheon, 1986). An excellent example of how "diversity" is utilized by U.S. conservatives is the nomination of Clarence Thomas to the Supreme Court. For essays that examine "diversity," state power, racism and sexism see Raceing Justice, En-gendering Power, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993).

13. This was a comment made in Mulherjee's talk at a conference on "Asian American Cultural Transformations: A Literature of One's Own" at U.C. Santa Barbara, April 26, 1991.


15. Ibid.


17. This is a popular stereotype of people from Punjab that is endemic in many parts of India that see themselves as more "cultured" and "civilized." Punjabis are often seen as without any valuable traditions, as too ready to ape the West, as vulgar. The Punjabi language is believed to be without any literature worthy reading.


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Becoming Agents Of Our Identity

ZAINAB ALI

I was nine months old, enclosed by the strength of my father's arms and the salty air of the Bay of Bengal. My parents were moving to the United States, and were here, in Madras, India, obtaining their visa. They were breaking their confinement, promising—hoping—all the while to keep their religion, their heritage, their contact to family and friends left behind, severed. Hyphenated over the Pacific Ocean and in their new identity, Indian-American. A Western merger. Artificial. The only purity that remained was coiled in that place in their hearts where McDonald's, televangelism and Vogue magazine—all that lay literally and symbolically behind the hyphen—could not violate.

"Taxi!" I screamed. My parents turned with both delight and surprise.

"Say it again, Say it again," Baba persisted in Urdu, bouncing me in his arms, while Anne picked my year-and-a-half-old brother from the concrete to her softness, then pointed me to my brother to see.

"We say it so much here, that must be it," she said, still pointing and watching my brother, her voice in the low tones she speaks when talking to babies. My brother griped her ear, watching the cars and rickshaws drive by on the road, his tongue swirling around his tiny index finger in his mouth.

"But what a coincidence, and how appropriate. We are going to America for the first time, and her first word is in English," Baba began his open-mouthed, all-teeth-showing-and-back-arched laugh that leaves his face so innocent. "America...and English!" he repeated, still in Urdu, laughing. "Who would have thought? Huh? Who would have thought with us living in Hyderabad, the heart of Urdu-speakers?" He became talkative as he does when he's excited. "Mere beti!" He held me close, still bouncing.

"Taxi!" I screamed into his hair.

I remember a time in fourth grade, when I went to my teacher after class.

"I'm sorry but I can't say the Pledge of Allegiance because I'm Muslim." My teacher's eyebrows narrowed and the skin on her forehead crunched into lines.

"Oh," she managed to finally say.

I realized she didn't know what to say to me because she hadn't dealt with a situation like this before. But I was Muslim and I was determined not to commit a sin simply because I attended an American school.

"Well then," she said. "I guess you can remain sitting while the rest of us say the Pledge."

"Thank you!" I exclaimed. I was grateful she hadn't made a fuss and had allowed me the freedom to practice my religion.
That night I told my mom about the great feat I had accomplished in school that day. "You did what?" she asked in disbelief.

"Yes," I said. "I told her that I would sit while the rest said the Pledge."

"Oh, honey," my mother sighed. "We need to have a talk." She took my hand into hers and sat on the sofa. Then she sat me down next to her and looked into my eyes. "Listen, honey. Mommy thinks that you're very strong for standing up for what you believe in, but I think it's okay for you to say the Pledge..."

"But Amee..." I blurted out. I couldn't believe my ears; what was my mom saying?

"Shhh. I want to explain something to you, honey." And for two hours that night, my mother explained that religion and nationality are two separate things: It's okay for me to say the Pledge because I am an American citizen, which means that I am devoted to this country, without my citizenship infringing on my religious life. I finally understood.

But for the next two days, I continued sitting during the Pledge because I didn't have the courage to tell my teacher that I was wrong. Finally, three days later, as the students stood to say the Pledge, my teacher walked over to my desk—where I sat with eyes lowered—and asked me to stand.

"Okay," I excitedly replied, then stood and pledged. I never asked her who told her it was okay for me to say the Pledge; she never told me either. I can just imagine her telling the principal and the teachers having a meeting to discuss whether this small, Muslim child should and can say the Pledge.

This is just one of many incidents in which I have felt like I am sitting on the border of two cultures and religions. This position invariably forms me into feelings of disjunction because I must choose between two cultural practices. Nevertheless, it would be wrong to assume that I am able to choose which side of the fence I want to jump: I have no choice. Rather, I am disjointed from both my Islamic culture and my Urdu language, and my—yes it is mine also—Western culture and English language. Which do I use to express myself? Which becomes my identity?

At certain times, such as the Pledge incident, my identity becomes that of Islam. Other times, however, I become confused and disoriented, and overcompensate for my differences in order to assimilate. This paradox of simultaneously getting closer to and further away from discovering my identity in both cultures occurs because I am an "orphan" who is on the fringe of two social-cultural orders. I had to deconstruct these social mores in order to bare and discern my identity.

For instance, I remember studying nutrition and the four food groups in the sixth grade. "Okay, class," my teacher chimed, her smile reminding me of the good witch in the Wizard of Oz. It was bright, wide and friendly. She lifted her long red-painted index finger and continued: "Today we will go around class to see what each of you had for breakfast. We can then see if we are all eating nutritionally. I'll go first. I had Nutri-Grain Waffles, coffee, and orange juice. Jen, you go next and we'll continue around class from aisle to aisle." At that time, I never thought that such a small exercise would cause me so much anxiety.

"Well, I think I had orange juice too, and—oh, I know—I had oatmeal."

