



wick fall 2009

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*wick* provides a forum for the creative expressions of the Harvard Divinity School community. As editors of *wick*, we feel that the community and its members benefit when we share our creative work and engage with the larger conversations that creative expression provokes.

In the past, *wick* has published artistic material including short fiction, poetry, creative criticism and essays, visual art and cartoons. *wick* continues to welcome submissions in these genres and in other forms, as well. We invite you to share your imagined cartographies, fabricated autobiographies, interviews, experiments, manifestos and other innovations and adventures, within its pages.

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*LIVES & IDENTITIES INTERTWINED*

*I do not ask for the world to be mine.*

*I yearn to be of the world.*

*It is I who longs to emerge in the world; who craves with its very  
existence to embrace the world...*

*with its own being, with every molecule and cell of its body to  
constitute the world: the body, the I, that is the world.*

*It is I who yearns to shatter the illusion of separation.*

*It is I who desires to be the world, to fill the world with my presence,  
to dissolve myself into the world, so that I can infinitely re-create  
myself from the matter of the world.*

*Go on! Give yourself to it. Melt your being and mix into it.*

*Constitute, with your own matter, what the world is.*

It is a condition inherent in the very nature of existing, being and living that the subject in the world be never singular, never isolated, never separate from that space he/she/it inhabits. The space, the natural and physical environment, is never separable from all that inhabits it: people, animals, trees, plants, air, sounds, scents, vibrations, chemicals. The existence of all of these, and much more, are placed next to and in each other, overlapping onto each other and creating each other simultaneously by their very existence, so that the air is never separate from my body immersed in it, and which cannot exist as an entity if there was no air to touch its contours, no vision to see its shape; no sound to direct its movements; so that the sound is never separate from the ear that hears it, nor does hearing exist if there is no sound; so that the tree in front of my window: its movement, its breath, its color,

its scent is commingled with my vision of it, so that my vision is not an isolated phenomenon, but it – my vision – is the movement, the breath, the scent, the color of an experience of an entity I have learnt to call ‘tree’.

Our experiences of the world and of ourselves – as a thing in the world – are never singular, never isolated, never separate from everything else around us. At each moment of our existence there are a tremendous variety of things happening at the same time that color our experiences and perceptions of those experiences. It is in and through the wholeness of the *living* of the world around us, that we live. Our breath, our touch, our living, our longing and imagining is unified with that of the world around us. We are never alone in our experience of experiencing: there is a plurality of simultaneous experiences around and in us that commingle and intertwine, so that we cannot tell who’s experience we are experiencing; and what one, singular phenomenon we are experiencing. Can my experience of writing at this moment be ever separated from the scent of the bread baking in the kitchen, or from the sound of the laughter emanating from the construction workers next door; or from the leaves of the tree in front of my window that are playfully moving with the breeze that is present in between them?

While reading Leila Ahmed’s *A Border Passage*, I could not stop thinking about how each experience in our lives – each understanding of ourselves, each meaning we prescribe to events, each identity and culture we adopt or are exposed to – is inherently connected to every single “happening” in the world we inhabit. The identities we are born into – culture, family, religion, gender, – are never separate, nor do they affect our consciousness of the world as isolated objects of contemplation. Everything that exists within the world in which we live is intertwined at different levels and by numerous relations that constantly transform from one moment to another. The “collaboration”, the mixture, the constantly transforming social and ideological relations affect how we – immersed in them and part of them – shape our selves, our

knowledge and perceptions of the world. Each passing of time is existentially connected to this space we inhabit. Because with each passing time, the space - the shape and the reality of which is a product of things constantly interrelating and constantly re-establishing their places in the puzzle that is life - changes with the movement of life. If you could magically freeze a moment in reality and view it from without, you could see that the exact position of every single thing in our world (including the sensual and perceptual experiences) underlies, and shapes our experience of that moment.

In Ahmed's memoir I wish to trace and, through my own reflections, explore the nature of being, as necessarily a being that is in the world and of the world. A being that is a product of the world it inhabits and simultaneously creates. Through this discussion of being on the level of what constitutes and entails experience, I will approach the issue of categories, (such as gender, religion, identity) and their relations to the world of the living, thus look into the ways in which these categories are operative within the actuality of life and experience. By thus I hope to challenge the abstract theoretical understanding of categories as containers of particular identifying characteristics that have been and still are ascribed to groups of people, and reveal the problematics that are inherent in the attempts to impose such bounded and rigid constructs into the life-world of the inter-relational, inter-creating and constantly changing definitions of identities.

