

The culture we belong to impacts our way of thinking and views on certain situations in life. I am a “Third culture kid,” one who equally belongs to both backgrounds. Though I was born and brought up with the American culture, I equally inherited the Indian culture through the teachings of my parents. While researching the typical treatment and expectations of daughters in India, I found that many elders have thrown youth into the abyss of old fashioned customs affecting young women’s lives.

In my first painting of a nude model, the red vermillion on her hairline, the bridal clothes lain on the floor, and the freshly-stained henna visible on her hands indicate that she is newly wed. In my second painting, I painted a close-up of her bridal henna. The symbols on her hand introduce concepts like the “delicacy” of a woman’s body, the importance of God and religion, and individual decisions made by beings *other* than her self.

In the initial stages of my project, I wasn’t fully aware of the connection I’d create with my work. As a person who visits my native country very frequently, I have witnessed the pace at which India is evolving, which unfortunately is quite slow. In this diptych I took full authority of my own decisions. It is necessary for all women to determine their own lives and their own happiness. Once women are confident enough to take that stand, it will make all the difference in the world.

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India: the largest democratic country where the traditional values created by our ancestors are as important today as they were centuries ago. Where the air itself binds the old and young into one as the elderly did an exceptional job in passing down such respected views. India; when a cup of coffee in the rain next to a lake gives the residents immense pleasure rather than being cloistered in an air-conditioned, four-walled coffee joint. India: where the locals are as enthralled as the tourists by the allure of the heritage-steeped country.

However, with each praise comes an inevitable criticism; India: a country where, in order to preserve the traditions formulated centuries ago, the people unknowingly trap themselves in the past. It is a country so helplessly stuck in the past that only the upcoming generation has the ability to pull it out of the abyss its elders have created and jumped into; An abyss of poverty, lack of education and equality, and more. Then, there is America, a country that grows by the minute; new advances are made everyday and the main focus is and has always been the future. As a child who has had the opportunity to experience and be influenced by both India and America, a “third culture kid”¹, I have realized how paradoxical both countries are.

When most first generation immigrants come to the United States, they bring with them the ethics, cultural teachings, and values they wish to pass down to their children who will be considered *American* for the soul reason that they are born and brought up in the United States. They bring with them those teachings that will keep the Indian culture alive even in a foreign country, like respecting your elders in any circumstance and praying to God for everything we have in life. As I grew up, I grew accustomed to listening to the circumstances of my own parents’ upbringing, which were both intriguing and abominable. I knew my parents had easily adapted to the modern lifestyle that I was getting a front-seat view of, but I also realized the effort they were putting in to embed the core Indian cultural beliefs by taking frequent trips to India. Going to India as a child almost felt like going back several decades in a time machine. I wasn’t allowed to wear clothing that came above my knees or didn’t cover my shoulders, I had to be alert of my surroundings at all times, and I could never talk back to any elder under any circumstance. I never felt uncomfortable having to change according to the atmosphere, but I did always question why this wasn’t the case in America. Why was the environment, the people, the mentality all so different between two countries situated on the same planet?

Having experienced the best of both worlds, I was quick to understand that I had a choice of what I wanted to extrapolate from both countries. My parents had always taught me to pursue the occupation that would keep me happy in the long run, a phenomenon only comprehensible in America. However, they also imposed restrictions on me, many of them due to the fact that I was a girl, which made more sense in India. At first I was too young to oppose anything that came out of my parents’ mouth, like “Go change, I can see your entire cleavage” or “Never talk back to your elders, even if they are wrong.” But as I grew up, I wasn’t afraid to question certain things they would say, like the most frequent, infuriating statement, “What will others say.” In order to find the reasons behind all kinds of statements and sayings and why they are so strongly preached, I decided to perform my own research.

“We’ll go the *Mandir*² once you don’t have your period anymore.” ~ Several mothers in India, including my own.

