

***This Being Human* Transcript  
Ep. 25 – Hamid Dabashi**

**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, award-winning author and public intellectual Hamid Dabashi.

**HAMID DABASHI:**

I always say this sinking boat in the middle of the Mediterranean with people desperate to get to a safe shore, that's the site of being a Muslim. What do you do on that boat? What is your responsibility? What is your moral obligation?—And in one sense, the whole earth is that sinking boat in the Mediterranean that needs care.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

What does it mean to be Muslim in the world? It's a big question, one that I think about a lot and one that Hamid Dabashi uses as the title and central question of one of his books. As the Hagop Kevorkian professor of Iranian Studies and comparative literature at Columbia University, Dabashi has made a career out of scholarship, critique, and commentary. He has over 20 books to his name on everything from the Green Revolution in Iran, to Palestinian film, to the role of travel in Islam. And while he's known for his contributions to academia and criticism, he's led a long and fascinating life — and we'll get into it — from his involvement in a Hollywood blockbuster, to his friendship with renowned critic Edward Said, to how he almost burnt down his house as a child trying to build his own movie theatre.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Professor Hamid Dabashi, it's a pleasure to have you on *This Being Human*.

**HAMID DABASHI:**

My, my pleasure. Thank you for having me, Abdul-Rehman..

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Hamid, when we reached out to you, you responded by sending us "The Guest House" by Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi in its original Farsi, which was delightful because the poem, of course, means so much to us as part of this program. I want to start off by asking, what does the poem mean to you?

**HAMID DABASHI:**

You know, Rumi, as we always say, is like a river, is like a sea, is like a torrent, is always running, is always there. you may not know it, you may not pay attention to it, but it's always there. And it is absolutely astonishing how I've been with his *Masnavi* since my early childhood. You know, when the wandering dervishes would come to our neighborhood and sing from *Masnavi* — [singing in Farsi] — from there. And I was fascinated by these wandering dervish who had one of these *kashkuls* in his hand full of [name of sweets], this sweet stuff. I was just both mesmerized by him and frightened and frightened by him. And to this day the same is with Rumi. I'm in love with him, I'm mesmerized by him. The poem that you mentioned is a poem that is really for a time of trouble, when troubling things are coming to you — personal, professional, whatever. And you feel desperate, you feel what the hell is this? And Rumi is telling you, "Listen, your body, your soul, your existence is like a guesthouse." And all of these events that happened to you, they come, enter into this guest house and spend some time with you. And then they leave. So don't be too preoccupied. "Oh, my God, how am I going with this? You know, my job is this or my marriage is that, or my children is this." Right now, I'm petrified because of my-- getting my younger daughter into a public school and we didn't get the school that she likes. So, you know, I'm all over the place fighting with vast, cruel bureaucracy of the Department of Education. So then I read Rumi, and I say, "OK, it will be sorted out, it will be fine. It will be sorted out." This is what he's telling you. And at one point he says, "Yeah, you look at some guests and say, 'Oh my God, when is he going to leave?'" But, you know, eventually they will leave and other guests will come. I love it. So it was bizarre. It was prophetic. I was just reading that poem then I received your email. So I said, "Oh! Let me send them the original."

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

I'm so pleased you did. Where does this incredible love for literature and books and language come from?

**HAMID DABASHI:**

Again, you have to seek it in your childhood and the storytelling. My mother was a magnificent storyteller. And so was my maternal grandmother, [grandmother's nickname] we called her. When for the first time in my 30s, I saw a mother in Philadelphia when I had just moved to the U.S., putting her child on her lap and putting a book in front of them and reading from the book. I said, "This is weird. Why is she reading this story? She has to tell the story." And this is how, this is how the love of poetry and literature emerges. I vividly remember as a child, five, six years old, my grandmother on my uncle's rooftop, telling us the stories when it's dark. And she had a beautiful voice, or to our ear, appeared beautiful and full of intonations. And then the other thing, Abdul-Rehman, is the oral tradition of poetry. My mother knew — you tell me how — lines and lines of poetry, of Khayyam from heart. Much of it in dialogue with

