

Internalizing the Ghetto: Jews and Muslims in Venice
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An Arab Shepard is searching for his goat on Mount Zion
And on the opposite mountain I am searching
For my little boy
An Arab shepherd and a Jewish father
Both in their temporary failure.
Our voices meet above the Sultan's Pool
In the valley between us. Neither of us wants
The child or the goat to get caught in the wheels
Of the terrible Had Gadya machine.

Afterward we found them among the bushes
And our voices came back inside us laughing and crying.

Searching for a goat or a son
Has always been the beginning
Of a new religion in these mountains.

This poem by Amichai echoes the myriad of thoughts that have encapsulated, and soaked my mind since I have ventured to study the history of Jewish identity in the Ghetto. I had initially planned an ambitious comparative study between Levantine and German Jews in the ghetto, however due to my poor Italian and lack of resources I decided to roam around in Venice in the present reflecting on my own identity as a Muslim and how I could remotely relate to Jewish Identity from 1617-1770.

The Jewish ghetto was colored with life that exuded a peculiar multiculturalism that included many aspects of the larger society as the boundaries/doors of the bridges were imagined to contain the pestilence of the Jews away from the purity of Christians. The literal closing and opening of the bridge doors became an imaginary vehicle that configured as a literal mark that suppressed the act of exchange and contact between Jews and the *Others*

reifying the Ghetto as separate and exclusive. Although the German nation and Levantine Jews lived separately there occurred a mutual syncretic relationship of marriage, exchange of homes, cultural and religious debate, and business not to mention the duality of Christians that visited the Ghetto for business and as we witnessed in Leon Modena's *Life of Judah* the "inner/outer contrasts found so acutely in Modena is surely a product of his experience of moving between two worlds, using Italian language, motifs, and genres and being listened to seriously by Christians." (Davis, p.69) The climate of the ghetto was not prosperous in matters of state, laws or freedom but there existed subculture of Jews in Venice that impacted economy and ideas that resulted in restrictive laws set by the state council in different times.

There are three important aspects of the Jewish Ghetto that compares to how Muslims have lived in Italy since the late 1950's as a prominent and a modern ghettoized group. The term for Ghetto here will be Jocelyn Cesari's term in her research in France terming it a *Banlieues*. This defines a Ghettoized community that reflects the difficulty in making the transition from a vertically integrated society in which the chief division is that of upper and lower classes, to a horizontally integrated society, in which the important distinction is between those at the center and those at the periphery. Muslims and Jews would be placed in the horizontal society where the periphery would be their place and the center the larger society.

The first aspect of the paper will discuss the notion of home and how it differs in both communities, the second will discuss the identity of the Jew/Muslim as

Other from the perspective of the larger society, and finally it will discuss the internalization by the images of Jew and Muslim as separate entities from the larger society. The paper will incorporate recent interviews conducted in Mestre with Muslims who represent three different communities of Bangladesh, Morocco, and Syria along with sociological research conducted by Annalisa Frisina from the University of Padova, and Jocelyn Cesari at the Sorbonne in Paris.

The question of home for Jews is drastically different from Muslims both theologically and socially. In Judaism the belief in a home instantiated itself from the handing down of the word of God, giving the commandment that requires an uprootedness and search for a home. The ontological basis of Jewish identity relies on the concept of exile or galut as a condition of being until the promise is fulfilled. In respect to Jews, the memory of home and the affliction of dispersion have a dialectical relationship as quoted in Deuteronomy:

And the Egyptians dealt ill with us, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. And we cried unto the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, and our toil, and our oppression. And the Lord brought us forth out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and with an outstretched arm, and with great terribleness, and with signs, and with wonders. And he brought us into this place, and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey... (Deut 25:5-9)

Jews view the state of Israel as the triumph of a dispossessed people who waited 2,000 years for a return to their homeland. However, looking at the notions of home in the period when the Ghetto was closed pre-Shoah is very different, home was Venice, and Italy was a place of hostility and simultaneously a place of development and success for many Jews even through the turbulence of closing

and opening the ghetto, it was not until 1938 that Italy began to imitate Nazi Germany and Italian Jews were barred from many aspects of life such as ownership of land, intermarriage, and holding jobs in public sectors, amongst the 40,000 Jews at that time many held respectable jobs as academics and businessmen. Home to Jews in the Ghetto encompassed over three hundred years of creating a life that required an introspective longing of being in a home that allotted freedom and simultaneously being a nation unto themselves. Many Jews reflected the negative representations of them in their own lives by adhering to the isolating concept known as galut (“exile”) Galut functioned as a self-fulfilling prophecy: Jews were Ghettoed, taxed, and persecuted in their own birthplace because, to a certain extent, they were perceived by others in the same way they perceived themselves: “different”, “a nation apart.” Galut was the logical result of the accusation of nonparticipation, the Jew’s destiny imposed by those very people who denied their participation.

Home to Muslims has not been part of a Muslim’s imagination theologically or politically and this difference is particularly important in view of the Jewish Ghetto or segregation of Jews throughout Europe, and the Muslim world. At present, the world is experiencing a flow of Muslim immigrants both legal and illegal in unaccounted numbers in Western Europe and the United States for reasons that are economic. Muslims prescribe to a notion of brother/sisterhood that falls under the *Ummah* (nation in Hebrew). This *Ummah* or global unification of Muslims has lost the inclusivity of others by being themselves segregated and depicted as “other” since 1910 which was the demise of the last Muslim Empire

the ottomans. Muslims have taken on a transnational identity and Diasporic quality that includes awareness of ethnic identity, existence of group organization, and persistence of relations with the homeland either through monetary, political or psychological means. The Quran'ic revelations and grants given to Muslims as the last "chosen" people of the book has problematized the idea of inclusivity obversely the idea of inclusivity within Judaism has excluded others because of the oppressive history of living amongst the "other".