Menstruation is, scientifically, the process in which a woman discharges blood and other materials from the lining of the uterus at intervals of about one lunar month from puberty until

¹ <http://www.tckworld.com>

² Hindu place of worship

menopause, except during pregnancy. It is, unlike what many Indians may believe, not related to pollutants in the female body. Centuries back in India and nearby countries, women had a severe role of looking after the house and children. Though the men of the family made an income, the women were believed to have an all-day shift. They had to cook, clean the house, look after their children, and support their husbands. When they would enter their cycle, they were expected to take complete rest in order to jump back into their 24-hour work shift as soon as it was over. Complete rest consisted of not entering a kitchen or even stepping out of the house. Gradually though, menstruation began to be condemned and looked upon as impure. Women were, “confined into their room during the menstrual days. They [had] separate sleeping beds, different clothes and different utensils for eating” all due to the fact that a woman’s body was said to be contaminated at the time. (Women Planet) Different items were used while performing daily life rituals so no other person in the family could be “unclean.” While interviewing a Jain nun, Sammi Sanmati Pragya Ji, I asked why women were deprived of the right to worship during their periods. She replied with, “When a woman is menstruating, the foul smell of the blood irritates the Devis and Devtas” (beings who fall right under the supreme god). In order to not anger the demigods, women shouldn’t step into worship areas. This belief, though not stated in the *Agama*³, is a belief passed down from our ancestors and is taken very seriously. Then again, Devis and Devtas do not restrict only women going through menstruation from worshipping or reading the *Agama*, but also disapprove of any forms of excretion, like a nose bleed or cut.

However, scientists have proven that menses does not contain the amount of filth that we believe it does. “‘Menses,’ the fancy term for your menstrual flow, is mostly made up of tissue that covers the walls of your uterus. This uterine lining, called endometrium, gets thick every month to prepare a... home for a fertilized egg. If pregnancy doesn’t occur, your uterus contracts to shed the lining..., which then “flows” out of your vagina” (Refinery29). A woman does not release the *filth*, but rather what is unnecessary for the body to hold. Furthermore, for those who still stick to their belief that women should stay out of temples while cleansing their bodies, then they should also take in account that men have no such way of doing the same. In that case, their bodies must always be contaminated, which should result in a rule of not stepping in a temple for their entire lives. But, that is not the case. Society has unknowingly created double standards for gender. Also, in response to Sanmati Pragya Ji, menstrual blood does not contain a smell of its own. Menstrual products keep the blood from drying, which is the same as if one were to leave human blood out in contact to the air for several hours. With all that noted, it is important to realize that being grateful to God, or anyone in that case, never requires a certain body type or circumstance. People in India and surrounding countries are indirectly stating that periods are not a natural state or element in women’s lives by depriving them of the right to complete any daily practice due to them entering their mature years. Theists everywhere can agree that God has never discriminated between race, gender, or age. Humans themselves have created boundaries and rules for their own satisfaction that cannot be broken. However, it should be left to an individual to decide what they wish to believe, and how they decide to act upon it. After hearing the restriction of only entering the temple when I wasn’t on my period several times until it was rooted in my brain, I could only respond by asking why God would not accept my gratitude towards Him due to my womanhood. That brought upon several other questions, one of them being why the topic of virginity was still condemned in India.

³ Jain holy book

“You aren’t considered pure if you lose your virginity before marriage.” ~ A countless number of people in India and other countries.

India had been a wealthy country in terms of spices and silk, but was also very rich in upholding their values and religious beliefs. After the British invasion, India did lose its gold and spices, but firmly held on to the ideals taught to woman, one of them being shame and fragility. Only a few decades ago, a woman could only face her elders with a see-through scarf draped over her face. Even today, some elders in a family believe that women should lower their heads or behave softly when talking to others out of respect. It isn’t a feeling, rather it is a state of being that a woman should always be in, which includes not talking about any topic that may seem inappropriate, one of them being virginity. When a country is not completely ready to face a problem, it becomes all the more difficult to solve it, and India is not ready to take any initiative to solve the problem. Likewise, many people feel uncomfortable talking about such a topic in front of women because of the common thinking that they are too fragile to discuss such a topic and, ultimately, not educating themselves. Sanmati Pragya Ji spoke on behalf of the entire Indian culture when she stated that a woman is much stronger than a man because her role in life is to “flourish the seed that a man plants,” which has a number of different meanings. She added that women should take care of their morality because they hold the power of conceiving the upcoming generation.

