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**August 4th and Saving Face:
A Tango between Reality and Metaphor**

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Some things are only understood as we go through them. Many years ago, when I was studying the sociology of language, I was introduced to the politeness theory and how it ties to the notion of “face.” Each party to a conversation or interaction will strive to present the best image of themselves by preserving the image of the other. The Arabic phrase *yahfaz ma’u l-wajh*, literally “saving the water of the face,” i.e., to save face, showcases this dynamic. Another example is the Lebanese dialect’s *ybayeid*, “to whiten” one’s face by “whitening” the face of the other. Conversely, according to the theory, the worst plight that could fall upon us in a verbal interaction is to “lose face” – *yeswadd wejna* (“have our face blackened”) is another famous Lebanese phrase used like the English “to blacken someone’s name.” In this light, certain sayings, like the Arabic *qabaha Allahu wajhak*, “May God make you ugly,” sound very cruel. Back when I was still studying this however, I was totally oblivious to the fact that I will, one day – specifically on August 4th, 2020 – have the “privilege” of experiencing firsthand how these metaphors turn into reality.

It was 6pm, and I was having an evening coffee with my aunt at her house located in Gemmayze, one of the badly hit neighborhoods in the Beirut Port blast. I do not remember a thing of what happened, nor do I wish to remember, but I recall waking up from the coma my injury put me in.

- Where am I?
- At the hospital
- What happened?
- Something really huge. You’re better off not knowing... go back to sleep now.

Thus spoke the nurse, so I slept. Then I awoke again and noticed my blood-stained clothes lying on the chair facing my bed, and the word “brain” written in large Latin alphabet on my forearm. I discovered that I had literally, as in anatomically, “lost the water of my face:” I had fractures in my eye socket affecting the tear ducts and “water” no longer passed through.

It took me days to fully assimilate what had happened. I was lucky in a way that I could not remember, for physiological reasons, the trauma from the blast, although I do remember traumas of another kind such as statements by ministers and other officials in the aftermath of the blast.

Initially, I remember being happy; happy for not having lost my mental abilities, except my ability to focus and 24 hours of my memory (focus is back, but memory is still hard hit). That is why I answered anyone asking how I was with “I am well, thanks to God.”

I only understood too late that what I had lost is precisely what I had never learned to appreciate: that “face” which I had read about, in a previous life, when I was studying the sociology of language.

Despite the anger and grudge taking over me upon realizing the blast’s political dimensions, I was glad that only “my face” was hit. But those “older and wiser” than me, be it relatives, neighbors, or friends, understood the situation much quicker than I did. “I hope your face was not disfigured much” said a family friend over the phone; “When will you get some plastic surgery done?” a friend asked; “I had no idea it was this bad” said

another friend upon seeing my picture. I used to laugh from the bottom of my heart at the foolishness of thinking that losing the “face” is worse than losing the brain! I used to laugh because I had not fully understood the lessons from my studies in the sociology of language, nor had I discerned yet the bizarre intimate tango between reality and metaphor. But I would all too soon be getting a real taste of it.

After August 4th, I was introduced to various types of discrimination and was met with levels of rudeness I did not know existed. I was accused of shoplifting in one of Beirut’s shops just because my face no longer inspired trust. I was called dumb, out-loud, in another shop – this time in Germany – because I now needed more time to read things accurately. Not to mention the silent discrimination I came across in embassies, airports, and public administrations, experiencing in a few months’ time what visually impaired individuals experience daily under society’s complete disregard for their right to an inclusive environment.

In the first weeks, as I quickly decided to go back out into the world going about my “normal” activities, I was under the impression that I fully realized the extent of what had happened. I got that impression as people went past me in the streets, staring in disbelief at my face, as if no explosion had ripped through the city just a few weeks back. In reality, people did not know how to perceive the face they saw; it was disfigured, yes, but it did not resemble the weeping disfigured faces they see daily on TV screens. Lebanese media, even prior to August 4th, has always made a living out of misery porn. No one is interested in portraying the strength, steadfastness, and defiance in the faces of those presented exclusively as “victims;” their voices are muffled unless they are crying.

People do not expect to meet “face to face” with the victim of an explosion. It is easy for them to empathize with a disfigured face, remotely, through media channels or social media platforms. But they were not, and maybe still are not (or never will be), familiar with “face negotiation” – i.e., negotiating respect and politeness – with a physically disfigured face still insisting on saving its metaphorical face.

