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Gilad Cohen:

You're listening to The Hum. I am so stoked to be back here after a year of being away, with Season 5 of The Hum, this human rights podcast. And I'm joined here today by my lovely co-host Simo... Wait a second. You're not Simona. Who are you?

Taylor Harris-Mungo:

My name is Taylor Harris-Mungo, and I am your Season 5 co-host for The Hum podcast.

Gilad Cohen:

Welcome to the show. Welcome. I'm so excited to go on this journey with you this year. We've got some amazing guests lined up, some really inspiring and, at times, heartbreaking stories. I'm so glad to have you here. Our hashtag is GiveAShit. It was one of our hashtags at a JAYU event recently. Taylor, you're on a human rights podcast, tell the world what you give a shit about.

Taylor Harris-Mungo:

Short list, in no particular order, but all important. I give a shit about race shit, I give a shit about queer shit, I give a shit about social justice, and I give a shit about the arts. That's my top four, and I want to talk about it. So I'm so stoked to be here, joined with you, G, to sit in on The Hum podcast and talk about all of the shit we give shit about.

Gilad Cohen:

I love it. I love it. Welcome to the podcast. We'll be on this journey together. And why don't we just jump in? Let's start off right now with Episode 1.

Taylor Harris-Mungo:

We're joined today by Sumaiya Matin and, of course, my co-host, Gilad. Sumaiya, Gilad, how are you both?

Sumaiya Matin:

I'm well. Thank you for having me on this podcast.

Gilad Cohen:

I can't complain. I got my second dose of Moderna today. I'm just feeling groovy. It's a good feeling right now. I wish I could bottle up this second dosage feeling that I'm experiencing right now and have it whenever I want. Taylor, how are you doing?

Taylor Harris-Mungo:

I'm good. I'm coasting. I'm feeling good. But Sumaiya, thank you so much for being here. We're really excited to talk to you about your memoir and about your life. And I guess we'll just jump right in. Can you

start by just telling us where were you born, what are your early childhood memories, and your memories of immigrating to Canada?

Sumaiya Matin:

So I was born in Dhaka, Bangladesh, so that's in South Asia. I immigrated from there to Thunder Bay, Ontario at age six, and then afterwards to Toronto. And I've lived in various neighborhoods in Toronto ever since. In terms of my childhood memories and what I speak to in my memoir, I can vividly remember certain flashbacks that I have. In those flashbacks, I often see figures or people that I used to care about a lot and still care about that have played a significant role in my life, so my grandparents, my aunts and uncles, some of my cousins. In addition to that, I also remember sights and sounds of being in Bangladesh, the sounds of rickshaws on the street, sound of sometimes you have these vegetable sellers or meat sellers yelling out or stall owners, the sounds of the traffic of Bangladesh, or some of the most beautiful national spaces and the images that come to mind when I think about those places.

Sumaiya Matin:

So I would say it's sort of like a mix of various sights and sounds, taste of familiar foods. It's almost like a visceral central experience that I have when I think about the country that I was born in. Sometimes hard to put all of those into words, and so my writing journey really has been an attempt to do that to put all of those experiences on paper and to also demonstrate and illustrate that when we leave a place, we don't just leave it behind. Those places stay with us and our parts of our experiences, whether in our minds or in our bodies and ourselves. I think I say I carry that with me wherever I go, whether it be Thunder Bay, Toronto, or other places that I've visited, and each place has their own unique set of memories that I carry from place to place.

Taylor Harris-Mungo:

Oh, that's brilliant. I love the idea of having all of your senses engaged in your memories there. So you mentioned moving to Thunder Bay. For those of you who don't know, Thunder Bay is in Northern Ontario. What was it like growing up in Thunder Bay as a Bangladeshi child?

Sumaiya Matin:

In Bangladesh, we have English-medium schools. So a lot of folks there are, depending on your access, you learn English at a young age. So when I came to Thunder Bay, I had some understanding of English. I spoke some English. But most of my memories, they relate to being really shy to speak English in school, in my classes, with my peers. I was a very quiet child and I would observe a lot and I would listen in a lot.