This paper opens bridges of identity that offer a historical place for both Jews and Muslims looking at Venice and their own traditions. The mapping of this history relies on Jewish from 1617-1938, and for Muslims from 1800's to the present as other.

Today there are more Muslims in the Veneto area than Jews, the approximate population of Muslims in Italy is about 900,000 and of that about 20,000 reside in this environs. There are about 400 Jewish families that we know of in this area in different professions and locals, in Veneto most Muslims live in Mestre, Connegliani and Padova. Muslims are mostly laborers and vendors from Morocco, Nigeria, Sudan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. In my research I discovered that the Muslim immigrants that have come to Italy left their "homes" in search of a better life largely for economic reasons. Their homelands have become an imaginary place where survival and return would be impossible economically. Jews in Italy have a home in Venice but one that is still smeared with symptomatic antisemiticism throughout Italian history; the low Jewish population reflects that home perhaps lays elsewhere.

In my brief analysis I look at two periods of history broadly using Jewish writing and Muslim interviews. This is by no means representative of all Muslims or Jews but it is uncanny to witness the similarities of being stigmatized by being Other through their Jewish and Muslim ----ness.

In our last few weeks we have discussed the duality of Jewish narrative and the characterizations of living as an Italian Jew in an enclosed place where at moments the bridge drops open to let in and out freely the passage of business and ideas. We have witnessed this in Modena, Svevo, Levi, Othello, Sara Sulam, Bassani, and clearly Calimani's text that explores this idea over and over again through Luzatto and other Rabbinic and public figures at the time of the ghetto. The Jewish ness of being exiled from a theological home into Diaspora then making a home, and again being extrapolated from that home and resulting with two homes: Israel and Italy reifies once again a mysterious manner in which history has reconstructed memory and home for Jews of Italy. Similarly, Muslims who have had a home that was colonized by the Europeans, co-opted in their religious values under missionaries, language, and culture have found themselves in a new place that is the very home of the colonizer. Here we witness a duality that speaks to Muslims who can reside in Italy but are given no direct council or representation in affairs of the state. The problem of proper representation is cited as the chief cause for the lack of recognition of Muslims as a religious community in a State agreement. The dilemma for the State is that once it recognizes one of the groups as representing the entire Islamic community, with powers to appoint Imams, administer money contributed to

religious denominations, etc., other groups may refuse to recognize that group's representative ness. The State's position is that it is "too early to conclude such an agreement with Muslims," until the Muslim community is rooted and proper representation emerges. Experts note that there are "rudiments" of dialogue between the State and Muslims, but that further efforts are necessary. Muslims have struggled between the two worlds of statehood and secular laws for centuries and today this religious ambivalence has become the cornerstone of rejecting the Muslim from the larger Italian culture. As Orhan Pamuk has said: we were able to accept into our home as a strange sort of background music to accompany our oscillations between East and West"

In my interviews the three subjects were very diverse and represented the three main continents of where Muslims reside and the consensus on how they viewed home, their own identity, and fitting into Italian culture was discussed. The new generation of Muslims in Italy defines their roles in society as primarily Muslims who are here to covertly practice their religion unlike their former generations who tried hard to assimilate and lose their connections to their homelands.

The Moroccan man saw his home as Rabat and Italy, his family had been here for 20 years and he was raised in Mestre. He saw home where he felt free to practice and speak Arabic and French. I asked him if French was a European language and he replied that it was a Moroccan French that was unique to his own community for generations. He also said that his race was a blinding factor in how people saw him in the streets of Venice and although he is not a street vendor people would ask him if he had any bags to sell. This notion of home and

homelessness in issues of race and religion are emblematic to the identity of Muslims today, a man who is black and is a Muslim sees home as Africa and Islam as the one community he has in Italy. My second interview was with a Bangladeshi woman whom I met on the Vaporetto who spoke very little of anything I understood but her husband translated for me, she is about 25 years old and has been here most of her life, she was married in Bangladesh via an arranged marriage and is very happy in Mestre. She feels that the Italians are nice except for when they stare at her since she wears the hijab which was her own decision to wear a few years ago. She is a student in Mestre and a laborer in Venice in Rialto at a restaurant. Her impression of other minorities like the Jews was moderate, she did not realize that any Jews lived in Venice and if they did she would assume they were wealthy. The third interview with a 14 year old Syrian boy was short but he was willing to speak with me as his mother stood by his side. He attends school and also goes to Quranic School where he learns the Qu'ran and on Sundays he plays with other Muslim children. During the week he is only with Italian children, and loves his friends, the only time that he was angry at his friends was when they supported the war in Iraq and then Syria was in the news when he got into an argument with them. He said they knew he was a Muslim because his mother wore a hijab.

My very limited interviews and research on Muslims was a starting point in understanding the duality and living in two worlds, as we call our world global we are more and more local with imaginary bridges that close at night and open up only for business.

In conclusion, the Jewish Ghetto can be seen as paradigmatic to the situation of Muslims in Mestre today ---the bridge that closed at night and opened during the day for business now rides on a bus away from the glitter of Venice to an ordinary and industrial area spotted with local Muslim and South Asian groceries, and cheap clothing stores. The Other of Europe as Jew and now Muslim resides in a site of memory that encloses upon us as we sit today in the Jewish Ghetto but we know that looking at Jewish and Muslim invisibility in Venice it would be important for us who admire Venetian culture to trace the imprints of Jewish and Muslim contributions in society. As the Shepard and father search in the mountains of a shared home perhaps they can also find a son or a goat deep in their Diaspora in Venice?