Ahmed begins her memoir with a description of a place and a time of her childhood. We begin to "hear" her; through trees of the garden we begin to distinguish her silhouette and through the sounds of the place and the time of her childhood we see glimpses of her: "in [that] place and [that] time and in a world alive, as it seemed, with a music of being" (5). All the trees in their garden are described in terms of sound: "the breath of the mimosa", or "the faintly rattling shuffle of the long-leaved eucalyptus", or "each variety of tree having its own music, its own way of conversing" (1). Then we hear the sounds of the streets, of the people, of the

animals, of the “quiet of the desert”, of the bark of the dog and of the engines of the cars (1-5). These descriptions of moments filled with the sounds of nature and human environment – sounds that are their breath, thus, the very motion we call ‘life’ - are not only present throughout the book (47; 50; 90; 116; 190; 285), but also underlie the discussions, the tellings, the memories portrayed in the memoir. By positioning moments of her life within the descriptions of a living nature and space, Ahmed conveys to the reader the sense – a comprehension that is on the level of the senses – that any moment in life is saturated with multiplicity of things living and “experiencing” their presence in the world. They fill, enrich and shape the individual subject (human and non-human) and his/her/its consciousness of that moment, while simultaneously they are shaped by them. The living can never and should never be cast as unimportant, as insignificant, because all that has meaning, has it in the moment of the living.

“There was the breath of the wind always, and the perpetual murmur of trees; the call of the *karawan* that came in the dusk, dying with the dying light; the reed-piper playing his pipe in the dawn and, throughout the day, the music of the living: street vendors’ call; people passing in the street, talking; the clip-clop of a donkey; the sound of a motor car; dogs barking; the cooing of pigeons in the siesta hour” (47). We often ignore what happens around us; we often forget that each experience is unique, irreproducible, relevant and meaningful in that moment of life, for that person experiencing it. What the interrelatedness of all the things around us entails is that ideas, identities, truths acquire meaning and significance precisely in the living moment. No truth, no idea, no identity can ever be universal. It is meaningful only within that moment in that time and in that place where the world is living. Thus I think, the descriptions of nature as living and breathing allow the theoretical, historical or political discussions in the book are to be viewed and read as necessarily bound to *a* life, *a* time period and *a* place. On a general level, this corresponds to the larger concern of the book to convey that politico-historical or



religious categorizations should never be detached from the lifeworlds and from the experiences and the conditions of the people living in that time and in that place.

The complexities and the difficulties of living one's condition; adapting to categorizations and identities imposed upon one through religion, culture, state and education; struggling with separations between groups of 'us' and 'them', that these categorizations necessitate, amount to a life of separatedness and fragmentation. As we grow older, beyond childhood consciousness that sees and experiences the world as a whole, we enter into a life of separations between 'us' the women, and 'them' the men; between 'us' the Westerners and them 'the third worlders'; between 'us' the civilized and 'them' the 'primitive'; between 'us' the Christians and 'them' the Muslims, and on and on. The individualization of the sense of self as compared to and in contrast with 'others' is a necessary and inherent condition of the struggles to be and to sustain liveliness in the Western constructs of life, but it necessarily leads to a fragmentation of self, because the sense of wholeness and unity by which we enter the world to create and change, as we are being created and changed by it, becomes overshadowed by the illusory, deceptive sense of separation into categories, which do not overlap, but exist only side by side, as binary. In the struggles with the identities we have been prescribed, or we have adopted, we create and shape our sense of self and project our image of who we think we are to the surrounding world.

The categories, within which we live, are socio-historical and political constructs, but they are constructs that are existentially necessary for our individuality to exist (and are a part of being human). Thus I am not arguing against categorization, but I am arguing for the acknowledgment in every aspect and time of life of our inherent unity, our interdependent connection to not only the natural and physical world we inhabit, but that of the objects and subjects residing in it. A unity, the essence of which

must be difference, so that the life can be created in the movement of interrelations within all things.