God. That, oh, yes, she would tell us, “One day Khayyam was sitting by this magnificent river in a beautiful garden and having his cup of wine and such and having a ball. And then suddenly a wind comes and his cup is over thrown. So he turns to God.” This is my mother telling — is a very pious woman, is a very pious person. “And he says” — this is God — “and says, [speaking Farsi].” I mean, I can hear her talk. “Oh, God, you broke my cup. [speaking Farsi] Oh God, you disallowed me my fun. [speaking Farsi] I drink. You get drunk?” God gets very angry and punishes Khayyam, and Khayyam looks into the river and sees half of his face is white and half of his face is black. So he's flabbergasted. So he turns to God and says, “You know, I did wrong, [speaking Farsi]. I did wrong, and you punished me wrongly. So what's the difference between you and me?” Where these people learn this poetry?

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

That's incredible.

**HAMID DABASHI:**

She learned from her mother. Where did she get it? Her mother. I mean, this magnificent ocean of oral stories that circulates. And then the other part, which is the public space, is the stories that these Naqqāls, story tellers, the wandering Naqqāls, were telling in front of a canvas. That's the beginning of cinema, you see it was cinema. There used to be this canvas full of magnificent paintings, with stories from *Shahnameh*, stories from Karbala, stories from Amir Hamza, all sorts of stories. And they were great orators. And they knew where to stop at the cliffhanger. They would stop at the cliffhanger and then collect some money and then tell the story. They were master storytellers. They changed their story depending on what audience they have. If they had young people, they would tell love stories. If they had old people, they had stories about the hell and heaven. They had a huge repertoire. They had a — much more important than the Metropolitan Opera House.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

Hamid left Iran in his early adult life, to pursue a PhD in the United States. He ended up settling in New York, where he lives now. Hamid's adopted home in the United States has had a tense relationship with Iran. And Hamid has been critical both of the government of his home country and of issues of justice and colonization in the U.S. So I wondered, has that tension driven his work?

**HAMID DABASHI:**

Probably, Abdul-Rehman, probably. But there is another aspect of it, which is the fact that I am the father of four American children who don't have any other country. And by virtue of being the father of four American kids, I can't be a foreigner in this country. I'm not an American; I consider myself an Iranian who lives in New York. That's all there is to it. There's no metaphysical anything. But here in New York, particularly in New York, but in U.S. in general, I have two lineages to which I place myself. Yes, I am self-conscious and confidently an Iranian, a Shia, and a Muslim. [Names a friend] wrote to me from South Africa. Hamid, I included this in my writing. and somebody said, “Hamid

is not even Muslim.” I said, “Are you insane? What is that supposed to mean? My mother gave me my, my, my faith. Your friends want to take it away from me? Of course, I’m a Muslim.” The lineage of that, the two lineage, one is a Jewish intellectual immigration in the aftermath of the Nazi horror in Europe and they came to the United States — that’s one genealogy with which Hannah Arendt, Adorno, etc.. I deeply identify. And the other is the Harlem Renaissance, with a generation of African-American intellectuals of James Baldwin and W.E. Dubois and Malcolm X and, and so forth. † live in the shadow of Magnificent Malcolm. So in between these two genealogies, of Jewish intellectual immigration and Harlem Renaissance, I place myself. You know, Edward Said, Allah yarhamha, may he rest in peace, wrote an essay towards the end of his life that he was the last Jewish intellectual. And I recently, in my book on Edward, a collection of my work on Edward, I said that if Edward Said was the last Jewish intellectual, I’m the first Muslim intellectual.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Hamid, you speak about Edward Said, the Palestinian-American scholar who coined arguably one of the most important terms of our era, Orientalism. But as you said, you connected, of course, to his intellectual legacy and his work. But you were his friend. And I’m interested in hearing from you about that, about that friendship. Do you remember your first meeting with Edward Said?

