



KHANDAAN, KHAANAA AND FINDING MY FOOTING IN THE پاکستانی DIASPORA

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Growing up, family and food were my main conduits to Pakistani culture. Desi khaanaa is my comfort food, my first choice, always. So much so that in my limited Urdu vocabulary there's only one full sentence, mujay bhokh lag rahee hai (I'm feeling hungry). Try as I might, I have yet to master cooking any of my favourite dishes – indeed, there have been many failed attempts at making daal. Which means on my trips home to London, my mum's fridge is readily filled with stacks of daal, chicken

biryani, aloo keema, raita—the joy! My love for this food runs deep, and has been shared amongst so many of my non-Pakistani nearest and dearest, from my oldest friend in France to my surrogate sister in New York.

Much of the time I spent with my Nani, was in her North London bedroom amidst thralls of shawls and trinkets. Her North London home felt like a portal to Pakistan, with fragrant spices filling the air, Persian rugs

covering the floors, rooms overflowing with family and friends. There is no place on Earth where I have felt such warmth and love—this was where my initial connection to Pakistan was forged.

Unsurprisingly, my most distinct memories of Nani have to do with food, particularly those of her waking me up in the middle of the night to feed me *namak para* or *shakar kandi*. She was unique in so many ways, but also performed the Desi trope of over-feeding and spoiling her grandchildren so well. My room of choice when visiting was always hers—I loved that she was a night owl, the sound of her pottering about was comforting as were the dramas of *Star Plus* playing in the background. It didn't matter that I only understood every three words of what they were saying, the fun of it was watching my Nani's reactions and laughter. Although fluent in English, she only ever spoke to me in Urdu, a stubbornness I am now grateful for—because although I can't really speak the language, I can for the most part understand it.

Now being here in Islamabad, there is a disconnect and frustration I feel about not being able to communicate in the national language, a language that is my heritage. But, I'm no stranger to these emotions, particularly as they relate to my roots. That's not to say I haven't loved and appreciated my life and surroundings thus far. Growing up in a small town in the south of France was beyond idyllic and privileged, filled with so many beautiful friendships and adventures. Nonetheless it was a predominantly white community; and for a very long time my mum, my sister and I were the only people of colour, the only Pakistanis. We felt that; my mum, more than us.

Until 16 years old, the faces, the books, the movies, and shows by which I was surrounded in my day to day only reflected and related to half of who I am. So naturally, I leant into that. Like most teenagers, I wanted to fit in, or be accepted, and my understanding of what that meant wasn't necessarily to embrace my British side but rather repress my Pakistani side.

Slowly but surely, this started to change when I left for boarding school in Wales. This school was probably as international as you could get, where I saw my fellow Pakistanis, but also my Palestinian, Syrian, Japanese, Venezuelan, etc. peers fiercely embracing their culture. We'd have events where anyone and everyone was given the floor to showcase their respective cultures. In a way this made me feel more disconnected, slightly detached from both of my nationalities. I never quite belonged to either. But bearing witness to other people's pride gave me hope for myself. This was pivotal, the narrative was shifting for me. When faced with the question, "Where are you from?" I was no longer hesitant. I felt that pride, not shame. But, I don't think I really embraced being Pakistani until I moved to New York for college. It's a journey that I'm still on. Physically and spiritually.

Speaking of the spiritual, for me, understanding this part of my identity has been inextricably intertwined with being Muslim. A tough pill to swallow, seeing as

my exposure to Islam has been inconsistent, and my relationship complicated. What I know of the Qur'an I picked up from a handful of Saturday mornings at Stanmore Masjid with my cousin's kids. She wears a hijab, and that would be the intended plan for her three daughters once they turned 9. My sister and I had an entirely different trajectory. We were raised knowing Mama believes in Allah, and Papa converted when they married as a gesture of love—in our household being Muslim felt more cultural than religious. I still struggle to distinguish the two. These major polarities within the immediate family have sometimes caused friction and frustration, felt from both sides—experiences that have tainted my connection to Islam, and incidentally to Pakistan. I feel like I've hit a bit of a wall with this, but I try to ground and rebuild my beliefs through introspection rather than these experiences with other people.

I write this sitting next to my grandfather in his Islamabad home. He is my physical anchor to Pakistan. Through his eyes, I have been lucky enough to experience some of this country's beauty and strength. He's taken me to the snowy peaks of Gilgit, the cherry orchards in Chitral, and the rolling Margalla Hills. I recall scoffing down spicy omelettes and parathas while overlooking the Galyat range, racing against the reappearance of bandar. Trips to Peshawar were always exciting, as we anticipated long overdue reunions with our cousins. Everyday were feasts prepared in honour of our arrival, as years would most likely go by before the next.

This visit has been particularly special, for it's the first time I've travelled to Pakistan alone, and as an adult. I went to Lahore, where I was stunned by all the sites, standing strong after thousands of years. From the Shahi Hamam, and Wazir Khan Mosque, to the Fort and Badshahi Mosque—each impressive in their own rights. On our drives to various engagements, my Aunt would point to different landmarks of her youth: the house the family lived in, the college where she met three of her dearest friends, one of whom we were currently staying with. I took it all in, the national and the personal history.

These few weeks I've spent in Islamabad have been especially peaceful and cathartic. Here, I've cherished a daily routine of quality time with my grandfather, from reading the daily papers under the morning sun and strolling along Trail I, to evening tea and sifting through photo albums. He's spent so much of his life here, so to be part of that, even for a short while feels so special.

Moments in between, I'll settle into my writing nook—a cherry wood rocking chair that I moved to face the lush trees that line Aga Khan Road. The words seem to flow easier here, there's been no shortage of inspiration. I can't help but attribute that to the warmth surrounding me in this house, where I feel generational love and strength.

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