Sumaiya Matin:

When I originally or initially moved, I stayed with one of my uncles or aunts and her husband and their kids. Some of the memories I had had to do with the feeling of fitting in or not fitting in based on language or based on how I appeared or how long I had lived in Canada. And as a child, you don't really have the words necessarily to articulate some of these things. You just feel it in your body. I remember some experiences that I had where it was a real struggle to articulate myself, but then one day, I remember just opening my mouth and speaking, and the words just flowing out and everyone just being stunned and amazed that I could put those sentences together.

Sumaiya Matin:

I talk about, in my story, how language is sort of a portal. Once you start speaking it, it can help you belong in places, it can help you navigate places, and almost kind of like a currency also. Before speaking English, there was speaking to nature and understanding the world through nature. But once language came about, it was connecting through that. I would say in terms of growing up and living in these new places, language was probably a key factor in how I found myself either belonging or not belonging and how I navigated the world.

Gilad Cohen:

I want to jump in just really quick with this because you're talking about language and this feeling of belonging. I remember, I didn't grow up... Sorry, I grew up in Canada but I wasn't born here. I was born in Israel. We had different customs. One of the things we definitely don't do is we don't fuck with a glass of milk if you're having a hamburger, and we were joking about this before we started recording. But I remember going to school and there'd be kids with full-on cartons of milk with a hotdog. And not only did my stomach feel confused looking at that, but so did my brain. And I'd go home and be like, "Mom, what are they doing? Did you..." Was there ever that feeling of disjointedness? I can't imagine Dhaka and Thunder Bay. I'm having a hard time figuring out Toronto and Thunder Bay. Did that feel disjointed in any way in that sense?

Sumaiya Matin:

The thing is I was so young, it's hard to remember specific examples or instances. But one of the things that stands out for me is space. In Dhaka, it's a very overpopulated city. The way your body moves through space, it's like always squeezing in tight spaces and you're always surrounded by people. In Thunder Bay, I just distinctly remember so much space, acres and acres of wild and green space. I think just being around more nature. Dhaka's quite dense. I think that would probably be the biggest difference really.

Sumaiya Matin:

Other things would be what I would see on television. In Dhaka, we would watch Bollywood films or shows in different languages, whereas in Thunder Bay, we turned on the television screen and I remember a lot of soap operas, kissing on-screen, and just how people looked like that. That was different. And then, seeing the people on screen and thinking like, "Okay, they don't necessarily look like me." This sort of other worldliness, this curiosity to go on the other side of the screen really, and then interact with other people that didn't look like me or didn't seem to have similar experiences.

Taylor Harris-Mungo:

You're talking about this cultural change, this shift, and connecting to this culture in Thunder Bay that is almost foreign, right, you're trying to fit into it. You've lived there for some time, and later on, your family decides to take you on a trip back to Bangladesh. Could you guide us through that bull experience?

Sumaiya Matin:

I was about 19 years old, and this was probably my second time visiting Bangladesh. So after having immigrated for a period of time, it was just Canada. So when we went back there, it was a family vacation. In between me immigrating at 6 and then me having gone there at 19, there was a period of time where the usual woes of being a young child or a young girl becoming a young adult, and the woes that come with that adolescent journey on top of that was layered with settlement challenges and

migration and some of the grief and loss that comes with that for families. It was also the time period where there was a war on terror and the Islamophobia was heightening, so the landscape was changing or it felt different. Those are some of the key things that I remember in that time period.

Sumaiya Matin:

And then, when I went to Bangladesh at age 19, I was faced with a situation where I was being presented with prospects for marriage. I wasn't prepared for that at all. There were a lot of things that happened beforehand that shaped the family inclination to present me with marriage. This is the complicated part of it. In terms of forced marriages, they're very different from arranged marriages. So arranged marriages, you have families who are very much involved in helping you find a suitor, kind of like a matchmaker, and you have two participating people in agreement with the marriage. Whereas with the forced marriage, the person who's getting married is not comfortable with getting married. The parents are involved or relatives are involved, but they themselves, it's not out of their freewill that they're doing it. So at the time, in that situation where I was being presented with marriage, I didn't want to get married. So it was sort of imposed on me and I resisted it in the beginning.