“... In Sufi poetry this music of the reed is the quintessential music of loss. ... the song of the reed is the metaphor for our human condition, haunted as we so often are by a vague sense of longing and of nostalgia, but nostalgia for we know not quite what. Cut from its bed and fashioned into a pipe, the reed forever laments the living earth that it once knew, crying out, whenever life is breathed into it, its ache and its yearning and loss. We too live our lives haunted by loss, we too, says Rumi, remember a condition of completeness that we once knew but have forgotten that we ever knew. The song of the reed and the music that haunts our lives is the music of loss, of loss and of remembrance” (5). Of inevitable loss of completeness, and remembrance of the connection to that from which we emerged. Thus to be individual (the reed) one must inevitably both create individuality and belong to a category (pipe), but it can never be complete or even exist without being a part of the larger whole. In the beginning years of human life, before consciousness of the world as a place of separations, the lines and boundaries between categories are blurred, are indistinct. It is a time of completeness, of a sense of wholeness, which, as adults, we perpetually yearn for. To be complete, to be whole, to dissolve into the matter of the world. Our sense of completeness is in the elemental matter of the world out of which our separate identities are created. “...it is not in those days and those moments [of childhood] that my story begins. Rather, it begins for me with the disruption of that world...” (5). It is a paradox that the most valued and nurtured aspect of human life in the Western world – our individuality – is a disruption of a state of being complete, the loss of which we perpetually mourn and yearn.

What we long for is the fullness of the experience of the world: it is the experience that the world and I are a whole, it is the experience before imposed categories take on a life of their own within our bodies. It is the experience where the separation between ourselves and others and nature around us is blurred. We

are of the world, in the world, sensing, breathing, hearing the living of the world as a whole: we inhale and exhale as the world around us does, so that we are not a part of that world, but we *are* the world. What constitutes the 'I', the 'we', or, more precisely, what the 'I' or the 'we' *is*, is the combination of breaths, movements, sounds, experiences that occur in the world around us at each given moment.

*When I am standing in the forest surrounded by trees the branches of which are intermingled and intertwined so intimately that the rays of the sun are struggling to break through them to reach my body; when I am standing on the grass, barefoot, breathing in the light from the scattered rays; and when the wind passes through me, how much am I in control of my own existence. The nature is in control of me. My body feels like it belongs to the wind and the air and the rays of light. They enter into my body, they go through it, they breath it, touch it, see it, and I exist as a result of that. I exist in their sensual experience, the concept 'I' exists as a result of their existence. I diffuse with them, I become one of them: inseparable, undifferentiated. It feels as if my body is a sound in the wind; a smell in the air; a ray of the light.*

The boundaries of categories can never be rigidly and precisely defined. They are blurred, made unstable in the lifeworlds of the people living them, because we are always simultaneously many things, precisely because as existing, living, breathing entities, we are such only within the living of the world

around us. We stand on the ground, so that our feet touch the ground, our skin is stroked by the air and the wind; our body is in the visions of others. I exist only in a space where I can *never* be separate and isolated object, because the air will always touch my skin and the sound will always reach my hearing. I am forever bound to a space: to the living, breathing, sensing of everything that constitutes it.

The vital importance and role that our surrounding world plays in our sense of reality is profound, though because it is so everyday and seemingly banal, we fail to consciously acknowledge it. In the situations of radical incoherence, or absence of “appropriate” conditions in our surrounding world, we find ourselves at loss: bewildered, confused, unreal. Reflecting on the death of her parents, Ahmed says that their death “felt quite unreal for a long time, as if they had not died at all but just somehow vanished” (30). Ahmed, residing in England at the time, came to experience the death and the mourning of her parents in an environment where their death did not affect anyone other than her, nor was there any “disruption” to the everyday life motion. There were no relatives and friends, dressed in black; there were no neighbors, friends and relative whose lives were affected by the loss; there was no disruption of everyday activities brought about by death; there was no loss of certain relations of friendship or of co-habitation. “It seemed odd over the following days [after her father’s death] that nothing is different. There is nothing in the world around me to indicate that anything of any significance whatever has happened. Everything is just as it was, people’s eyes today look just as they did yesterday. Nothing is different for anyone here. Life, everything, seems just the same” (217). The deaths seemed unreal, because nothing had changed in the world in which she resided.

