

# Growing up Pakistani in Australia

by Mohammed Haarris Ahmed 10D

When someone asks "Where are you from?" I usually run through this multiple-choice quiz in my head: Should I...

- A. Say that I'm Australian and be ashamed to admit where I'm really from, as though being born on Australian soil isn't enough to prove my inner Aussie-ness.
- B. Say that I'm Pakistani, and as a result sit through a whole list of FAQs, ("Do Pakistanis have the red dot, Did you come here in search of asylum? Do you eat curry every night? Do your parents speak English? Will your marriage be arranged?")
- C. Say "around here" and fake that I have to go to the bathroom.

I roll the dice with options A-C, depending on how much energy I have that day. My name is possibly the lengthiest you'll ever come across - Mohammed Haarris Ahmed. The use of the double a and r is what annoys me the most. When you are Pakistani there are at least 10 versions of your name: One for your family, one for your religion teacher and the rest for all the different people you meet. You have to listen extra carefully when the substitute teacher takes attendance or you'll be marked absent for not raising your hand. Not to mention the barista who always spells your name wrong on the cup or the teachers and friends who fail to spell 'Haarris' correctly despite correcting them time and time again in the past.

I was born in Melbourne, Australia but most fail to believe this despite me offering to show them my birth certificate. If the word refugee or asylum seeker appears in the text book while the class reads together, every eye in the room turns to me followed by elbow nudges from the people sitting beside me. This is infuriating. The reason? I am NOT a refugee!!! The hardest part about being the darkest member of your family is that people often mistake you for many other nationalities. Indian being one of them. What they failed to understand is the long lasting feud between Pakistani's and Indians and how irate this makes us. Let me explain it to you like this. Our cultural feud is like that of Verona's Montagues and Capulets. The only love ever likely to exist between us is about as doomed as Romeo's and Juliet's: unlikely.

Food is life, and the Pakistani way. But 16 years of Pakistani food daily can be a real head doer. When I made the mistake of telling this to my mum, the next time I got home from school I was given a piece of broccoli with 2 boiled carrots and Vegemite toast, my mum ever triumphant said: "You wanna be Aussie? Here is some Australian food".

Growing up in Australia meant having Australian friends, and having Australian friends meant they would often come over to your place, this is where things tend to get complicated. For Pakistani parents the word 'NO' in does not exist if you are being offered food. When friends finally realised

they cannot win this battle say they'll have ONLY ONE serving, they manage still get a decorated mountainous plate of food enough for a space trip to the moon and back. Knowing that most your friends are feasting on Australian whilst you are struggling to get the spicy hot biryani down your throat because your parents strictly believe in keeping your culture alive in the household is a battle I know I will never win.

In my culture, the words entrepreneur, dentist, engineer, politician, accountant and such do not exist. These words and other related professions are pronounced as 'DOCTOR.' Every Pakistani student you will ever come across will hope to become a doctor. This constant nagging of my parents wanting to see excellent grades just so I can be the next doctor in the family is what makes it hard to hang out with friends. They often make plans but I am the first to bail, part of it is because of the 'you must share everything with the family' rule of my parents. Before I'm allowed to go out, a whole procedure that would bring shame to a CSI investigation is conducted. I have to supply the names of my friends, surnames included so that a background check on the life of that friend can be carried out, this sometimes includes ringing their parents and my mum asking the most embarrassing questions ever. Parents are the biggest barrier between me and the Australian way of life. I'm grateful my dad isn't really strict so I often ask him before I approach my mum, but often the answer is "Ask your mum," a response that defies all cultural barriers.

My parents are very strict when it comes to taking pride in my culture, despite visiting Pakistan every single year my parents still don't take that as a sign of me being proud of my culture. Pakistani functions and religious holidays, are when the possibility of being embarrassed is at its peak, as this is because I am forced to wear traditional Pakistani clothes. These clothes are long (the top dangles down just above the knees) and they also have designs on them. So if seen in these, the average Australian will think "this dude has put on a girls' dress". Of course to my misfortune, there hasn't been a time when I haven't been spotted wearing my *Shalwar Kameez*. I am a pro at dodge ball, as a matter of fact most Pakistani kids are. I hear you ask why? Because the shoe is the Pakistani mum's ultimate weapon. And they are pretty good at handling it, trust me. The other day I made a joke about dropping out of school, next thing I saw in my peripheral vision was something spinning toward me. Having my parents imposing Pakistani values and ideals which often confuse me and at times really get on my nerves, meant growing up Pakistani-Australian wasn't easy, but these are the little things that make me different and add some spice to what would otherwise have been a boring life.