**HAMID DABASHI:**

Of course I do. First of all, something that I have also recently said, I was drawn to Edward Said because of Palestine. I was not drawn to Palestine because of Edward Said. When I came to Columbia in late 1980s. Of course, I knew Edward’s work, I had read Orientalism in graduate school, and I also knew his writing on Palestine and literary criticism and all of that. But for months, maybe a year, maybe more, I would not dare to go near him. I was so shy or so bashful, I was so shivering and go to the other side of the campus and all of that. And then finally, my Theology of discontent was out and I collected my courage. And I autographed a copy and I send it to Zaynab [last name] Allah yarhamha, who just passed away. And he gave it to Edward. And Edward wrote me a beautiful, long, handwritten letter on his Columbia stationery, thanking me, praising the book and all of that. I still have the letter. And then I collected my courage and called him and made an appointment, went to see him, and yes, that was the beginning of our friendship. I was putting together a film course in which I was going to include Palestinian films. He put me in touch with Palestinian filmmakers and that began a whole different journey as we went on. And that became a solid foundation of friendship, solidarity, camaraderie, collegiality, collaboration, and various projects that, you know, was cut short, very brutally cut short, after his passing.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Hamid, you know, you knew, Edward Said. But for all those of us who loved his work and in some ways are his children, are his intellectual children, we mourned and the world mourned, not just an academic and intellectual, but an artist, a man of letters who exuded a kind of an incredible elegance and beauty really. What has his absence meant for you over these years?

**HAMID DABASHI:**

Let me tell you the most poignant event. When Edward passed away, Allah yarhamha may he rest in peace. There was a question, where should he be buried?

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

Some people wanted him to be buried in Jerusalem. But his wife wanted him to be buried in Beirut, near her family — which is where he ended up.

**HAMID DABASHI:**

So, what I did when I went to Palestine, I went to Palestine to take our Palestinian film festival to five Palestinian cities. And went to one of the cemeteries. There's a cemetery of the Prophet's Sahabah, right near [speaking in Arabic], near Harim al-Sharif. And I took a fistful of dust from the cemetery of the Sahabah, put it inside a bag, a plastic bag, put in my pocket, and came back to New York. We had a memorial for Edward. And then after that I flew to Beirut because now I was taking my Palestinian festival to Palestinian refugee camps. On that occasion, I went to Edward's grave. It's a beautiful black stone, under an olive tree. Looks like a bonsai. And I placed the soil that I had brought from Jerusalem on his grave. And what I said to myself is, "If Muhammad can't go to the mountain, mountain comes to Mohammad." It's a beautiful scene of mountains, of Lebanon. And yeah, I mean, in a way, it was a homage I paid, both bringing Jerusalem to Edward, as it were, and also homage as a Muslim, because I made sure that it comes from... You know, Edward was a Christian, but it was a magnificent defender of Muslim dignity in his beautiful book *Covering Islam* and on other occasions. So it was also a homage of the Muslim in gratitude to what Edward had done in protecting the dignity of the name of a Muslim.

**DR. ULRIKE AL-KHAMIS:**

Hello, I am Dr. Ulrike Al-Khamis, the Aga Khan Museum's Director and CEO. We hope you are enjoying this episode of *This Being Human*. If you like what you hear please support us by rating *This Being Human* on your podcast app or by leaving a review. By sharing your feedback, you will help us grow our audiences and reach more people with the podcast's extraordinary human stories, wonderfully told. Thank you so much. And now back to *This Being Human*.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

In addition to his love of reading, writing, and travel, Hamid has also had a lifelong love of cinema. And over the years, he has built a name for himself in the film world. He has served on film festival juries, curated his own film festivals and even became a highly-sought after consultant on Hollywood movies. His deep connection with movies begins with some of his earliest memories.

**HAMID DABASHI:**

We used to sleep on the roof. Many people in my part of the world, they do that. And they used to — there were these open air theatres that they will show Indian musicals,

[naming musicals] and all of that. And the mothers will go to the roof to, you know, prepare the bed for us to sleep. And then they will sing, hear the song and have a party hearing Nargis sing. [Sings a line] I can still remember it from my childhood.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

As he grew up, he came to love cinema, so much that he tried to create his own DIY projector.