One of the problems of categorizations is that within many contexts such categorical identities are blind to the existence of other categories to which a person belongs to, belonged in the past or the possibility of him/her belonging in the future. Human life is

so complex and multiple, because of the tremendous variety of unique experiences, that to ascribe a person a subjectivity that is only contained within a few categories (such as a woman and a Muslim), is extremely problematic, because it ignores an intricate web of complexities that constitute a person's humanity. Ahmed discusses this issue of being simultaneously numerous within the context of understanding her parents' "colonized consciousness". "I have been through many revolutions in my understanding of my father, my mother, and my own consciousness - understanding them now this way, now that, convinced at one moment that they are this and at another that they are that. For the truth is we are always plural. Not either this *or* that, but this *and* that" (25). What a plurality of being entails is that any category is a living experience that is in perpetual relations with other categories one simultaneously inhabits. If I am a woman and a Muslim, my experiences can be drastically different from another Muslim woman, depending on a vast multiplicity of categories I might or might not belong to: am I a mother; a daughter; an educated woman; living in America; or living in a predominantly Muslim country; am I a daughter of a liberal parents or fundamentalist; am I a writer or a judge? What is important is to realize that even if I and another woman belonged to the same or similar categories, what matters is the way these categorical identities play out within us in the particulars of situations and times we live. What is also operative is how these categories relate to each other in particular times of one's life: which one is stronger, or which one is weaker. If one is in a helpless situation (e.g. in jail, stripped of rights; or one is terminally ill), their sense of God can be heightened, thus compromising their otherwise non-religious subjectivity. To accept this notion of plurality is to realize that we are not bounded beings but are subjects and objects, simultaneously numerous, of the world, in the world, within the context of the world.

We are plural not only in the sense of belonging to many categories at once, but we are plural because we not only live our lives, our desires, our longing, but also that of others. Ahmed

dedicates a beautiful discussion to the subject of religion, and narrates the “life” of Islam in the lifeworld of women and ordinary folk. Religion, or what it meant to be Muslim, was, she says, passed on to her “as a way of being in the world”. “A way of holding oneself in the world – in relation to God, to existence, to other human beings” (121). She continues to describe that the way women of her family learnt what it meant to be a Muslim, was by looking into their own lives and trying to find meanings, ways of coping with life, living it and behaving in a way that coheres with the knowledge passed on to them from generations of women; or from speaking with others in their immediate world, including other women and also their husbands. Of course, they also listened to Quran, which directed the ways in by which they found meanings in their lives (121-125). The religion was living within them, connecting them not only to others in their life-worlds, but to the generations of women who taught them, passed on to them what they understood Islam to be. The Islam of the women of Ahmed’s family was like the women themselves – “gentle, generous, pacifist, inclusive, sometimes mystical” (121). Each passage of such bodily and living knowledge to the next generation has, embedded in its very constitution, the inscriptions of the lives, longings, struggles of these women. To “adopt” this knowledge into ones life, is to forever adopt those struggles and longings of many generations of people. “They profoundly shape the next generation, but they do not leave a record in a way that someone writing a text about how to live or what to believe leaves a record. Nevertheless they leave a far more important and, literally, more vital, living record. Beliefs, morals, attitudes passed on to and impressed on us through those fleeting words and gestures *are written into our very lives, our bodies, our selves, even into our physical cells and into how we live out the script of our lives*” [italics mine] (122).

Thus we live our life, create our being through inscriptions of knowledge and struggles of not only our families and friends, but also the longings of our religion, national identity and history. We are plural not only by the virtue of belonging to numerous

categories simultaneously, but because within us we carry the lives and the longings of those who came before us. We do not live our lives only, but the lives of others. We are a mosaic of pieces that are passed onto us and written on our very constitution by our interaction with the living world around us, every aspect of which contains all that has been passed onto it from generations and generations of longing, desires, imaginations. Within us, inscribed on our bodies, are the vibrations, the sounds, the breaths of all that co-existed, co-lived, co-experienced with us, or with those around us. Their presence – vibrations and experiences of people and places – are engraved within our own being. We live the lives, the imaginations, the longings and the desires of all that exists and existed in our world.

One early morning, looking into the nature outside her windows, a cup of coffee in her hand, depression engrossed within her, Ahmed experiences the presence of her deceased parents. In an attempt to separate herself from her mother's wish for her death; in an attempt to erase this inscription from her being; in an attempt to clear her bloodstream from the "chemicals of rejection", she writes in her journal: "I will not let my mother's old wish for my death kill me. I vow right now that this will be the end of it. I will never, no matter what, take my own life" (90-91). In that moment, when she acknowledges that this depression, or what she calls the "heritage" given to her from her mother's side of family, is a piece of her mother's wish that she carries in her own being, in her own sense of herself; in that moment, when she separates herself and her own wishes from that of her mother, she experiences her mother's presence.

