

Ep. 13 - Shireen Ahmed

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik. I'm canvassing the world for the most interesting people, to hear about their journeys, their work, and what it means to be alive in the world today. And perhaps nobody has captured that experience, of being alive, better than the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi in his poem, "The Guest House."

FEMALE VOICE:

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

So welcome to *This Being Human*. A podcast inspired by Rumi's words and motivated by all those who carry that message forward in the world today. Today, sports journalist, Shireen Ahmed.

SHIREEN AHMED:

I think that's one of the things why sports was so beautiful for me. All the things that I was told, maybe, covertly, not to be in the community or not to be in school, was welcome. So, it was a place where when I felt so on the margins in Halifax in the eighties, I felt welcome there.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Shireen Ahmed has been advocating for better inclusion in sports and sports media for over a decade. She grew up in Halifax to Pakistani parents and got into sports early in life. Long before Nike sold sweat-wicking sports hijabs, Shireen decided to start wearing a hijab during soccer games. So in 2007, when FIFA banned hijabs on the playing field, it affected her personally. And it propelled her down the road to advocacy. A few years later she started a blog called *Tales From a Hijabi Footballer*, writing about sports, often with a focus on race and gender. In 2014, when FIFA reversed the ban on hijabs, it was a major win. But Shireen had a hard time celebrating. Here's a passage from a piece she wrote in the *Huffington Post*:

How can I laud FIFA for striking down a law that should never have been implemented in the first place? How can I be grateful for someone allowing me to do what I should have always been allowed to do? Why was I made to choose? How can you choose between your heart and soul? Thank God my daughter won't have to face that choice.

The piece went viral, and it launched her into greater prominence. She's since become a go-to voice for *TSN* and *The Guardian*, she's won awards and given a *TEDx* talk. She co-hosts a sports podcast of her own, called *Burn It All Down*. And she's a longtime friend of mine.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Shireen, tell me that first time when you knew that sports were going to be a big part of your life. Was there a moment where it clicked in and you said, "wow, this is where I belong?"

SHIREEN AHMED:

I don't think it was one moment, I think it had always, had always just been a part of my life. I mean, I think I came from a nontraditional place that my parents were both extremely athletic. My mother was like the table tennis champion of Clover Medical College, '66, '67. And like it was just understood that that would happen. There would be a spiritual component of your upkeep. There was a physical component. There was a mental component. And my father was a firm believer in balance. You know, he rowed at the Karachi Boat Club in the fifties, but he was not allowed to row crew because the white people wouldn't let him row with them, so he learned how to scull and he sculled on his own and with his brother. So we have, all of us have these really weird connections to sport and with discrimination. And it's really interesting. He was very happy to see me -- I mean, there was obviously the back and forth when I was a teenager about, are you going to wear shorts? Like, are you gonna wear pants? I'm gonna wear shorts. Eventually I was just like, I'm just going to not tell you about it and just do it anyway [laughs], so, which is how I operated in some spaces. I remember I had practice, I was playing rugby for my -- I was scrum-half -- and I saw this uncle drive by and I was like, oh my God, he's going to tell my parents. And then by the time I got home, my parents already knew that I was wearing shorts. "She was wearing shorts." So it was like, oh, God. And then I was like, my defense was I had a long sleeve shirt on. So, like, is that okay? And then I had socks up to my knees. So, like, uncle would have really had to stare to see, you know. But anyways, bless that uncle. And, you know, when I got to a point of just wearing hijab on my own, I think my family was a little flummoxed. They didn't know what to do.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

That decision, to wear a hijab, came in Shireen's early adult life. It was 1997. She was enrolled at the University of Toronto, where she had been playing varsity soccer. She left town to attend a conference of the Islamic Society of North America. And on the way back, she made the decision. From now on, she would wear a hijab. She didn't know the implications that would have for her, that it would create friction between her, her coach, and her teammates, to the point where she stopped playing the game she loved most.

SHIREEN AHMED:

It was just a very quick thing for me. It was just a very specific moment. I remember driving back from Chicago to Toronto, being on the highway and thinking, at what point do I take this off? At what point do I unravel, and unravel spiritually, unravel personally, not just the physical scarf. So I kept it on. So, the timing was very bizarre. I was co-chair of frosh week, so I attended all the frosh week events, wearing hijab for the first time, which was hilarious and true to form. But soccer was one of the things that I didn't realize I would have to give up. There was no rule saying that I couldn't wear hijab, but there was nothing saying that I could wear it. And football in particular is quite a stickler in terms of legality and semantics. So there was nothing to say that you couldn't, but it would be up to the discretion of the official. And fast forward to 2007, Asmahan Mansour, who was a young woman from Ontario playing at a tournament in Quebec.

