

## Why Not You?

MAAHUM SHAHAB



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*WRITER'S COMMENT: Our prompt was to discuss a time we may have encountered a culture vastly different than our own. When I first read the assignment, I didn't know that I'd end up bearing some of my most personal feelings in a vulnerable account about my own heritage. Even now, my stomach churns at the thought of somebody reading my words and conflating harmful social systems with some of the deepest parts of my identity. I also recognize, however, that to stay silent about those who suffer most under these systems out of such fear hinders communities from making genuine, substantial progress. It is also true that progress is underway. I see it in the way young Pakistani women are actively combating sexism through social media, or the way women are demanding respect in everyday spaces. It is clear that more and more Pakistanis are standing up and joining the fight against misogyny in all of its ugly forms. Nevertheless, recounting and sharing these experiences and thoughts is necessary so that when we fight, we fight for all affected—not just those who can afford the fight.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: In the first assignment for UWP 102D: Writing in International Relations, students can write a traditional analysis essay or a reflective essay about experiencing a culture different from your own, using a former Prized Writing winning essay as a model: Rosa Klein-Baer's "For the Lost in Translation." Most students are content to write a traditional essay, but Maahum was more than ready for this challenge. Her past summers challenged her to see beyond the stereotypes of two disparate worlds and to wonder what her life might have been if she were raised in the land of her ancestors, as part of a different social class. As we worked on the draft, we began to*

*realize that the essay would go beyond my narrow page limit, because Maahum needed more room to beautifully express her wider view of the world.*

—Karma Waltonen, *University Writing Program*

The scent of soil was different there. Something about it just made it more earthy and natural than what I was used to. I sat there, giggling with my cousins, ice cream dripping onto my bare feet, as we soaked up the hot Pakistani sunlight on those black marble doorsteps in their front yard. We were all sticky and wet from both the humidity that enveloped us like a big hug and the sweat from having just finished a soccer—or as they insisted, football—game with the neighbors.

Coming back home was never fun. The ache that would sit in the back of my throat each time we'd finally land back at the San Francisco International Airport would linger on for days, and then reappear months later whenever I found myself to be stuck in, what I considered to be, a horribly American reality of routine, work, and school. I would long to be back in Pakistan, wanting to relive the summers where I could just walk with a group of kids to the corner markets and get whatever my nine-year-old heart desired. I'd miss the late nights on balconies, the exhilaration of meeting other children on the streets and immediately launching into games, and the showers of love and affection from all the relatives that I'd only get to receive in snippets. Despite how much my parents tried to preserve culture, it was hard to recreate those experiences in the boring California suburbs.

## Scarves and Blurred Lines

We tended to visit Pakistan every three years. The intervals don't seem drastic until you realize that no one prepared you for how different things would be when you jumped in age from nine to twelve.

I'd never been as aware of my body as I was that summer. It was the first time my dad ever commented on anything I wore—he didn't do it before the trip and stopped as soon as we reached our layover on the way back. But that summer, I was confused and bothered by the way he'd follow me around the house and tell me to wear a scarf over my regular clothes. Somehow, sheer fabric would make all the difference in how people perceived me. He pointed out that all the women in Pakistan

wore scarves, or *dupattas*, across their chests or on their shoulders out of “respect.”

I didn’t understand whom I was respecting. I wore it anyway.

I was familiar with the Islamic concept of modesty, but it hadn’t occurred to me that an accessory, regardless of whether it really “covered” anything or not, could make me seem more modest. It was because of this *dupatta* dilemma that I began to comprehend (as best as a twelve year old could) the difference between culture and religion. The false equating of one to the other was most clear when my dad didn’t feel the need to comment on my clothing anywhere else, even though religion applies across all borders; even at that age, I knew that meant he wasn’t actually doing so for religious reasons. It was the very textbook definition of blurred lines; nowhere in any scripture did Islamic law or theology dictate that all women should carry *dupattas* at all times, including in their own homes and around their own families. Modesty for both men and women is encouraged, just like prayer or fasting is—that is, no person has the right or authority to force another to practice these forms of worship, but they do exist as spiritual guidelines. However, those spiritual guidelines all come with reason. If you’re sick or elderly, you don’t need to fast during Ramadan; if you’re financially underprivileged, you’re exempt from performing Hajj (pilgrimage); if you’re around your own family, you don’t need to wear concealing clothing. Why would you?

