

The Blood in My Veins

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“The wave of the future is not the conquest of the world by a single dogmatic creed, but the liberation of the diverse energies of free nations and free men.”

-John F. Kennedy

We are defined by our culture; our actions, our beliefs, the mediums we use to express ourselves. Our culture is who we are. It is woven into the sole fabric of our entire existence. It is the language of the subconscious mind.

Culture is as good a part of us as the blood that flows through our veins. We are connected to our ancestors by blood, just as we are by our culture. The customs that have been passed down from generation to generation have shaped us into who we are today. But culture too, is subject to change. As Chuck Palahniuk once said, *“To merely observe your culture without contributing to it seems very close to existing as a ghost.”* Because culture is influenced by us just as we are influenced by it.

In modern times, culture means diversity. Diversity is seen with the change of time, climate, geographical location and so on. The European culture is different from the Indian culture, and the Indian culture is different from that of the American. When I imagine Europeans, I picture snow, thick boots, the smell of cookies and brewing coffee. And when I imagine Indians, I picture lights, music, colors and sweets. It’s just what comes to my mind because those factors represent them; those are aspects of their cultures.

When I think of my culture; the Bengali culture, I picture numerous colorful kites in the infinite blue sky, I picture millions of people wearing red and white on Bengali New Years, I can hear the sound of fishes frying on the pan and the aroma of water soaked rice that has just been served. When I think of my culture, I imagine men walking out of mosques and sharing greetings on Eid days, I imagine women with gorgeous henna on their hands and I imagine little kids burning crackers and the sounds of their joyous laughter.

When I think of my culture and how it has influenced my life, I think of the tea I crave every morning and evening. I think of the clothes I wear that are so very different from the ones I see people wearing on the shows on Netflix. I think of the hotchpotch my mum makes on rainy days when the sky is all gloomy, because hotchpotch is my favorite just as it is my dad’s. I think of the way I greet people with *“Assalamu Alaikum”* (May peace be upon you) instead of bowing like I’ve seen the Japanese do, or waving like the Americans do.

And I think this is the best because this is what I'm accustomed to, this is what I've grown up seeing my mother and grandmother and great-grandmother do. This has a sense of familiarity and homely comfort because we all have the same habits and we view a lot of things similarly, they understand me because we speak the same language, like the same food, wear the same clothes and we are connected not only by the same blood, but by the same culture.

I spent a large part of my childhood growing up in Russia when my dad was transferred to the Bangladesh Embassy in Moscow. And I remember being surprised seeing a civilization covered in snow where the sun peeked through the gaps between buildings that pierced the sky. Because my 1st grade textbook had taught me that Russians lived in Igloos and they travelled on sledges. I was mesmerized by the subway they called Metro and the trains they called Monorails. Although back then I was too young to understand, but now I know that industrialization had changed them too, as they evolved from Igloos to Buildings and sledges to trains or buses. Perhaps it is how Johan Huizinga said, *"If we are to preserve culture then we must continue to create it."*

In my 3 years of living in Moscow, I got to discover a lot more about their culture. Starting from Matryoshka dolls to their folk costumes and various types of food items that I can still feel the taste of when I close my eyes and reminisce those moments that are etched into the pages of my memory. The people there talked in Russian, a language that 8 year old me was unaccustomed to. They drank Vodka in celebration and hosted Shashlik parties during Summer. They danced in a way I've never witnessed before and sang folk songs that touched by heart despite not being able to decipher the foreign words. They were so very different from everything I was used to but somehow I was content, I was happy and I felt welcome there.

When I think back, I realize that maybe they weren't so different from me after all. Despite the cultural differences, we were all connected by our humane aspects. We wept when in dismay and laughed in happiness. We mourned in pain and rejoiced in celebration. There were strangers who helped me when I was struggling to cope with the new environment and there were friends who stayed by my side. Henry Ward Beecher once said, *"That is true culture which helps us to work for the social betterment of all."* And I wondered that maybe despite our differences in language and culture and race and religion, we originated from the same ancestors. Maybe some hundred years ago one of my ancestor and the white Russian girl's ancestor were brothers under the same roof. Maybe they were sundered in a war. Maybe they travelled to separate continents and continued their lives. Maybe we are all descendants of the same ancestors and despite our differences we are all one and the same.

The Russian culture influenced me and I can feel it in the way I like to wake up to cereal for breakfast now and mayonnaise-salad for dinner. I feel it in the way my accent has changed and how my views often tend to clash with those of my cousins' here in Bangladesh now. We are the

same blood, but I have more or less adapted to new cultures. Some aspects of Russian culture will always be a part of me and despite that, if I were to choose, I'd always pick a warm cup of tea over a steaming mug of hot chocolate. I still admire Russians, but Bangladesh is my home and the Bengali culture is who I am and who I always will to be.

Like Marcus Gravelly once said, *"A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree without roots."*

I am grateful to my family for teaching me my customs and telling me about the history of my origins, for making me feel connected, feel like I belong and to have something that I can call my own. My culture is my identity and it flows through me like the blood in my veins, a constant reminder of my origins and who I am. And without it, I wouldn't know myself.