She wasn't allowed to play with it on and it elevated and it escalated all the way to Canada Soccer, which to this day continues to be useless on many things, including gender and intersections of culture and religion. But they just said we don't know what to do with this. They gave it to FIFA. FIFA very quickly said no, because that's their visceral reaction when you have a room full of men who are all too happy to opine on women -- women's clothing, just were like no. Danger. It's dangerous. I spent 10 years almost looking for any iota of information from different football associations around the world, by emailing them and in two cases I actually wrote letters. And there is not one case or incident at which a football association had been reported a hijab hurting a player or an opponent. There was definitely issues in cases of jewelry, ponytails and elastics hitting people and that could... there was nothing about hijab. So it really wasn't about it wasn't about injury. It wasn't about harm. It was about controlling what women wear. And it was a deliberate exclusion.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

For years, Shireen spoke out against the ban. The issue would occasionally reach the mainstream, like when the Iranian National Women's team was banned from a qualifying match in the 2012 Olympics, since their gear was deemed not suitable. It took almost seven years, but FIFA finally reversed their position in March, 2014. After all that time, Shireen didn't feel like a celebration was in order. She wrote about her feelings on her blog, which the Huffington Post republished to a wider audience.

SHIREEN AHMED:

I just had all these feelings and I talked about being exhausted. I was very, very tired. I think one thing that I know and I have the language for now and I didn't have then, was about the emotional labor involved in this kind of work. It's the discussions, the toil, the psychosocial interactions that you have to have, the constant explanations, the justifications for why I belong. And this is inter-community and intra-community. So it's like people telling me, well women shouldn't be running anyway. People telling me, well, Muslim women should, you know, only play in - under these conditions, or should only be with female officials or in a segregated space. I don't have time to get into those details. What I know is that, let's start with basic inclusion. Let's just start there, because that was even not allowed and any sanctioned league was considered impermissible by FIFA standards. I was very tired and I just felt that this was something that didn't have to happen. And for FIFA and Jerome Valcke at the time, who was Secretary General, just to turn around and make an announcement that, okay, we're good to go, made me feel like it was so reductive. Okay, let's keep moving forward. But what about the healing that comes from that time of being ripped away from something I loved? And I mean, I never really thought about it until it was done. And then I could sit back, exhale, and I think I cried my eyes out and they weren't necessarily tears of joy. It was very emotional for me that like just to be validated in the swing, why did I have to rely on this group of men in Switzerland to validate who I am? Playing soccer is very much and always been part of my identity. And then to have to say, well, I want to believe in this. I believe in this hijab. I want it for me, but then have to choose, like that's just not a decision anyone should ever have to make. My mentor, Dave Zirin, had reached out to me after seeing the piece go viral. And he says, "you will be on my show and we will talk about this." Because it's something that might have been reported, but

no one had ever thought in the sports community to look to Muslim women to speak for themselves. I mean, it just was unfathomable at that point. I'm very happy to say that now that's not the case. But five years ago was very different. Six years ago now, it was very, very different. And the landscape has changed. I get emails regularly from young Muslim women who are aspiring journalists and sports journalists who are like, we can't believe that we see you talking because we just didn't think it was possible and I didn't think of it as people are like, are you doing your dream career? And sadly, no, because I didn't even think this was a possibility.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

For Shireen, the FIFA ban was just one battle. There were many others left to fight. Other sports still didn't allow hijabs. And there were other issues around inequality that Shireen was now writing about. So she kept going, fighting for more inclusive policies in sports across the board.

SHIREEN AHMED:

I was going to go after a FIVB -- volleyball. I was going to go after AIBA -- boxing. I'm going to go after all of them Abdurs, you know that. And gonna hit it where it needs to. My specialist and my research has been on Muslim women in sport. Absolutely. But that translates into being able to comment on other things like gender and race and the intersections, which is desperately needed. Because, you know, according to the Women's Media Center in New York, who do grades, they grade a media industry in North America predominantly. And 90 percent of my industry is white, able-bodied cis-het men. So that's who's talking about these issues. And I'm finally like, nope, I'm going to talk to myself. And then very often those stories will be peppered with comments like, oh, "these voiceless women." I will object to this idea of "voiceless." And there's this quote that has stuck with me and will always stay with me. And, "there is no such thing as the voiceless. There are only the deliberately silenced or the preferably unheard." And that's Arundhati Roy. And she was speaking specifically about this idea of agency and who we speak for. I don't need to speak for anybody. I'm privileged that people trust me with their stories and I can report fairly on what's happening and I can opine if I'm asked to, or comment. And I do presentations about the history of Muslim women in sport, do my own research about it, and, you know, leading back into the beginning of the 20th century and people don't know this. It's like part of history that's been erased. So I'm just here to be like, here it is.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You know, every hero has their origin story. And I want to take you back to some of, some of, some earlier memories living in a Pakistani household in Halifax where you were born. Were you always this outspoken even when you were growing up?

