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Hagar on My Mind

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A PERSONAL INTRODUCTION

I am an American Muslim immigrant. I come from an ancient corner of the world—the Middle East. My history goes back a few thousand years, for I am a descendant of Hagar, the mother of all Arabs. As years pass by in these United States, I find myself reading about Hagar, imagining her face, her hands, her life, her emotions. An Egyptian princess alone in the hot Arabian desert, twice an immigrant, with a crying infant and no food or water, not even breast milk to nurse. I close my eyes and feel the dry sand of the desert in my mouth. I hear Hagar running between two hills looking for water, food, people, anything. Seven times she runs back and forth. Her act is called *sa’i* in Arabic. It literally means to make an effort. You would think that one round of *sa’i* would have been more than enough to reach the inevitable conclusion—she was in trouble with no one in sight. But Hagar was an obstinate woman of faith who knew that in the end God would come through for her. He did, and thousands of years later I was born of her seed.

When I was in Lebanon, I lived a double life as a young woman. At home, I lived in highly religious surroundings, because I come from a house of learning and religious leadership. At the American University of Beirut (AUB), I stuffed my scarf in my briefcase and had American coffee with my classmates in the Uncle Sam restaurant. Two very different worlds that I tried very hard to keep apart, but in each I was privileged. At home, I was the descendant of major scholars and was seen as having inherited some of...
their spiritual transparency. At the University, I had a rich modern uncle with a ridiculously expensive car and a chauffeur who often picked me up with my friends to spend the day at my uncle's chalet at the beach. My world was complex and contradictory, but whatever stress it placed on me, it never prepared me for the life of an immigrant.

I came to the United States to continue my higher education. As a result, my life suddenly changed. I faced serious challenges to my core values, to my dignity. I was emotionally shredded to pieces and thrown into the abyss. Till this day, I remember the departmental parties I attended when I began teaching in the seventies, and a certain colleague and senior administrator. He always reeked of alcohol in the afternoon. At parties, he held a drink in his hand and moved closer and closer to talk. Suddenly, the space would shrink and I would be backed slowly against the wall. "Be generous," he would whisper before I could wiggle out from my tight corner. One day, he stopped me to inquire: "I heard from the department secretary that you ordered an electric pencil sharpener for your office."

"Yes," I answered, "the secretary told me it was not that expensive." He looked amused, then said with a grin: "Why don't you just order a manual one and hire an Arab to turn it? That would be much cheaper."

I turned to my feminist sisters. I remember around that time writing an article for a feminist socialist book. The latter half of the article was about the relationship of Marx and Lenin to the women in their lives. I had been introduced to Marxism only a few years earlier and was very proud of the research I had done. I had no agenda. I simply wanted to research and write about the topic. As it turned out, Marx in particular was a miserable male chauvinist. The article was accepted for publication, subject to the deletion and replacement of the part on Marx and Lenin. I was told to stick to writing about Arab women. Clearly, some Marxist feminist women did not want to destroy the image of their two patriarchal heroes, or take me out of the pigeonhole they assigned to me.

During that period, I remember lying in bed awake many nights. At times, tears ran down my cheeks like glittering sand particles from the beaches of Beirut. Then I would feel Hagar touching my shoulder, softly whispering: "You are an immigrant now, like me. You are all alone in this distant desert. Wipe up your tears. Get up and do your own sa'i. Run between these strange hills. In the end, God will be with you."

Hagar was right, and this immigrant never gave up.

Luckily, I had the Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP) to help me make an oasis in my desert. They were the finest group of women I ever had the privilege of working with in this country. A crazy bunch of women. We were crazy, because we would silence no one, and all ideas were placed on the table. There were no taboos, no restrictions on freedom of speech, no