

Who Am I?
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“When I discover who I am, I’ll be free.”
~ Ralph Ellison, Invisible Man

Soon after 9/11, stories about attacks on Muslims popped up in the news, and subsequently, a number of female friends and acquaintances here in the US removed their hijab. My husband grew concerned too. One day, he asked me whether I should also consider removing it.

“No,” I told him. “I never even thought about it.”

Some people asked me where I found the courage and strength to keep it on.

Strength? Courage? I had never thought about it that way.

I remember a chat I had in Jeddah with a number of Chinese sisters who all wore the black veil while in Saudi Arabia, but removed it when on holiday in Taiwan. They all mentioned how difficult it was to meet everyone’s stares and questions. It was much easier to just dress like everyone else and melt in the crowd. Indeed, one of the universal biggest fears is public speaking, and I imagine that dressing yourself in a markedly different way is similar to public speaking. Everyone’s eyes are on you. You are always on a stage -- in the streets, the stores, the offices, everywhere.

I had made the decision to put on the hijab shortly before marriage, when I still lived in Jeddah, then wore it on my travel to Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and the US, where I got married. It was 1984, and the trendiest look at the time was an Egyptian style made up of two pieces of very light fabric. It involved twisting a long braid around the top of the head and slipping the second piece to form a beautiful falling fold. In keeping with the fashion, I purchased scarves in a dozen different colors to match my clothes. The style looked great except that it was very tight and by the end of the day, I always ended up with flattened hair and a headache.

I remember in Singapore, as I was walking down the street, three young ladies came up to me and asked, “This thing you are wearing on your head, is it for fashion or for religion?” to which I answered, it was both. I suppose that there were enough Muslims in Singapore for them to ask that so freely. But in Taiwan, I would get a totally different type of question, “Are you from Mongolia or from Tibet?” or, from a slightly more knowledgeable person, “Are you from Malaysia?” It would totally stun them when I’d answer that I was from Taiwan just like they were.

In the office of a family acquaintance, the young Taiwanese secretary stared at my pink flowing hijab for a long time and then said to me, “Can I tell you something? This thing you are wearing is actually not making you more beautiful!”

My immediate reaction was to burst into laughter. When I regained my composure, I kindly informed her that I was not wearing it in order to look more beautiful, but to cover my beauty. I still giggle today when I recall her facial expression.

Some time after my marriage in the US, we moved again to Jeddah, and it was there that the question of courage popped up. In my mind, I rewound the video of my life and saw that indeed, I never had any problem appearing in front of either acquaintances or strangers wearing the hijab. No embarrassment whatsoever. Instead, I had been proud and willing to share information about my faith and my practice. This new me – the *muhajjabah*-- was starkly different from the shy and inhibited little girl I used to be many years ago.

How did this happen?

My father was a diplomat, and consequently, I followed him all over the world in an era when there weren't any international schools. In 1959, my elder sister and I were enrolled in a French public "maternelle" (preschool and kindergarten). Not many people had television and even so, there weren't any Chinese faces on TV. So, we were a great exotic spectacle to our schoolmates. During recess, the children would form a large circle around the two of us, and pull the outer corners of their eyes up, then flatten their noses, and chant, "Oh la chinoise! Oh la chinoise!" Oh, the Chinese girl! Oh, the Chinese girl!

Well, it wasn't exactly enjoyable for a 3-year-old and so I'd scream my heart out every morning when my mother dropped me off to school. I would grab her dress and refuse to let go while hollering at the top of my voice. She would push me and Mme Mireille, my teacher, would pull me, until my fingers were pried open. This little scene would repeat itself every day. I hated having a little flat nose and slanted Chinese eyes, and "yellow" skin. My parents told me that "phoenix eyes" in China are rare and considered beautiful. It certainly did not feel so in school, and so I hated them.

In my dreams, I had porcelain white skin, blue eyes and blond hair, but in the morning I would wake in the same skin, with the same eyes, the same nose. Of course, there is nothing a child can do about her physical attributes. It is not something you can decide to wear or not to wear. It was something I was born with, and I had to accept it, like it or not.

