

Elika Ansari

Confession of a Pseudo-European

My first childhood memory is not a memory but a dream.

I, a child of three or four at the time with my bobbed haircut and perfectly straight fringe, am standing on the balcony gazing out into the horizon. I stare ahead for seconds that feel like minutes, and minutes that feel like hours, searching, probing, despondently pursuing an ever fleeting peace; a sense of calm that, for whatever reason, refuses to have anything to do with me.

Just then I glimpse a snow-white dove flying towards me in all its splendour, and with it comes a soothing energy when it perches on the railing next to me.

'Be patient' the dove murmurs, not with words, but with its radiating presence. 'Peace will be yours one day'. And just like that, I feel at ease. Even when the bird leaves me and glides off into the sunrise; even then, I feel calm, as I relish in the enlightened aura it has left behind.

The dream was a recurring one. For months, maybe even years, the white bird visited me in my sleep and showered me with millions of molecules of hope that seeped through my bloodstream and wedged themselves deep into my heart.

That was when I was still living in Tehran. When I moved to Europe, the bird abandoned me for good, and with it, that reassuring aura of serenity also disappeared.

The years slipped swiftly away as I moved from one European city to another, trying to find a home, trying to remember what it felt like to wrap myself in that familiar feeling that lulled me to sleep every night, telling me to wait, telling to be patient for good things to come.

But this is not one of those stories where I denounce my homeland and cry and plead in the hope that I'll one day be accepted here.

Unlike some of my other compatriots who feel the need to laud their allegiance to the flags of their adopted countries; who feel the need to shout out their British or Spanish or French patriotism loud enough for everyone to hear, I don't feel I need to justify my presence here. I am no patriot, simply because I don't have a taste for anything remotely similar to the falsehood that is the narrative of a nationalist.

Europe, I don't owe you any debts of gratitude for taking me in. Throughout my life here, I've studied and worked hard; I've always tried to learn the language of every country I lived in; I've paid my taxes on time; I've even put in my free time to volunteer every chance I got. No matter where I went, I tried to be an exemplary European citizen.

But as a European who is "really actually just Iranian" I was always too different, too exotic, or too "beautiful" (whenever you wanted to be nice about it) to be one of your own.

Those of you who wanted to impress said something to the tune of how you loved Iran's rich history and culture -and impress you did-; while those of you who wanted to impress but were less intellectually equipped to do so, just said something you'd heard on the news that day.

Your incessant questions about my homeland urged me to learn more about it, and I am grateful for that. Yet when I finally came back to you with my answers, you dismissed them outright. Because let's be honest, you never wanted my opinion. You only sought after my responses to confirm your own relative bias, and when I failed to give you that, I was met with your disapproving grunts and your presumptuous rolling eyes.

“How could you not shun your home country? How could you not shun Islam? Oh, but the government; oh, but the oppression; oh, but the veil.”

Oh, but the veil. How I tire to hear time and again about how a simple garment on women's heads stirs up so much controversy in this continent. How I tire to have to go anecdotal to prove you wrong, every time I feel the need to tell you my sister who grew up British, who after 27 odd years and in spite of every social pressure, chose of her own accord to embrace Islam and wear the hijab in public.

How I tire to hear you pat yourself on the back for discrediting me so quickly, with a line so contrived as “Islam is not a race”, whenever I give you every statistic, every valid study, everything there is to prove you are a racist.

How I despair to live surrounded by people who make no effort to dig deeper to find out why things are the way they are in Iran. Why there is such a lack of democracy in the Middle East as a whole.

Instead I am horrified to hear you justify these as reasons to excuse spewing your vitriol against a cluster of minorities whose actual origins you don't even care enough to probe or examine; against the Alis and the Mohammeds and the Amirs and anyone who doesn't look or act or dress white enough.

I don't feel compelled to offer you an explanation on behalf of my government, or any other Middle Eastern government for that matter, nor do I feel compelled to hang my head in shame every time a brown person commits an offence. No more than I expect any American or European person to hang their heads in shame

for the disgraceful history of oppression, manipulation and destruction their governments have had a hand in.

I wish when I said my Europe was one in which women could wear whatever they wanted on their heads and bodies without inviting backlash, the follow-up question wouldn't be whether I support Sharia law in the West.

I wish my name didn't sound quite so foreign so your brazen discrimination wouldn't dismiss my educated opinion in the form of "Of course *you'd* defend Muslims".

I wish I had been born with every privilege (and for the most part I was), so I could show you that I would be right there, fighting for your rights, even if all the hatred and slander didn't expand so far as to include my Iranian family.

But I can't. Because this is my life. It is my family you are refusing to tolerate. It is my family's family and my family's friends and my friends that are the target of your hatred. And it breaks my heart. You break my heart.

The image of the four year old me flickers in and out of my mind every time I feel I am in a state of utter despair. I find myself trying to recall the white dove, trying to cling on to even a figment of the calm it once radiated. But now for all I try, I just see that child flailing her hands, thrashing them wildly in the air in one failed attempt after another to grasp at the tattered remains of a ghost. I am lost.