

On Selfhood

By Hala Salem

Growing up in a shame-based patriarchal culture, puberty was a fever dream where the freedom and innocence of childhood abruptly ended with the onset of menstruation. Subjectivity and selfhood cease to be denoting one to the status of an object. I could no longer wear the same clothes and was pressured to dress in modest attire covering parts of my body that I never thought of as shameful or promiscuous. I was reminded to lower my voice and contain the boisterous boyishness that was characteristic since early childhood. It was time to be a woman. Eager to maintain my sense of authority, I began collecting would-be trash accessories from my older sisters and weaving bracelets out of string which I would stack on my arms like colourful armor determined to express myself and not fall into the monotony and servitude of objectivity. After several days of accessorising my usually absent father noticed the cluster of colour on my arms, he demanded I take them off and told me that they looked ridiculous. Devastated and saddened for not meeting his standard of clean and docile femininity, I ended up throwing the bracelets in the bin. I resented my new position and the cage that it came with but obedience was my only option.

Selfhood and autonomy which were never questioned became my predominant concerns. Under this authority “I” still existed but “I” became something secret hidden, not just physically but mentally as well. There were certain questions and doubts that I had about the rules of our culture and faith that were forbidden from being expressed. My mother found my diary where I’d written an entry speculating on the existence of God, positing that if God created us then who created God. Tearful and horrified, she made me apologise and beg for forgiveness. Guilt, nausea and anger welled in the pit of my stomach; I never thought that anyone would read those entries. She decided that it was best to burn the few pages that had been filled—we stood over the laundry sink watching them engulfed by flames and ash as she dried the tears on her face. The general attitude toward skepticism or criticism of any kind was *‘how dare you? Isn’t the fear of eternal hellfire enough to keep you in line?’*

Obedience and fear didn't come naturally to me; my inclinations were toward bravery and rebellion. I have a clear and vivid memory from when I was six with two of my cousins. We were stuck inside on a rainy day and decided to pass time by telling each other scary stories. When it was my turn I told a tale of a young girl who took it upon herself to fight God with a sword. She struck God with it and the world crumbled down taking heaven and hell along with it. Nothingness, which was a mulberry coloured plasma, swallowed everything leaving nothing behind just the little girl and her sword. As I told the story I felt an eerie thrill at the upheaval of order. I don't recall expressing any resistance to the idea of God prior to this moment but the feeling of doubt and disbelief was always there. It seemed ridiculous to me that an old man in the sky was the one in charge of everything.

At eighteen years I arbitrarily enrolled into an introductory philosophy course during my first year of university. I fell in immediate and immense love with the skepticism and thorough interrogation of reality that it encouraged. It was a space where the taboo was welcomed and openly discussed. When I learned of Nietzsche's proclamation that *God is dead* I cried in overwhelming recognition and relief that I wasn't alone in my defiance of the old man. As I continued my academic pursuit of philosophy, my mother noticed a growing disturbance in my compliance. While writing an essay on Simone De Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*—a foundational feminist text—I left a printed article on my desk titled '*The Body In Its Sexual Being*'. My mother saw the title and urged me to quit studying philosophy while encouraging a switch to a degree like nursing. When I asserted that I'm not going to quit she banned me from working on any philosophy essays at home. She pointed to the article on the desk and said '*I never want to see anything like this in my home ever again. Your younger sisters can't see this.*' The mask that I wore for the sake of peace was beginning to slip and the hidden "I" began to reveal itself.

My understanding of truth and meaning was expanding beyond the horizon of belief that I was raised to look onto for guidance and preserve. The world was no longer flat, it was a sphere and it didn't orbit around a single truth but rather offered a multitude of perspectives, each within their own right. I began to believe in everything, above all I believed in multiplicity and difference. The only thing I felt certain of was uncertainty itself. This revelation paired with the

pressure cooker that was my family home led to a psychotic episode, which my therapist at the time described as a collapse of reality under the weight of contradictory and incompatible truths. It became clear that I had to choose between a life of obedience and restraint or one of personal freedom and autonomy. I would end up choosing the latter and became the first of five daughters to break the traditional expectation of living with family until marriage. It wasn't an easy choice. My parents were gutted, they didn't approve of my decision but there was no way for them to stop me. Everytime I'd visit them they'd beg me to turn back to move back home and turn back to God. A sentiment which they never cease to express and leaves me feeling nauseous with guilt every time.