We carry within us those who have passed. Ahmed explores, although implicitly, the boundary between the living and the dead. She asks: "How does one think about those who are gone?" (219). How do we deal with the physical absence of those who are gone, yet are so present in our conceptions of our lives? Those, whose longings and struggles are embedded in our very composition, so that we are not only us, but also them; so that

through the body of ours, they also live; so that in their body, which is absent, we lived, thus with their loss, lost parts of ourselves? How do we say that to be dead meant to not exist, when they exist in us? How do we stay that to be alive is to be physically and mentally present, when parts of our selves are not? Can there be a boundary: a rigid, unyielding, never overlapping boundary between those who are alive and those who are dead?

The irreproducibility and the infinite multiplicity of ways of experiencing categorical identities necessitates that the boundaries of seemingly opposite and binary categories possess a degree of fluidity. Fluidity must also exist in one's experience of the category itself. The category of motherhood is most generally prescribed with the characteristic of nurturance, unconditional love and dedication to the preservation of the child's well-being. Ahmed described motherhood as mysterious. "It [motherhood] was sacred, but it had little to do, apparently, with actually looking after or tending to one's children. It was, I suppose, about having one's children around one, under one's broad physical and moral guardianship and protection – even if, in the routines and practicalities of daily life, it was someone else who actually looked after them. And it connoted also some powerful, unseverable connection of the heart. Everything my mother did seemed to be an expression of this notion of motherhood, from her apparent lack of interest in the dailiness of our lives to the scenes she made at the quayside in Alexandria, waving her large white handkerchief in a tear drenched goodbye as one or another of us and sometimes several of us left for England" (111). A "powerful, unseverable connection to the heart". Yet her relationship with her mother was ambivalent. Ahmed sensed throughout her childhood a certain degree of non-belonging; reflecting, as a child, that she felt as if she belonged to the margins of the family, or maybe to the category of small beings, like cats (57). She divined, as she says, in the "unacknowledged, unwanted desires" of her mother. Ahmed reflects on the notion of losing a child, and the role and "meaning" that it can give to a woman's life. She speculates that her mother



might have had some unacknowledged wish to have this happen to her, and the child, Ahmed thought, that would have been sacrificed was herself (87-88). Later she finds out that her mother, pregnant with her, tried to terminate the pregnancy by stimulating a premature birth.

It is not to say that her mother had not unconditionally loved and nurtured Ahmed's existence. But what this juxtaposition of idyllic motherhood, and an unconscious desire in the mother for a child's death portrays is that identity constructs can never represent reality. Such constructs are based, in many ways, on how identities are experienced in reality, but the uniformity that a categorical definition of identity entails is largely flawed. Because even though there exist many similarities in our experiences (e.g. experiences of motherhood), they are nonetheless exclusive not only to the person experiencing but to the time and the place where the experience takes place. These categories are always and perpetually changing. "...it is of the nature of being in this place, this place of convergence of history, cultures, ways of thought, that there will always be new ways to understand what we are living through, and that I [we] will never come to a point of rest or of finality in my [our] understanding" (25).<sup>1</sup>

I have hoped to show that every living subject is existentially and fundamentally connected to infinite number of influences that emanate from the living world as a whole. Impositions of set categories, such as national, religious, gender identities, are highly problematic. These historico- and socio-political categories that are serving the purposes of those in power, are fundamentally unreal. They can never exist in actuality. The complexities of human conditions are so convoluted, intertwined and irreducible to narrow universalizations and generalization that any attempt to contain living experiences within categorical

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<sup>1</sup> Leila Ahmed, *A Border Passage* (New York: Penguin Books, 2000). Ahmed speaks within the context of understanding the time and the place of Egypt of her parents, but I think this can be applied to the absence of finality in understanding people, experiences, identities and worlds.

boundaries is doomed to failure. Religion, culture, gender, identity – these are all human ways of living a life that is meaningful. As such, they transcend the boundaries of categories, thus perpetually shaping and reshaping definitions of identities: what it means to be a mother, a woman, a Muslim, an Egyptian.