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LENS (The Orange Houses)

*The Orange Houses* by Paul Griffin takes the lives of three teenagers, all experiencing struggles between their maintaining own identity and society’s stereotyping of their identity. Tamika (Mik) is caught between a world of sound and a world of silence. She blocks out the rest of the world as much as she can and gets by with out speaking often. Fatima is an illegal immigrant that must be self-sufficient in a country that is fairly unwelcoming to her. Jimmi, a honorably discharged war veteran, struggles with addiction and finds himself unable to readjust into “normal” society after the horrors he witnessed at war. Each of these individuals has had some significant, life-altering incident that has transformed their identity. Although Griffin does not dive too deeply into the characters’ pasts, I imagine that they were not picturing their lives would turn out the way that they do. They have all been stripped of something through their experiences. Illness has stripped Mik of her life as a fully hearing individual, Immigration has stripped Fatima of her culture and security, and War has Jimmi stripped of his innocence and sanity. These experiences have not only stripped them of their self-identity, but also of their societal identity (how the general public views them). They are all discriminated against, distrusted, and isolated from others in society because of their perceived circumstance. Even Mik is wary of trusting Fatima initially and Mik’s own family do not trust Jimmi, even though he saved her life. It is not until something else signicant happens to the characters that the outsiders are able to look beyond their perceptions of these individuals (and even then, not all).

One passage that I found particularly striking and relevant to these individuals’ struggle to define their identity was on page forty: “’Lovely headdress. What’s that like, being Islamic?’ ‘I am not Muslim’ ‘You’re not Christian.’ ‘No.’ ‘Then daggit, what are ya’ll?’ ‘I am human’” (40). Fatima is having a conversation with NaNa and Mik about who she is and how she defines herself. Nana assumes because Fatima wears a headdress and is foreign, she is Islamic. This judgment is probably similar to how the general public views Fatima as well. Fatima, most likely having experience with this issue, perceptively replies, “I am human.” This response really struck me, because Fatima’s religious background should not have any bearing on whether or not she can socialize with others and Fatima is not shy about stating it. She does not get offended or riled by the assumption; rather, she makes her statement simply and moves on.