**HAMID DABASHI:**

My generation grew up with three musicals: Indian musicals, Egyptian musicals, and Hollywood musicals. These were the staple of our upbringing. And before you know it, I came to the idea I should invent a projector. Now, before I projected the projector, I invented a slide projector, quote-unquote, which consisted of a shoebox in which I had put the magnifier — and I would put a slide there and a magnifier — and then go to the stairs that went to our roof and gave a mirror to my poor younger brother, who stand behind the door reflecting with the mirror, the sunlight through a hole, into the shoe box, hole in the shoe box that will go on the slides, go on a magnifier and [exclaims]! you had you had a beautiful picture of Steve Reeves as Hercules on the small wall in the thing — for which I started selling tickets. You know you know, a penny to my friends — I made a business out of them. Soon I, soon I thought I can expand on my invention and make a projector. So the idea was to get a roll of these films. And now instead of my poor brother reflecting the sun, I put a lamp. So I had a lamp connected to the electricity. The lamp is there. The film is there and inside the shoe box and the magnifier is there. So I said if I remove this film 33, 36, I forget, per second, something like -- this picture are start moving, so I have a movie. So I pull this — I was with my cousin Jamsheed — I pull this to create the, simulate the projector. The film touched the hot lamp, got into fire. Jesus Christ, I almost burned the house down. We were inside our living room. Fortunately, Jamsheed was with me and vouched for me and my mother didn't kick and scream, opened the door. She opened the door to scream at me. But as soon as she saw Jamsheed was there, "Oh dear, what happened?" I knew for a fact if Jamsheed was not there, that's it. I was done with. It starts there. A love of Indian cinema, in particular.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

Long after Hamd's ill-fated attempt to create his own cinema, he got involved in Hollywood, as a consultant on Ridley Scott's 2005 Blockbuster *Kingdom of Heaven*. It's an epic movie about the crusades — known particularly for its depiction of Salahuddin Al Ayubi — or Saladin as he's called in the West. Saladin is more than just a historical figure. For many, he is an icon. He took back Jerusalem from the Crusaders and stories of his mercy to the Christians and Jews of the Holy Land are often contrasted with the violence of the European knights. Hamid's involvement in the film all started with a surprise phone call.

**HAMID DABASHI:**

I was sitting in my office right here at Columbia, Kent Hall. Telephone rings. I pick up the phone and somebody on the other side says, "This is Ridley Scott." I said, "Excuse

me?" I thought somebody was joking. "This is Ridley Scott." I said, "*Thelma and Louise* Ridley Scott? *Alien* Ridley Scott?" "Yes, yes, yeah *Thelma and Louise* Ridley Scott." So he said, "I have a script about the Crusades and I wonder if you would read it." I said, "Of course, happily, but do you want me to read it because of my work on cinema or because of my work on medieval Islam?" He said, "Well, why do you think I called you? Both." So, Fox, the studio, which was the production company, sent me the script by a magnificent scriptwriter, William Monahan. And I read it and I made copious notes, both the structurally and also corrections of various sorts of misunderstandings of medieval history, especially the battle scenes, when they were they were happening. I wrote copious notes, sent them to Ridley Scott, and he loved them. And he invited me to go to Pasadena after he was done with the first cut. So I went to Pasadena, spent a couple of weeks there with him watching the first cut and made a few suggestions, some adjustments. Balian has a shipwreck and ends up in North Africa. Well, he says they need a desert fight. I said, "Well Jerusalem, it doesn't have any desert. What do you want?" He said, "Okay, somebody in North Africa." I said we can't have it in North Africa because the Fatimids are in Egypt; he cannot go. At any rate, it was fun and it worked, and then we sat and saw the final cut and there was a wonderful press kit that I was part of it. And we remained in contact with for a few years after that when he was thinking of various projects. It is a wonderful film, not just because of the figure of Salahaddin comes out as magnificent as he is, but it came at a time that this fabrication of Jewish, Muslim, Christian hostility needed a historical reminder, and he managed to do it beautifully.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

In so many ways, you know, throughout our conversation, you have described moments from your life and the impression that that that it leaves me with is that you are someone who is fully engaged in the world. You are in the world, being moved by the world. And in many ways amongst your many magnificent works of scholarship for me, your book *Being Muslim in the World* meant a great deal and came to me at a time in my life when I was asking the questions, which you were asking, but wasn't necessarily finding the answers which you were providing or offering to us. And, you know, in this book, you examined this question very plainly and very clearly of what it means to be Muslim in the world. And there's a passage from that book which I continue to revisit. I have to tell you, over the years I've continued to revisit and I, I would be honored before I ask you about it, if you'd be willing to read it for us.