We moved to Ankara, Turkey in 1964. There, I was fortunate to attend the French embassy school which accepted international students. I loved the fact that my schoolmates were French, Turkish, American, Vietnamese, Polish and just about every shade and color under the sun. No one minded my skin, my nose, my eyes or my hair. Unfortunately, this happiness did not last long. A year later, my father was transferred again, this time to Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

We finished the year at the Chinese embassy school, which was a one-room school with twelve children of all ages and grades, like something out of *Little House on the Prairie* or *Anne of Green Gables*. All the students were Chinese and all the teachers were parents. My father was the principal and the English teacher; my mother taught music. We also took Arabic, math and Mandarin. It was wonderful! But alas, this too did not last. The next school year, my father changed the embassy school to just a half day in the afternoon, and enrolled us at the closest Saudi elementary school for girls. Saudi Arabia had just started opening girls' schools a few years earlier, and this one was built on an old cemetery, and staffed with Egyptian teachers.

The first day of school, we arrived too early. So my sister and I sat on a wooden bench, in our uniform grey dresses, white socks and black shoes, waiting for assembly to start. Soon the girls started filling up the school yard, and a crowd grew around us. They pushed and shoved and pointed fingers, chattering excitedly. The wall of students was so thick you couldn't put a finger through. The two of us just pretended nothing was happening and sat on, stoically. Eventually, I bent toward my sister's ear, and whispered in French (for that was our primary tongue), "I feel like I'm in a circus..."

Well. I thought our bench was against the wall, but there was actually some space between the bench and the wall. The crowd had become so dense that some girls had squeezed themselves in that space and one of them had stuck her ear between our heads when I spoke those fateful words. She immediately tried imitating the sound of what she thought was Chinese, loudly and clownishly, for the benefit of the crowd, "ching chang ching chang ching chang...!" Raucous laughter erupted and rolled over the entire yard.

By then I knew the futility of trying to avoid school and never even broached the subject with my parents. Eventually, the crowd thinned out day by day, but some particularly curious girls would not stop having

some fun at our expense. Groups or pairs of girls would stop by us daily and ask, “aish ismik?” what is your name? and we would dutifully answer, “Saadia wa Fawzia...” which would send them into fits of laughter, probably because we had such a funny accent. We finally stopped telling them our names, since it was obvious the entire school knew them already and the question was not aimed at getting to know us. One girl would come and snatch away my handkerchief, which we had to have laundered and ironed in our pocket, supposedly for cleaning our nose, but really for inspection at any time. She’d run a little and stop, and wave it at me, “Come and get it!” In those days, the stress of schooling had given me a peptic ulcer and I was pretty much just skin and bones and very weak. I would try to run awkwardly, feel faint, and start crying.

Two years later, my uncle was transferred to Paris as the Taiwan representative at UNESCO. My parents decided that Saadia and I were wasting our education in Jeddah and sent us to live with my aunt (my mother’s sister). Back in France, we found ourselves more than three years ahead of our peers in French literature, grammar, vocabulary and spelling. This was because during our stay in Jeddah we had spent all our spare time reading and re-reading my father’s shelves which were filled with French classics. The Chinese math had also worked its wonders so we were doing pretty well in school, always coming in first.

Getting good grades had always given me some measure of respect from teachers and classmates, so I imagined that this time, with French girls much older and wiser, I would not encounter the type of discrimination and bullying I had to put up with in my earlier childhood. For a while, I really thought it was so. Then one day, during my third year in Paris, at a private Catholic girls school run by nuns, I found out I had only been fooling myself.

The history teacher was returning our monthly tests. In those days in France, a history test would be something like, “Describe the life of a common Roman citizen under the reign of Emperor Augustus.” Then you would have to fill up five pages. There weren’t any multiple choice or fill in the blank type questions. She had returned everyone’s paper except mine. She stopped, and to the whole class, she announced, “I want to tell you all that in my whole career as a history teacher, I have never given a full mark to anyone. Ever. But I did this month. The answer was so complete there was nothing I could find missing. Can you guess who it is?”

Since I had not received my paper back yet, I knew it must be me. I felt flushed with happiness and embarrassment. At which point, an acidic voice, something between a sneer and an curse, piped somewhere to my right, behind me, “Oh... we know very well... it is that little Chinese... c’est la p’tite chinoise, la!”

I felt my face grow cold, and my eyes nearly gushed with tears. I tried very hard to control them, and make my eyes swallow them back in. I hated my perfect score and wished I had never gotten it. Life went on, and I continued to attend school with my Chinese face and my good scores, antagonizing my French classmates.