SHIREEN AHMED:

Yeah, I think that's one of the things why sports was so beautiful for me, because my tenacity and my boldness was something that was appreciated in the role of a striker. So all the things that I was told, maybe, covertly not to be in the community or not to be in school, was welcome. I was told to communicate. I had no issues communicating on the pitch. I needed to talk constantly on the pitch. That I could do. So it was a place where when I felt so on the margins in Halifax in the eighties, I felt welcome there. I wasn't like the brown girl. I was, you know, the ten,

or the nine. And when you're in Halifax in the eighties, in the nineties as a teen, you don't pick and choose. You see someone melanated, you're like, "yo, what's up?" You know what I mean? I was welcomed into the Black Students Club at St. Patrick's High School. There like, there was a bit of a back and forth, like, what are we going to do with her? And they were like, yeah, she's not white. That's like the bar, so bring her in. And it was a feeling, you know, you're trying to find smaller communities within your community. And I found places like that. And Halifax, I mean, I loved -- one of the things I loved about it was our mosque. Within Islam we had like every denomination. It wasn't a Shia Masjid or another Masjid or, there was just one mosque that we all went to. And the concept was you didn't pick and choose your Muslim brothers and sisters. You stood beside them because there were so few. So having those bonds and learning how to interact was really important to me. When I moved to Toronto I actually went through a certain amount of culture shock. I couldn't believe how many, you know, South Asians there were and even people of color there were. And it was really overwhelming for me. And I learned very quickly not to speak Urdu because almost everybody understands. And in Halifax, I could speak Urdu with a friend and nobody would know what we're talking about. You can't do that on the streetcar on Gerard. You just cannot. So, some lessons were learned the hard way.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

I have a small favour to ask you. If you enjoy this show, there's a really quick thing you can do to help us make it even better. Just take five minutes to fill out a short survey. This is the Aga Khan's first-ever podcast and a little bit of feedback will help us measure our impact and reach more people with extraordinary stories from some of the most interesting artists, thinkers, and leaders on the kaleidoscope of Muslim experience.

To participate, go to agakhanmuseum.org/tbhsurvey Once again, that's: agakhanmuseum.org/tbhsurvey. Thanks for listening to This Being Human. Now, back to the interview.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

I met Shireen in University. We were both part of the Muslim Students Association at the University of Toronto. Amongst our friends, love was certainly in the air and summers were packed with weddings. To get married in your early 20s seemed strange to friends outside of our faith community, but for our friends within the faith, it was pretty normal. Shireen was one of those people who married early.

SHIREEN AHMED:

I got married very young to somebody from Waterloo. there was such a desire to want to be something and we -- I didn't appreciate the journey enough because that was the path. I wanted to get somewhere quickly. And yeah, it was fun. Lots of weddings. I mean, again, to be fair, twenty years later I'm still going to a lot of weddings and some of the same people that were married the first time are getting married again. So sometimes I think there should be a twenty year moratorium on relationships. But that's just me.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Shireen is half-joking there, but when she talks about a moratorium on relationships, she's kind of talking about herself. Shireen had four kids, before her marriage ended in divorce. So in her 40s, she found herself living as a single mom.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Talk us through the experience of transitioning from a married life, coming right out of, and right in the middle of, university, to now being in your 40s, being the person you are and being a single parent.

SHIREEN AHMED:

Well, I adore my kids, Hamdullah, like, I like them now. I always tell them, I like you now. Because I don't love children and people always assume that I love kids because I have four. I'm like, no, me having four kids says more about me being bad at birth control than it does about me loving children, but that being said, I mean, the transition was very difficult. And it was incredibly painful, like no doubt. And there's still elements that you're still healing and you'll continue to heal. And I grieve. I grieve very much for the family unit. I mean, it was a very invested family in each other. It was two families. It was a very traditional two families. And there was no objections to the union. So everybody was really happy. And historically, culturally, we had very similar backgrounds. So there wasn't even like a conflict of this culture, you know, what happens in a community quite often, they're from a different province or this. It wasn't like that. So it was fairly seamless in those ways. And so, you know, it was, you know, difficult. And I know it was incredibly difficult for my parents. Definitely. I mean, I've seen my father cry like three times and it was so hard to watch and there was nothing I could do about it. So it's an incredible sense of helplessness. At the same time, Alhamdulillah, it was a huge wave of relief and being like I had been like Allah had protected me. And there's something that, you know, I mean, I very much thought that my identity was tightly wrapped around being a wife and a mother, being a mother for sure still is. So was me being a footballer and being a cat lover and drinking coffee. So, like, I couldn't let that relationship become all of me. It's definitely a part of me for sure. And do I want to get married again one day, Inshallah? Sure. But it's going to be on very different terms now. People say, will message and say, oh you're inspirational. And I'm like, oh, I had a lot of days where I just cried. I had a lot of days where I felt shaky and I felt useless and I felt not good enough. And, you know, coming out of almost a two decade relationship, is, you know, and then adjusting to everything around me. And I moved into my own place for the first time when I was 41, 42 years old. And I love it. I'm never sharing a bathroom with a man again, I can tell you that much.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You are constantly finding ways of making sure your voice and the voice of other women who are engaged in the issues that you care about are heard. And I know these days you're regularly called to speak on Canada's sports network, *TSN*. And I want to ask you, what's it like entering the lion's den of broadcast sports media, which feels so pale and so male?