"Very good, Jen. Did you hear that, class?" our teacher trumpeted. "Jen had a very nutritious breakfast. We're proud of Jen, aren't we class?"

"Yes, Mrs. Peterson," we replied in unison, some boys in back giggling nastily at Jen. "Alex?" Mrs. Peterson continued.

After about five people had shared their breakfast experiences, I realized that my breakfast was completely different from the rest. Did I tell them, would the boys then laugh at me? Would Mrs. Peterson and the rest of class be proud of me? After all, no one would even understand what I had for breakfast: it was so... Indian. Pancake set, my eyes grew bigger as each student replied: cereal, or toast, or pancakes, or—as most did—oatmeal. I didn't even know what oatmeal was! Should I pretend that I hadn't eaten it? Should I lie in order to keep the friends that I had, so they wouldn't be scared of my differences? After all, I didn't want to be different, my parents were.

I stared at Mrs. Peterson, the smile on her face now resembling that of the Wicked Witch of the North. Her laugh no longer flowed, but cackled. She was out to humiliate me, I thought, and I knew she could if I let on to my breakfast.

"Zainab," her voice squawked my name, mispronouncing it as she had throughout the school year. But now I was angry at her mispronunciation and her attempts to make me lose my friends.

I held her gaze and said emphatically: "Spaghetti."

Her face wrinkled, her smile washed away in my words, and I knew I had won. The boys in the back were awestruck. "Wow," they thundered. "That's so cool. I wish I had parents as cool as that. You're lucky."

I smiled triumphantly. A simple lie allowed me to keep my friends and become even more popular in my class.

"That's very good, Zainab," Mrs. Peterson weakly uttered. "Mark," she called on the boy behind me, "how about you? What did you have?"

"Well, nothing as cool as spaghetti," he began. And my thoughts wandered. I was thankful that I had not told the class that I really had an omelet and toast. They would have thought that I was weird.

Now I realize that Anglo-Americans also have omelets for breakfast—and I'm sure some student might have said it in class, but I was too terrified to listen. This terror forced me to overcompensate—to lie—in order to express universality in customs and practices.

During the Gulf War, as I walk through campus to get to my class, I cross paths with another student who watches me approach. When I am within earshot, he says, "Oil-rich bitch! That's our oil, you Shit-ites better give it back."

I continue walking, pretending I have not heard him. "Oil-rich bitch!" He repeats his words over and over until I cannot hear him. Even when his voice stops, his words resonate through the walls of my body.

Throughout the day, I think of different ways I could have confronted him. I imagine telling him it's not America's oil, but the Middle East's; that Saddam Hussein is not Shi'ite, but Sunni; that not all Muslims support him: my own family dislikes him for his massacre of Iranians. I wish I told the student that the U.S.—his own people—gave Hussein the power to attack Kuwait; that whispers are being heard about the U.S.—his people—encouraging this attack on Kuwait. I wish I had explained to him about the real 'dirty politics' and dirty
dealings with the Middle East. I wanted to ask, "Why is the U.S. there helping the Saudis? Why did they turn away from the Iranians? The Palestinians?"

I know these are simple thoughts, but I know he must begin with the basics if he is to consider the many branches of this tree.

Yet, I said nothing to him. And I gave him nothing, not even a look.

Two years later, a bomb explodes in New York. I am watching a roundtable discussion on CNN analyzing the reasons for the terrorist action.

"These fundamentalist Muslims cannot be allowed in the United States anymore," one man says. "The more Muslims we bring into America, the more terrorist actions we'll see."

"I disagree," a woman reporter on the panel says. "Not all Muslims are like those involved in this bombing."

"This has to be linked with Iran," another panelist interrupts her.

I turn the TV off and lay my head against the back of the couch in an attempt to relax. "Muslims not allowed in the U.S.," a voice keeps repeating in my mind. "Muslims no longer allowed in the U.S."

I shake my head, trying to shed these thoughts. I think of the millions of people watching the show, nodding their heads in agreement. Some, perhaps, will go out tomorrow to ensure that Muslims can no longer immigrate to America. They will never know how we feel, I think. The media never asks how we feel.

Nor does the media tell the complete truth. I know those millions watching CNN right then will not hear of the suspicions that some of the "fundamentalist" Muslims involved in this bombing emigrated during the war between Afghanistan and what was then the Soviet Union. The U.S. supported Afghanistan enough to provide them with weapons and unlimited entrance into the U.S. without visas simply because they had a common enemy.

The people here will never see the Iranian streets lined with dead children's bodies as Saddam Hussein killed them with poisonous gas in the Iran-Iraq war that the U.S. supported. They will not feel the coarseness of cheeks after the tears have finally dried. They will not understand why this man suddenly became this day's U.S. enemy when he tried to take over Kuwait.

No, all people here see is that hundreds were injured, twenty killed, as the fundamentalist lunatic Muslims—who-should-never-have-been-in-this-country-in-the-first-place—bombed innocent people.

They will then turn their TVs off, grumbling that the world has gone mad, that it was not like this when they were growing up, and who makes these damn immigration laws in the first place? Those damn Moslems must be stopped. They will ask, who brought these people here in the first place? Who gave them the right to pollute our country, our world?

They will never once think to look at my palms. To see that the lines resemble theirs. That skin covers bone. That the darkness in their eyes is reflected in mine. No, they will know only to rush away and hide behind the lens that fragments the whole.

So my brownness scares them. As do my saris. My chicken curry. My call to prayers. From the safety of this lens, they pit Black against Red, Yellow against White, Brown against Brown, me against my past. I begin to feel as though this arm is not mine, these eyes should not be black, this hair is not straight, these legs are not a pair. I fall apart, walking two different