Whoever created Pakistani culture certainly did not get that memo. In their own homes, women are generally expected to hide themselves away, constantly vigilant over the way they dress, sit, lie down, and even sleep. Pajama pants are a complete disgrace, and this was a shock to twelve-year-old me. For some reason, they are unacceptable for Pakistani women to walk around in within their homes. To this day, I’m baffled by this reality.

“Ammi,” I sometimes tease my mom when packing for our trips, perplexed by the reaction I know is coming, “what would you do if I wore PJs around your parents’ house?”

“*Khabardar*,” she’d warn with a stern, disapproving face. *Watch it.*

Of course, she’s never offered a logical explanation for why they’re so taboo any time I’ve pressed her about it. She empathizes, confused as to why she herself sees them as dirty. But she doesn’t have an answer.

I’m thankful that I grasped the stark differences between culture and religion as early as then. Had I conflated Pakistani traditions with Islam, I would’ve let go of what is now the dearest part of my identity: being Muslim.

I came back home that summer confused, but still attached to the memories I had made and looking forward to the next trip.

## The Streets

During the next trip we took in 2017, at the age of sixteen, I was gawked at for the first time. The streets of big cities like Rawalpindi gave me a reason to cling on to my *dupatta*, no matter how impractical it seemed.

“Yeah, I know it’s really weird,” my dad acknowledged when I first realized it aloud. “In American culture, when a child is staring, you tell them, ‘stop, that’s rude.’ But here, it’s just not considered rude. It’s just a normal thing.”

His explanation helped me worry less about random stares I’d get from the women and children around me, but it didn’t do anything to ease my discomfort about the men.

The men’s stares were different, often easing into sly, creepy grins when I’d meet their gazes. The raging feminist in me loathed being the one who’d have to break eye contact, but not doing so also meant they won—it meant provoking them further. There was no winning. You either let them stare, or you played into some game they enjoyed.

That summer, I was hyper aware of the eyes on me. My cousins must have realized the change too, because they would follow me everywhere, to every little corner of every market, their eyes constantly darting around to watch our surroundings. I felt powerless, and as much as I wanted to scream at them for acting like I needed protection, the sad reality was that I did need it. The only thing that usually warded off unwanted gawking was other men.

The worst instance of the gawking was while we were driving around the congested roads of Lahore, and I was seated by the window, eagerly trying to take in all of my surroundings. Cars honked all around us, the air was full of smog, and the heat clung heavy to the two families stuffed into the tiny sedan we were in. Road lanes and traffic rules mere suggestions in Pakistan, inches away from my car door were multiple cars and motorcycles.

I must’ve absentmindedly let my eyes rest on the man who was sitting on the back of a motorcycle, because I didn’t realize that he’d started grinning back at me, peering into the car window. He started making eyes and raising his eyebrows. I grew frustrated. Here I was, in a car full of family and relatives, and this man—who looked like he was in

his late twenties—considered it to be the perfect time to stare. As soon as our car started moving, I flashed up my middle finger, not breaking eye contact.

I didn't expect what came next: he patted his friend's back, and motioned with his hand toward me. They started following our car, he developed an angry expression, and then he turned his head to stare more obviously. My heart skipped a beat, and I shrunk back into the car, silently praying that we'd lose them without me having to tell anyone about the silent interaction. I pretended absolutely nothing happened, and when I was finally brave enough to sneak a look outside, I was relieved to see they were gone. Shaken up, I told myself to be thankful that a little bit of staring was the worst I'd experienced.

*So many women have been through so much worse.*

## **Marriam**

It is common practice in Pakistan for average, middle-class families to hire domestic help, possible thanks to enormous wealth gaps, poverty conditions, and overall economic instability. I was used to meeting servants hired at either of my relatives' homes who'd wait on the families.

Adjusting to living with servants was always difficult. Besides the strange looks I'd get when washing my own dishes after every meal without much thought, there's also the deep sense of shame I felt letting someone else do my work. This I considered to be one of the few American traits that I was proud of: self-sufficiency.

