

Unraveling the East-West Myth

Does the divide between us and them exist within our souls?

BY SIKEENA KARMALI, from ASCENT MAGAZINE

ARRIVE IN PESHAWAR, Pakistan, on a day in mid-October, one month after the tragedy the Western world remembers as September 11. The Americans are bombing Afghanistan. I am here on a human rights mission, meeting with recently arrived Afghan refugees. When I get to the hotel, I register as a Canadian woman. However, I am wearing *shalwar qamise* and speaking Urdu. The man behind the counter wants to know where I am “really” from. The place of birth listed in my Canadian passport is Nairobi, Kenya.

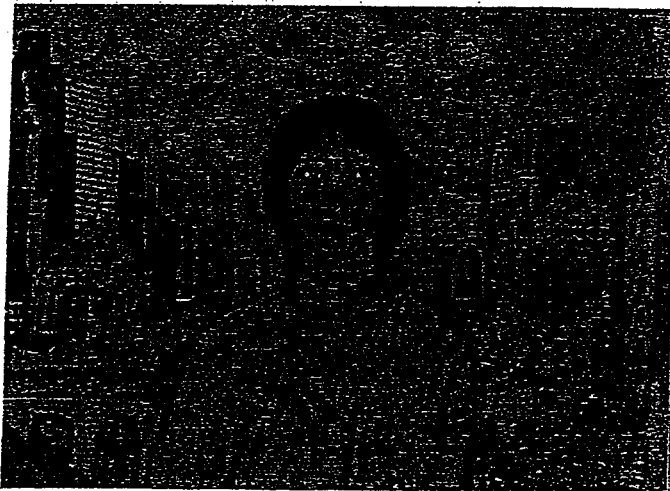
“East Africa,” I say. He chuckles to himself. There are no local women in sight. As I go up to my room, I hear a doorman say that I am no lawyer, but a local whore for the foreign men. It seems I cannot fool him with my English and my foreign ways.

The next day, I meet with a group of Afghan women who have recently crossed the mountain pass into Peshawar. We wear the same clothes, but mine are new, bright, and color-coordinated, just bought a couple of days ago in Islamabad, and theirs are dusty, tattered, randomly matched.

I don’t officially “interview” them because I know they will put on a performance for me; instead, I invite them to tea and we chat, sharing confidences.

Sometimes, just to win their trust, I tell them lies. I tell them that I am married and have two children—that, yes, I am just like them. When I am really

feeling brave, not the case on this visit to Pakistan, I tell the truth: that I am 30 years old and unmarried. This confession is often met by silence. Occasionally, a pitying look or knowing laugh breaks the silence. It is always



followed by a question. “Why not?”

Indeed, why not? Why have I chosen this lifestyle? Who would I be if I had been born here and if my ancestors had not been shipped across the Indian Ocean to East Africa?

THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY is one that has plagued me now for decades. I was born in Africa, to Indian parents who practice an Islam that merges itself with aspects of Hindu and Buddhist mysticism. I hold a Canadian passport. I have been educated and cultivated as an individual by the Western world; but with my head turned back, looking toward the East, particularly toward the Islam that has formed and nourishes my spirit. I carry in one hand a book on contemporary Web

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culture and clutch in the other hand a bundle formed by the Holy Koran, the poetry of Moulana Al-din Rumi and my meditation beads.

We understand that it is not concrete, this East-West divide, when we learn that "frock" is a Sanskrit word, when we find espresso machines and Lavazza coffees on Somali street corners, when we meet Algerians who don't speak a word of Arabic or Tamazight (the Berber tongue) but do speak perfect French. No, certainly it is not set in stone, this age-old, heavy-handed notion of East versus West. It has been invented, like everything else in the world.

The self is the orienting principle of the West, perhaps even of modernity as a whole. All things—community, the nation, religion, spirituality, even God—are subordinated to the individual, which is the highest form of good. If we take a cursory glance at contemporary Western media, we find that the self is the supreme subject of conversation—my mind, my body, my home, my fashion, my spirit. There seems to be an earnest endeavor—in talk shows like *Oprah* and sitcoms like *Friends*, in the proliferation of lifestyle coaches, personal trainers, nutritionists, and shrinks—to perfect the individual.

The East, with its heavy hand of tradition, functions through consensus. Loyalties and duties are ascribed by birth. Community, and not self, is the orienting principle. If we even peek at the current social afflictions of the East, we find communities fighting each other, sacrificing the individual, sacrificing the ethics of a good God, using religion as their rallying cry.

When did this splitting apart take place? If we accept a divided world, then we must also consider a divided self. It is here that I find difficulty, that I find myself rejecting the division of East and West. Here the thought stops and will not flow. I know that I am whole, integrated.

After several weeks in Pakistan, operating as a local woman, I become fluid, less rigid, surrendering to both time and circumstance. I walk softly,

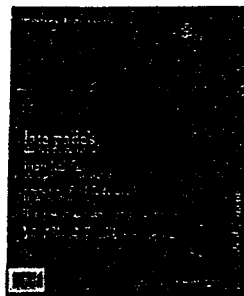
covering the body that identifies me and allowing myself to merge into space and sound. The boys in the hotel no longer sneer. They also walk softly. My privacy becomes a solace from the battling world. I speak words carefully, necessitating the full force of their meaning. I release the "I" and become "we."

On the plane from Pakistan, back to London and then Canada, I am now a South Asian woman, Muslim, and probably Pakistani. Yet inside, my thoughts, my private sphere, are my own. I am thinking about my apartment in Montréal, my favorite café, the ring I have bought for my mother.

No one can see these thoughts. The outer world is confined, prescribed even, but my inner world is free for me to invent as I wish.

I've tried again and again to fit myself into a construct. Either East or West, you must choose. Perhaps each of us embodies both East and West. Perhaps each world lives inside of us, and we draw it out according to our nature, our affinity, our constitution. I have tried the East on for size, but it did not fit; it left me confined. I returned to the West and tried to become Western again, but that too did not wholly fit. Choosing for myself a little East here and a little West there, integrating them into a union—that is my being.

There can be no East without West and no West without East. They are soulmates, seeking each other out.



Sikeena Karmali, who works in the fields of human rights and international development, is currently in Uzbekistan overseeing and training human rights advocates. "My weapons

are education and women's rights," says the Montreal-based Karmali. "I know I cannot quite save the world, but maybe I can integrate these values where they are needed." From Ascent magazine (Fall 2002). Subscriptions: \$15.95 (4 issues) from 334 Cornelia St. #519, Plattsburgh, NY 12901.