SHIREEN AHMED:

It is, like I tell people, I call it the mayonnaise factory, generally, Canadian media. And I'm like sriracha in the mayonnaise factory. Like, this is literally how it is. I am so grateful to TSN for calling me and being open to having somebody like me come there, because this, I wouldn't have thought possible. Like I'm sat beside people that I grew up watching. So it's kind of wild. It's surreal in a way. And they're very open to the conversations and it's a lot of work. And I think people across the board are beginning to understand what they need to do. And I've always felt that change won't happen unless people in the upper echelons are affected. And now they're starting to be open and understand. And it's a long road. Like it is, you know, I have to remind myself that change comes incrementally and this is not a sprint. It's a marathon. When we talk about community, and one community that has been, helped me stay afloat is my community in the sports media world, the community that I helped create, the community that I'm happy to invite others into. It's, you know, queer community, trans community, disabled community, Indigenous writers, Black, sports lovers, everybody, Muslim, like across the board, you can't imagine those that have felt that sports media has deliberately excluded them. There's a lot of us. And I just had a really fun Twitter conversation, DM with a friend. Adrian Cheung is a CBC journalist, and he and I were going at it. He's a ManU supporter, it's not his fault. I can pray for him. And I'm a long-suffering Arsenal supporter. So we were just back and forth and back and forth and I thought: this is really good material. Like this is absolutely smarter than some of the stuff we hear from these pundits.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Shireen, when I think about the history of sport over the last 75, 100 years, I think about who are the iconic personalities that we go to. And they're people of color. They're Black athletes who stood up at the Olympics, who put the knee down on the football field, who refused to stand for national anthems because, you know, there was injustice around them. And now we are in this moment where the global anti-racist movement, I wouldn't say has emerged, but has caught fire again and has caught allies again. And we're also in a pandemic and we're in this kind of unique moment where the world feels terribly fractured. What part are you playing in this movement for inclusion, equality and above all, justice?

SHIREEN AHMED:

I have my eye on a bigger prize. I have my eye on actually dismantling systems of oppression within sports. Like I know it sounds like a lot, but it doesn't have to be. And I think we're so accustomed to make, made to be, made to feel like we have to fight for scraps instead of sitting back and looking at who is actually oppressing us and saying, "no, this isn't okay." We don't need to fight over one seat at the table. I'm interested in building a whole new dining room at this point. Like, I'm not going to accept that there's no room. If there's enough for like 15 commentators on the Toronto Maple Leafs, there's enough space for us to talk about this. And, you know, like I will forever be advocating and someone said to me, "what's your professional goal?" My professional goal is to become irrelevant. I want there to be so many Muslim women to choose from, but that my name drops to like number 187 on who to call, not to be number one. That's what I want. And you know, another professional goal is to be an overpaid columnist at the *Globe and Mail*, eventually inshallah at one point in my life, just overpaid ridiculously and be so mediocre because that's actually what happens. So, but other than that, I have a lot to do.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Shireen Ahmed, what does this being human mean to you?

SHIREEN AHMED:

This being human for me means to work hard, to work with others in your community and keep creating community. Don't limit it. This being human means to be able to expand what love is, not to put yourself in harm's way, but to think beyond boxes. think like there is no box and do what you need to. And for me, that evokes such a strong sense of love, spirituality, and such a strong sense of community, that that's for me what the essence of being human is.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Shireen Ahmed, this has been such a pleasure and it's been so wonderful to reconnect with an old friend through this incredible space, I just want to say thank you so much for being on *This Being Human*.

SHIREEN AHMED:

Thank you so much for having me.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

This Being Human is an Antica Production. Our Senior Producer is Kevin Sexton. This episode was produced by Ebyan Abdigir. Our supervising producer is Pacinthe Mattar. Mixing and sound design by Phil Wilson. Original music by Boombox Sound. The Executive Producers are Kathleen Goldhar and Lisa Gabriele. And Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica Productions. *This Being Human* is generously supported by the Aga Khan Museum, one of the world's leading institutions that explores the artistic, intellectual and scientific heritage of Islamic civilizations around the world. For more information about the museum go to:

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