On that same trip of 2017, I met Kashaf, a live-in maid that my uncle's family had newly hired. I got along with her really well, and she had an older sister aura, which made it easy to be around her without feeling the awkwardness that I usually did. Although neither of us understood each other all too well (my broken Urdu was too slow; her dialect too fast), the bits we *were* able to exchange were always meaningful. I was surprised to know that she was Christian, and I figured that her religious experience could be similar to mine, seeing that we were both significant minorities in countries that were heavily influenced by the alternative religion. She also had two adorable daughters, ages one and three, whom I was fond of.

I mentioned all of this to my mom, telling her we should gift something to the three of them before we left Pakistan. I told her about how great it was to have a kind friend around the house when my cousins

were busy with school and work.

She chuckled and nodded, “You used to say the exact same thing about Marriam, remember her?”

*Marriam.* I’d totally forgotten about her. The memories from trips we’d taken years before stirred in my mind. Marriam was the daughter of a maid who would come to clean my grandparents’ house, and we were the same age. When we were six, she and I would get to play together after she finished helping her mother around the house. She was the only friend I had during summers in that house full of adults, and I admired her so much. I used to be insanely jealous of the colorful red long skirt she’d wear and the way it’d spread out like a princess’s dress when she twirled.

Excited at the memory, I exclaimed, “Oh yeah! We should visit next time we’re in Kahuta!”

My mom’s smile faded almost immediately. Her face flashed a strange, concerned look, and she turned away, attempting to change the subject.

“What?” I asked, “what is it?”

“Nothing. What do you want to eat—”

I was getting really confused. Was my mom, a devout Muslim woman who valued service to humanity so deeply, being elitist? Was she really upset that I wanted to know how Marriam was?

“—What’s wrong? You don’t like Marriam?”

“No, it’s not that—”

“—Then what is it? What happened to her?”

My mom looked at me, hesitated, and then started in a regretful tone, “Those people married the poor girl off when she was thirteen.” She searched my face for a trace of understanding, looking embarrassed.

I understood right then that she was embarrassed on behalf of the people who subscribed to a cultural system that she’d grown up around and was familiar with. In an attempt to preserve her culture, she had constantly tried to shield me from the stark differences that did exist between my world and the one she’d known her whole life. She was afraid of her own kid generalizing all of the culture which was an integral part of her. I was familiar with the feeling, often finding myself afraid to acknowledge the shortcomings of Pakistani culture to my peers in an attempt to not further perpetuate the stereotypes they already held.

Although I recognized her dilemma, I couldn’t mask my shock. Up

until that point, I'd lived in a bubble of seemingly equal opportunities and liberation.

"These people, the villagers, they are just like that," she explained. "When you two were little, I asked Marriam's mom which school she wanted to send her daughter to. She scoffed in my face and said, 'What good would ever come from sending *kudiyān* [chicks] to school?'"

My mom shook her head, sighing.

"I was so angry. I told her she should try to send her to school. It's these people—they are just uneducated and backward."

I implored her as to what my grandparents did about it, only to receive the answer I already knew: nothing could be done. Who were they supposed to call? The cops? What good would Pakistan's for-profit, broken policing system accomplish?

"They fired her mother, but there's not much else," she answered.

At this moment, the realities that I'd only read about in books and saw on the news settled under my nose. When I was a child, there was absolutely no difference between myself and Marriam. She might as well have been any other child I met out on the playground at recess. To realize that our life paths had diverged so loudly revealed to me my own privilege.

That night, as I tried to sleep on a thin mattress under the meek wind of a ceiling fan, I felt heavy with all the newfound discomfort I had navigating through Pakistan. I reflected on having to be constantly vigilant and fearful of my surroundings, and on the differences in how I was treated now versus when I was younger. On top of that, learning of the sinister fate of someone who I'd shared the same roof with was enough for that heaviness to resemble suffocation.

I finally admitted it to myself: I didn't want to be here anymore. A part of me broke off that day. I turned into my pillow and sobbed as quietly as I could, hating myself for feeling this way.