Personal freedom wasn't all that I thought it would be. In later years I would come across an account from psychoanalyst Carl Jung on Nietzsche. He argued that in proclaiming the death of God, Nietzsche didn't recognise that he was still living in the shadow of the very God he claimed to have killed. Though I didn't know it at the time, I too was living in the shadow of the God that I killed. I became consumed by doubt in myself and in others, embodying a void like existence. The total collapse of order triggered another psychotic episode which left me feeling abundantly fragile and afraid. It was a fear that I hadn't encountered before; a kind that was paralytic. Apathy toward life began to fester and would consume me for the coming years. The only way I could get through the days was by embracing cold detachment and blatant nihilism. Anything that I valued prior was no longer worth the trouble. The only pursuit that made sense was death in its inevitability. But I didn't want to die really, so I remained alive as a decrepit ghost of what I used to be. I gave up on writing and on trying to understand the world. I didn't want to learn anything anymore, what I already knew was crushing and felt like more than enough for a lifetime. I kept my head down and tried to focus on what the present was demanding of me. But no matter how hard I tried I could never be present, the past thickened like fog around me leaving me disoriented, dazed and unable to see. Time went on, the people around me were accomplishing great things with their lives but I could only master the mechanics of the everyday. I began to loathe myself for failing to meet the expectations of my family while also understanding that I was never able to meet them anyway. No matter how hard I tried something devious and catastrophic would rear its ugly head. This led me to believe that my expectations of myself didn't matter. In the grand nihilistic scheme of things nothing mattered anyway, there was

nothing new under the sun and I couldn't fathom of adding anymore clutter to this already disorganised and repugnant world.

In the shadow of God I felt that there was no choice but to reconcile my relationship and understanding of said God. I began to develop a mystical understanding of the universe and of faith by embracing spirituality. When I revealed to my father these new found beliefs he was ecstatic and took it as a sign that I was going to embrace adherence in religiosity. The nuances of mysticism were lost on him; pressure and expectation remained unwavering like the rising and falling of the ocean tide. I was tired of arguing with him and having to prove that faith didn't equate to dogma. That God; the universe was more profound than any dogmatic interpretation. But I kept my mouth shut and nodded in agreement believing that nothing I said mattered. There was no changing his mind. My perspective and interpretation would always remain secondary and of no apparent value. Worthlessness like this goes unnoticed, it metastasises, spreads without conscious awareness and functions like an algorithm that subconsciously manipulates your perception of everything. It taints every action and achievement. Nothing is ever enough when you believe that you aren't enough. Even with this rediscovered hope I still felt stuck—I just wanted the approval of my parents but it didn't belong to me—disapproval seemed to be my fate.

Subconsciously, I searched for this approval in every interaction; aiming to anticipate the needs and thoughts of others in order to fawn in order to survive. I became an anxious and deranged mirror losing all sight of myself. When I didn't like what I saw I hid from it, retreating into familiar and safe territory like a hermit. But I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by a few friends who graced me with patience, compassion and understanding. They reflected parts of myself that I'd forgotten about and neglected, reminding me of what I was capable of and pushing me to believe in myself again. The key to unlocking this potential is self-worth. For so long I lived in a static state of repression and shame without any self-esteem. Now I recognise that "I" have been there all along. That the worthiness of this "I" can't be secured from an outside source, only from within. Worthiness is a birthright. I refuse to live in shame and in fear. I am what I am. Through my studies of mysticism I've come to learn that God manifests in and through all things. Who am I to deny the dignity of God and being within myself. This isn't to

say that defiance and destruction are noble qualities—they are not— I've suffered greatly because of them. But with great upheaval comes great change.

Change is difficult but it is necessary and it can be a positive force. Within a year of my living out of home my older sister, who used to commute a total of four hours to and from Sydney was given permission by my parents to move into a city apartment. My younger sister was allowed to apply for universities in Sydney; something that my parents never allowed me or my two older sisters to do. I've come to believe that if it wasn't for my upheaval none of those things would have happened. It took an immense amount of bravery to defy that structure, bravery that I didn't recognise in myself until recently. I often wonder what my ancestors would think of me, whether they'd smile or frown on my decisions but I'll never know the answer to that. So I remind myself that it is now my turn to live and the only way to do it is in the present facing forward.