

Culture is a Distant Relative

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Culture is like a distant relative: you belong with them but do not know their true self. My relationship with culture is complicated; we are like a couple on the verge of divorcing and are like spouses who do not understand each other. While growing up I realized that we as Pakistani Muslims have instilled certain values, traditions and celebrations that we adhere to. However, neither my brother nor I comprehended the meaning behind them. We saw Eid as an event where we visited our relatives and received money in return and did not know the purpose of Eid itself. Eventually, I had to research the reason behind a celebration I had taken part in all my life.

It was not only the celebrations that were alien to us but also the language which I had spoken and heard since birth. Urdu is our country's national language, a representation of the struggle our ancestors faced; however, I can barely form a coherent sentence in it. I believe this is the situation for many of my peers. In our 7th grade, we dreaded the Urdu period and joked about how horrible we were at our own language. I can positively say that this uninformed view of our culture is not the fault of our generation but instead the fault of our teachers and parents who failed to educate us as we grew up. It was not the job of our young selves to research and understand our culture but was the task of the generations before to guide us through it.

The question I ask you today is why are we allowing our youth to forget the culture our ancestors worked hard to establish and why are we not giving it the importance it deserves?

In modern Pakistan, you are required to have a good grasp on English just to ensure a medium level job. Not only that but in school, Urdu is prohibited to be spoken outside of the designated class. Not wearing the latest western trend is considered shabby and low-class, and bringing traditional homemade food to school is like pasting a target on your back for bullying. When asked about our favorite poets, we name William Shakespeare or Charles Dickens instead of Pakistani poets such as Allama Iqbal, who has contributed largely to establish and strengthen Pakistani culture in his own way. Why is it that mentioning Pakistani culture is now considered a taboo?

An answer for this question can be the western media and community's one-sided perception of us. When a person wears shalwar kameez in a western world, they are labeled as "taliban". Wearing our culture makes us a target for harassment, abuse and in serious cases, assault. This has not only instilled fear in Pakistanis living abroad but has also instilled hate for our culture among Pakistanis living in Pakistan. This representation of our people in the western world has caused shame in us.

While forgetting our culture is mainly a devastating fact of our generation, is it possible that disregarding certain parts of our culture is sometimes morally correct? Many people might deny it, but patriarchy can also be considered part of our culture. For centuries, women have been at home while men remain out working. This had been a common practice in Pakistan until a few years ago. Denying the part of our culture which forces women to remain confined is not wrong or contrasting to our cultural norms in any way. Adding to that, the tradition of "honor" killing the women who bring shame to their family, by either asking for divorce or by voicing out their choices, is nothing to be proud of either.

Not only are there injustices for adult women but the tradition of child marriages is also largely present in our country. The ages of these children can go down to 5 in some parts of Pakistan and the ages of the groom can go up to 80. On the topic of marriages, the stigma around divorce and separation is also an extremely toxic trait of Pakistani culture. Several men and women suffer in these trapped and sometimes abusive relationships leading to depression, marital rape, physical and emotional pressure eventually leading to suicide in extreme cases. While culture is not to be forgotten, its toxic traits should be eliminated from any society we belong to.

Acknowledging the incomprehensible parts of our culture is important to strive towards a better future. While understanding and owning our culture might include uncomfortable conversations with our parents, grand-parents or even ourselves, it is important for us in order to preserve the traditions that have been long upheld by our ancestors.