## **Saima**

The next day, I woke up ready with a plan: I was going to teach Kashaf's three-year-old daughter, Saima, the alphabet. I nagged at my younger cousin for some pens and paper, and brought Saima and her little sister inside the house from the front yard.

Saima's eyes immediately lit up when I handed them to her, and together we began tracing the letter "S."

I spelled out her name, pointed to her, and said in broken Urdu, “That’s your name, see! You try it!” She chirped up, excited and curious. Her mom watched, beaming from the kitchen.

Over the next few days, it grew more difficult to continue teaching them. My aunt didn’t want the girls inside the house because they got the seats dirty—their clothes were always old and soiled, and they carried an odor of sweat and dirt. I was stubborn, so I insisted that I’d continue to teach them outside on the marble steps. But dealing with a three-year-old’s attention span, the blazing hot sunlight, and the language barriers between us made it challenging at best.

By the end of my trip, I barely got through a few letters with her, but I didn’t care. My goal was to inspire Saima somehow, to make her perceive education as fun, exciting, and cool. I wanted her to grow up to fight for her education. Maybe Marriam could’ve done the same.

## **Back Again**

The most recent trip I had was this past summer. I arrived at my grandparents’ home from the airport in the early hours of the morning. To deal with the jetlag, my mom, aunt, and I decided to go for a walk.

I took in the scent of soil, the wetness of the air, and the sleepy orange hue on the horizon. For a moment, I felt at peace, excited for the days that were to come ahead.

Out of nowhere, a car came roaring toward us. A group of young men hollered out mortifying remarks, whooping and laughing. My mom yanked me back onto the sidewalk just in time for them to miss me by a foot, and then they sped off into the night.

Not three hours after I’d arrived from the airport, I had been catcalled for the first time in my life. That too, in one of the most secure and affluent neighborhoods in Pakistan. To say I was enraged is an understatement.

Later, I got to reunite with Saima. I clamored excitedly up the driveway to see her, only to find that she hadn’t grown much bigger than she was at three. Now, at seven, she rested her new infant brother on her hip, bobbing him up and down. I began to greet her, but she caught her little sister playing in the mud from the corner of her eye, and hurried over to scold her, all while soothing the baby in her arms. When I was seven, I didn’t know how to hold a baby.

I found out that she never started school.



“I tried to get her to,” my aunt insisted, “but she’s just not interested. What are we supposed to do?”

As she grows, Saima continues to take on more responsibility as her mother’s right-hand helper. As the eldest daughter, she’s needed to take care of her siblings and so many other things while her parents are working to put food on the table. Paying for a school that Saima would actually enjoy would actively hurt the family’s financial situation.

In the midst of all of this, it is Saima who is hurt the most. She will likely grow up to be trapped into an endless cycle of poverty. Dependency—on her parents and then her husband—will be her means to survival, putting her at a significantly high risk of abuse and violence.

## **Fading Glitter**

Over the years, the glitter of Pakistan faded away. As I prepare for another trip this summer, I have to keep reminding myself to keep everything that I’ve learned from my anthropology, sociology, and history classes at the forefront of my mind. I know that as someone who’s only been given an Orientalist and imperialist view on the Eastern world, I need to make a conscious effort to work against inequality ingrained into culture while still balancing cultural relativism as an ideal. Still, a sense of wariness and trepidation washes over me as I pack my *dupattas* into my carry-on.

The worst part about all of these feelings is that they don’t make me any more American. It feels that I don’t belong anywhere. I’m like a fish being taken out of the expansive ocean and put into a glass bowl. I yearn for a sense of appreciation for the wet and warm lands that my ancestors inhabited for centuries, the same land in which so many of them are buried—only to find myself somewhere far away, dry and foreign, unsure of who my descendants will be.

The scent of soil there is different.

When I picture the black marble steps in the front yard, I no longer see myself. I see Saima sitting there with matted hair and a baby not much smaller than herself in her lap. She sits alone, hours on end. Her skin glistens under the sweltering Pakistani sun and suffocating humidity. A few flies buzz around her, occasionally landing on the baby’s head, but she doesn’t bother swatting them away. She quietly looks straight ahead, and her piercing eyes scream at me: *why not you?*