The year after, my uncle was transferred to Geneva. My parents and other siblings had been back in Taiwan for a year already, so they decided it was time for Saadia and me to come home. I was on cloud nine. Finally, I’d be among my own kind. I would not stand out like a sore thumb anymore!

While I had excelled at the school in France, in Taipei, my grades were terrible. My Chinese was barely second grade level, and we were then in 9th grade. This was the year where junior high school students prepared to take the national exam for entrance into senior high school, so apart from the actual curriculum, we had to review everything from 7th and 8th grades, plus keep taking mock national exams.

We started school in Taipei two weeks late, so we were introduced to our class one bright morning, standing in front of all of them. There were 57 of us in one classroom and I was number 57. I sat through our first class and understood very little. The teacher wrote notes on the blackboard, and I couldn’t read the

notes. The Chinese I had learned was from textbooks, printed clearly, so I had learned to print my characters just like that. But by middle school, students would write in a script that was hasty and simplified, rather like today's simplified characters in China, but even more rounded and flowing. So I stared at the board and wondered what those words were. My deskmate (we sat two to a desk) kindly copied them for me in my book, but that wasn't any use because I still couldn't read them.

Then, at the end of class, the teacher told us verbally what the homework was. I glanced furtively around. No one was writing it down! What to do? In France, we had a planner with color-coded days of the week in which we wrote down all our homework and their due dates. Somehow, all Chinese students simply memorized what they were supposed to do. I couldn't. I pulled out the notebook I'd brought with me, but afraid others would wonder what I was up to, I kept it on my lap, and proceeded to write in French what the teacher had just said. No sooner had I started writing than a voice behind me sneered semi-loudly, "What a show off! She's trying to show off that she can write in English!"

It was then that I realized it: try as I may, I did not belong in Taiwan either. I had turned into a strange animal, not belonging here nor there, an alien wherever I went. To be fair, I did pick up a lot of pride in Chinese culture and history and carried that with me when we moved to Jordan two years later.

Coming of age in Amman was liberating for Jordan boasts a mix of ethnicities and religions. Though there were barely any Chinese in those days in Amman, and I was consequently the target of finger-pointing and stares in the streets, I had become by then immune to these. Learning taekwondo boosted my self-confidence. It was Bruce Lee who came to my rescue, when his movies burst onto the entertainment scene and took Jordan by storm. The kids in the street suddenly looked up to us, now calling out, "Bruce Lee! Bruce Lee!" when we walked around. They recognized our shared ethnicity and no longer looked down at us. I wasn't sure how I felt being identified as a martial arts expert, rather than a yellow monkey. But one thing had not changed -- I was still an outsider.

Adolescence was a time when I wrestled with self-identity, a time when I poured out poems by the dozen, usually written in the middle of the night. I would stare at the moon and tell her that the night was my homeland. It was during my days as a medical student and an intern that I finally re-discovered my own religion, Islam. My home was now the entire earth, and my compatriots were all the Muslims in the world. How I came to wear the hijab is a long story, one that maybe I will tell elsewhere. Essentially, I loved the feeling of protection it gave me, protection from prying eyes, protection from intrusion.

Fast forward back to 9/11...

I now lived in the US where Asian faces were common and no one stared at my features for whatever reason. However, some would glare at my scarf. I had experienced my share of grouchy cashiers at the check-out counter who would greet the customer before and after me with friendliness. But that barely bothered me.

I had by then worn the hijab for about fifteen years and my hijab had evolved beyond the original two-piece chiffon to just a plain square cotton scarf folded into a triangle, much easier for a busy mother of seven. It was a choice. Something I could discard any minute. Not something stuck to me like my skin color and the shape of my eyes and nose. I could choose to join the world of anonymity and melt in the crowd of women in modern t-shirts and jeans, with the breeze blowing softly through their hair.

But I did not.

And I did not quite figure out why for a long time -- until I was asked about it.

Courage? Strength? It had nothing to do with any of these. It became obvious to me that this is who I am -- a righteous Muslim woman. Wearing the hijab advertises that fact to the world loud and clear. And so, it

is impossible for me to remove it.

As impossible as it is to peel off my skin or my nose.