**HAMID DABASHI:**

With, with pleasure.

**HAMID DABASHI:**

Yes, this is from the book *To Be a Muslim in the World*, in which I say, "To be a Muslim in the world today does not require an Islamic reformation, as some have suggested. Quite to the contrary: it requires the restoration of Islam back into its worldly disposition, remembering its conditions of pre-coloniality, to deliver itself from the conditions of post-coloniality. If Osama bin Laden and Ayaan Hirsi Ali represent the two extremes of

militant Islamism and virulent Islamophobia respectively, reading Islam back and forth into a fictive past and a pathological present — the restoration of Islam into its worldly disposition means entrusting Muslims with the emerging and pressing task of being in the world. Islam has always been the dialogical outcome of Muslim collective consciousness, engaging in conversation with the dominant moral and intellectual forces in the world, from a position of power. Having been for over two centuries at the receiving end of European and American imperialism and having turned their face into a singular site of ideological resistance to those empires, Muslims will now have to retrieve that habitual dialogue, though not from a position of power, but from a position of care, care of the Other, of the world, that will in turn redefine who and what they are.”

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Thank you so much, Hamid. One of the things that struck me when I read this first, and I've read this again, and strikes me even as you've read it now, is this conclusion that you reach, that when all is said and done — politics, history, theology, global affairs — we set it all aside. To be Muslim in the world today is to offer care to those who are broken in a time of brokenness. I wonder, Hamid, how much these ideas resonate with you now.

**HAMID DABASHI:**

I am a product of that. I am the result of that and that not only by virtue of my biological, biographical fact that I was born to a Muslim mother, I was born to a Muslim context, but by virtue also of my lifetime dedication to study of Islam, history of Islam, ideologies of Islam. If 850 million human beings go to bed hungry every night — the statistic according to U.N. If 350 million human beings roam around the globe in search of a decent living and we don't know how many of them are Muslims or non-Muslims, if... I always say this sinking boat in the middle of the Mediterranean with people desperate to get to a safe shore, that's the site of being a Muslim. What you do on that boat? What is your responsibility? What is your moral obligation? Not as any... I mean, Jews can ask this about being a Jew or Christian or Hindu or whatever, but I as a Muslim ask, “What does it mean if you are on that boat? What is your responsibility?” And in one sense, the whole earth is that sinking boat in the Mediterranean that needs care. So we are in a position of rethinking Islam, because Islam is really a manifestation of collective consciousness of Muslims. Is not anything that Muslims create what is Islam. Based on their heritage, their remembrances, the ritual, the doctrines, and in that context, what is your moral responsibility? In this context, that constitutes your being a Muslim in the world. Period.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

Professor Hamid Dabashi. What does this being human mean to you?

**HAMID DABASHI:** It's an ideal; it's an aspiration. We are mortal human beings. Rumi was this strange being that was sent to us by destiny, by humanity, by cosmos. We can only aspire to what he says. Rumi is already in paradise. He knows what is truth. And he's telling us the truth. I mean, he is the memory, Rumi is the memory of existence.



Without that memory we would be reduced to our daily routine banality, one more day more banal than the other. And suddenly there is a vision of Rumi that emerges and you see, “A-ha, so that is the purpose. So that is the reason.” Because he put such a twist to reality, that is outlandish but it makes perfect sense. That's Rumi for you.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:**

Professor Hamid Dabashi, you cannot imagine what an honor and pleasure this conversation has been, has been for me. Thank you so much for joining me on *This Being Human*.

**HAMID DABASHI:**

My pleasure. Thank you, Abdul-Rehman. Thank you for having me. Thank you for these magnificent questions. And thank you for this delightful conversation.

**ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:**

*This Being Human* is an Antica production. Our senior producer is Kevin Sexton. Our executive producer is Pacinthe Mattar. Mixing and sound design by Phil Wilson. Our intern is Annie MacLeod. Original music by Boombox Sound.

Antica's executive producers are Kathleen Goldhar and Lisa Gabriele. Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica Productions.

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