A week after the blast, I was taking care of some business in a public administration. I had not undergone yet the reconstructive surgery for my eye socket. A man beside me was inquiring about certain paperwork which I happened to know about. Forgetting that I had become faceless, that for the guy next to me I was, or should be, voiceless, I spontaneously answered his question. He ignored me, as if he had not heard me or as if I had not spoken. I did not react, for at that point, I was starting to understand.

But when I left Lebanon a few months later, things were different. It was beyond “pity” and the effect of “losing face” that lingers with it. I was met with a mix of automatic disrespect and unspoken aggressivity. It was, in some way or another, due to that “face” – now reconstructed and partially healed – being in a liminal state between familiar and unfamiliar, beautiful and ugly. Here, it is not ammonium nitrate that comes to people’s mind when they first lay eyes on me. It is “something” they cannot define, but I now know it is “something” intimately tied with what we [Arabs] call “water of the face.” With the new face I have, one which has lost to nitrate and bears its mark, I find myself having to renegotiate “my face.” From being a typical-looking woman trying hard (not always successfully) to be taken seriously by her interlocutor – instead of being perceived as

a child having fun – I went to being a creature fighting to have their place in “normal” conversations, struggling to lay the ground for an identity, a new face, one worth keeping.

That tango between metaphor and reality swings very sarcastically sometimes. Today, I can say that I have restored, to some extent, my metaphorical face through ongoing daily negotiations since August 2020, in order to impose my “pseudo-normal” face on people, shoving it in their faces and forcing them to respect it. This newly-gained skill in “face negotiation” – which I had not even dreamed of acquiring before – makes me think with sadness of all those who lost their “real” face to nitrate – and before that, to the economic crisis – and later lost their “metaphorical” face when dealing with society and with the media especially. Does being a victim automatically strips one of their human dignity? Does losing one’s face – or any other body part, their house, or their job, etc. – automatically strips them of their right to privacy and the due respect for their personal space? Was it not enough that corruption invaded our lives, destroyed our city, and damaged our bodies, only to have the media trample over our dignity and honor?

I especially remember this 4-year-old girl whose disfigured face was turned into a symbol by the media. A symbol of what exactly? Perhaps a certain patriarchy, or the belief that this little girl has symbolically lost her most valuable asset: the beauty of her face. Or perhaps is it a desecration of the child’s right to life, safety, security, and most importantly, to an “undisfigured” future. What it does symbolize, beyond any doubt, is the complete disregard for our dignity and the raging war against our “face” in all its meanings – linguistically, socially, and culturally.

Prior to August 4th, and even prior to protesters being directly targeted in the face and eyes by security forces, the media had already muddied our face and blackened our name¹ beyond repair by invading the privacy of the “miserable,” their homes and feelings, seeking nothing but a scoop. Face negotiation theory posits that one has a tacit face-saving agreement with the other. I preserve or save your ‘face’ by safeguarding your self-image from threatening words, behaviors, or signs; and in exchange, you do the same for me. A question begs itself here: Do you think the self-image of the people of Tripoli, and the image they wish to present to the world, is that of misery belts and extreme poverty? Or that of non-compliance with lockdowns in pandemic times? Has anyone bothered to do any face-negotiation work with the people of Tripoli? Or is it that their opinion is trivial, and what counts is how we portray them? Has anyone bothered to ask the women of Lebanon’s uprising whether the “face” they are trying to reflect is indeed the romantic/sexual one that they were branded with? Are the fantasies of media and spectators more important than the “face” of women? Who negotiated with the victims from the blast and their families about the “face” they wish to present?

¹ Far from a liberation/emancipation criticism of the political history and development of cultural/popular idioms in the Arabic language, these two sayings (muddied and blackened) are common in most Arabic-speaking regions, and what is contextually meant here is “discrediting” or “disparaging” the protesters in Lebanon by the media. In other words, the two sayings do not carry connotations of racial, ethnic or civilization superiority in the author’s intended context (Translation Manager).

The main point of face negotiation theory is that by the face-saving of the other, one would be saving their own face. That news bulletin editor who shamed citizens not abiding by the pandemic's protective measures calling them "brainless," was he aware that he was stepping out of his professional role and leaving himself open to rightful insults thrown back at him? The journalist who used the word "ugly people" in reference to those constantly criticizing the state, was she aware that she was breaking the tacit agreement protecting her from bullying? I wonder whether "opinion makers" realize that by breaking our faces they have been left with no face to lose.