Conversely, many people overlook the power of a woman due to lack of modernity. For example, in 2005, when discussing about AIDS and HIV in an interview, South Indian actress Khushboo declared, “No educated man would expect his fiancée to be a virgin.” In response to her remark, angry protestors harassed the actress at her residence and even threw eggs and shoes at her when she was brought to court for having said something so offensive to the Tamil culture (NDTV). It took over five years for all twenty-two cases to be dismissed against her, but the commentary for her remark hasn’t been let go by conservatives. Khushboo’s comment is considered true and would hold no valid reason to hype in the news in the United States, but due to the tremendously slow social evolution in India, the actress had to face consequences due to freedom of speech. Being the largest democracy, India is, for the most part, open to hearing different views of each case. However, that rule is not applied when the case conflicts with the traditional views of the country. In many cases, like Khushboo’s, personal beliefs trump over what is actually right in the situation. And in such cases when the judge favors the right side, a person still has to face consequences through society’s harsh words, thoughts, and/or actions.

If not already completely absurd, India also has double standards when it comes to sex. Not long ago, “The India Today Group-MDRA 2013 sex survey indicat[ed]... that even though men are three times more likely to have premarital sex than women, at least 77 per cent of men still insist on a blushing “virgin bride” (Banerji). This survey suggests that those men believe that sexual intercourse isn’t as important to a woman as it is to a man, which also indirectly leads people to believe that a woman’s body isn’t entirely hers and it isn’t her decision as to what she wants to do with it. Unfortunately, because women are convinced that this phenomenon is true and that they won’t be considered *innocent* or fit the qualifications of a man, they tend to get hymen reconstruction surgery, or in their definition, “re-virgination” (Times Of India). These results also prove that those who believe that something as minute and small as virginity can define a person have forced women to keep their bodies a specific way. Women are pressured into going through surgery just for the satisfaction of those men to which this rule of virginity doesn’t apply to. Two actresses, Radhika Vaz and Nadia Manzoor, from a web comedy series, “Walking the Line Between Hipsters and Hijabis,” gave their opinion on the topic of virginity,

summing up how many Indian girls feel today. Nadia Manzoor, one of the actresses stated, “It's this expectation that a woman is supposed to be pure, untouched, so that she's worthy of a man. [Virginity] being why a woman is worthy. To me, it just diminishes us as human beings” (Fresh Air). Without realizing it, my mother was contradicting herself when she taught me that marriage was a commitment made strictly from the mind and heart but also told me that sexual contact with a partner before marriage was intolerable. After several years, I have yet to understand why I'm considered unadulterated if I lose my virginity to a man whose skin I touch before he does my heart.

Along with menstruation and virginity, conceiving children for a woman plays a similar role in her life. Up until about a decade ago, women had one priority: conceiving children. From a young age, many women (even in the west), including my own mother, are taught that in order to have a prosperous life, one must be married and become a mother. With that idea hammered into their brain, many of these women didn't feel the need to set other goals for themselves other than just finding a potential husband who could provide for the family, an idea that worked well with the men. This lifestyle worked fine with both genders in the beginning, which was why it has been passed down until today. When talking to Sanmati Pragya Ji, she informed me that the general reason of birthing children is that, “There is a sort of ownership for the parents. It gives psychological satisfaction.” In most cases in India, children are taught to be successful, get married, and take care of their parents during their old age. This gives parents the perfect reason to believe that they will have a long, happy life. However, it is 2016, and the same aspirations of women that made sense years ago don't entirely comply with women today. Today, women want to be able to lead their own balanced and independent lives with the complete authority to decide what they really want in life.

Currently, many women want to work full time jobs, travel, start their own businesses, do things that every man is expected to do, and many times having a child can hinder that dream. One must not forget that the brain controls all desires and objectives. If a person, male or female in that case, wants to pursue a career or has other plans in life, being pressured into having children can cause turmoil in the future. One puts the childhood of a human being at risk along with their own life. Having heard the inevitable lecture my family gave to many of my cousins about never achieving happiness if they didn't raise a child, I always wondered what I would say when it was my turn. I never thought about whether I wanted children or not, but I knew that I wanted to be able to choose for myself when the time came. More importantly, I wanted my family to support whatever decision I made. After much thought, I realized that if any nosy aunt came to give me the talk about conceiving children, I'd confidently reply with, “My family will grow much larger than yours. But mine will not grow by reproducing what I am not ready for. It will grow from the love I will give and the love I will receive without asking for it. My family will not grow by giving a human an undeserving childhood, but it will grow from the experiences I will have shared with the right person. A group of unhappy people living together is not a family. A family is the right amount of people living together in the happiest way possible.” As every person's life holds a meaning in the world, I want myself to discover my own independently. I'd want a majority say in whether I want children or not, just like I want the majority say in who I would want to marry.

Ever since I was old enough to understand the concept of marriage, I knew that my parents would be the ones who had a complete say in who I'd marry. When I told several of my friends about this idea, they had mixed reviews. Some thought that my job was made easier by my parents while others thought it was completely outrageous, but I understood the thought

process of my parents. In India, a marriage isn't between two people; rather it is between two families, two communities. It is a promise that no matter what happens in one side of the family, the other will always be there to support, celebrate, and mourn with. That is why it is very important for the entire family to approve of the other partner and his or her family.

Most arranged marriages are also equal in terms of class and society standards. A family only searches for a boy or girl who has the same background and financial standings as them. Many times, the family denies a marriage proposal because they don't approve of the other family's culture, religion, or class, and sometimes even physical appearances (Arranged Marriages). For example, my uncle, the only person left to get married in his generation, has had the pressure of finding a girl for several years now. Finally when he fell in love with a girl, he was afraid to tell his family, knowing they wouldn't like her. When asked why he thought that, he replied saying that she was too short for him and they would not look well-matched standing together. I found it very difficult to understand why appearance was given equal importance to compatibility in terms of love and affection towards one another.

Though with so many rules and restrictions, it is proven that arranged marriages have a more successful rate than love marriages. In this case, success is measured in divorce rates. When I asked my parents why, they said the reason was because there is so much to learn about each other over the years, which is somewhat correct, but not entirely. Statistics show that "While forty to fifty percent of couples in the United States and Canada find themselves part of divorce rates, arranged marriage statistics show us an average divorce rate of 4 percent. [However]... this figure is hotly debated because many point out that cultures partaking in these types of relationships do not support divorce" (EverythingEngagement). Indian partners are repeatedly told to "work it out" when problems get out of hand, even if the crisis is extreme. The societal remarks about a divorcee are the most concerning to many families. As I grew up with an amalgam of opinions and regulations, I began to think of this entire concept as a contest. Marriage is a competition, and the only way to win is to find a boy who is exceptional in his studies, earns more money than he could possibly need in his life, and has a fair complexion. He must be slightly taller than me so we can seem compatible to the viewer. But nowhere in the rulebook can it mention to make sure he has a sentimental side. Nowhere is it mentioned to ask whether emotions will overpower logic when we will have disputes at the darkest hour of the night, or if he is trustworthy of the silly secrets I may spill out from time to time. And whatever happens, the rules cannot make sure to know whether the police sirens will blare in the middle of the night due to our fights or our passion for each other. Though the biggest and most important rule every person should note is to make sure that the next-door neighbor thinks he's the perfect husband. Family is a group of people who can always point out any mistakes and can stop someone from following the wrong path. They should definitely be able to approve or disapprove of ones life choices, not make choices for them. Ultimately it is the people who will be sharing experiences who need to make the decision of who they want to spend it with.

After having researched about many of these cultural values and sayings, I understood that they have only been passed down because they were effective at one point. Now though, it is 2016, and it is time to let go of any way of life that will get in the way of moving forward. My trips to India always consisted of participating in practices that portrayed the lifestyle of our ancestors and couldn't be shown anywhere else in the world, but they also consisted of adults passing down their close-minded views to me. This is where a line should be drawn.

Society in India needs to meet at a point where they are able to discard every view that blocks a child from making her/his own decisions while still keeping the culture alive. It was

quite later that I understood the privilege I had of being born in such a broadminded family. My parents chose to move forward and change their views as life progressed. They took the initiative to understand my thoughts and not only compromise their teachings, but learn from mine as well. It would have been very much possible that I would be one to stand by all these common sayings if I had been born in a prejudiced family. Hinduism and Jainism, two of the many religions followed in India have both gods and goddesses. In Hinduism, it is believed that education, wealth, and success in life is all gifted by our goddesses (Sanatan Society). Muslims believe that god itself has no gender, and Sikhism teaches its women to be warriors (Dr. Zakir Naik). The majority of people in India will say they believe in equality and the right to make individual choices, yet will look down upon the natural state of a woman and her decision to live life on her own terms. Rupi Kaur, in her debut book, *Milk And Honey*, wrote that she was told by her father, "The closest thing to god on this earth is a woman's body it's where life comes from..." (Kaur 45) Women possess more power than they are credited for; all they need to do is convince themselves of this fact, and then have others watch as they bring beneficial changes to the world.

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