Sumaiya Matin:

The complexity of it is that every family is different for different people. There's different factors behind why these kinds of situations arise. For me, in my memoir, I talk about what some of those factors were for me and how those led to this situation. In my memoir, I also talk about when I was presented with this, how I navigated it. It was one of the darkest times of my life, as you can imagine, because I resisted it at every step of the way. Throughout the story, you see the reactions to my resistance and how that escalated the situation very quickly to the point where I found a way to leave the country with the High Commission of Canada or the Canadian Embassy.

Sumaiya Matin:

During the five months that I was stuck in the country, there was a lot of tactics. I guess, you could call them that. I employ to try to navigate the situation, so bargaining my way out of it, trying to explain why I didn't want to be in that situation, trying to connect with family members so that they would see my side of the story and why I didn't want to be part of what was happening. That whole process, that whole bargaining, negotiating, trying to be heard, that was very challenging for me. The rest of the memoir speaks to my experience in terms of the impacts that that situation had on me from a mental health perspective, also a family relational perspective, and how I navigated all that.

Gilad Cohen:

It's really interesting because it starts off as a family vacation, which then goes into this murky place where it's like, "We've got suitors for you." When was that moment where it went from, "We've got suitors for you," where you started to realize that you were now about to go through with this arrangement of a forced marriage? How was it communicated to you by your family or even the family that you were forced to marry into? It seems like it escalates.

Sumaiya Matin:

I, myself, even tried to make sense of it after how it happened. The way I've made sense of it is that I think it turned into a power struggle. Both of my parents weren't there. It was more the extended family and relatives that were involved there. They didn't really know me that well, so many years have passed since my immigrating from Dhaka through. The negotiation and the bargaining that I try to do, there

emerged this bigger power struggle. That's what caused the situation to start escalating because it was almost like a clash of wills. And I don't think people were expecting me to fight so hard. It's tricky. It's tricky how all of that happens. You can start off with people explaining their best interests, which can eventually turn into emotional blackmail, which can turn into gaslighting the person as if, "Because of you that this is happening," which can turn into use of force or confinement. There's different experiences that I had with it in that murky time that I tried to navigate where it was essentially a power struggle.

Sumaiya Matin:

During that process too, you're almost faced with the mutually exclusive experience. So it's like you can either be loyal to your loved ones and care for them and have respect for them and be with them, have your personal identity attached to them, or you can really betray them and be disowned or be banished from them or never ever have connections with them again. And so, I think that's the challenging part of it. It just feels like you can have one or the other. It's a really tricky place to be in. A lot of it was me trying to have a clear perspective while being in such an emotionally challenging place and a place where I didn't feel physically safe. When you're caught in it, you're not as really able to step out and see the bigger picture of what's happening. You're just like a domino effect, one thing influencing the other, influencing the other. And so, it's very complex how all of that happens. I just try to use a literary way of describing my experience of that murky dark place that I was in.

Gilad Cohen:

And there's so many complicated things interwoven into one another. You touched upon a little bit of it, like family and trauma and tradition and culture. And I know we have questions too about your resistance, and how that resistance was interpreted and how culture interpreted that resistance, but I'm curious to know, before this was going on with you, we did a bit of research and we found it's tough to find great stats on forced marriages in general because sometimes they don't differentiate between forced adult marriages and forced child marriages. It was tough for us to find data, but one thing we were able to learn was that Bangladesh ranks in the top five countries, no matter where you look, in the highest number of forced marriages. Did you know about forced marriages in Bangladesh before you were going through on? Had you ever met anyone else who had been through a similar experience? Was there like a playbook on how to navigate through what seems like the plot twists of all plot twists?

Sumaiya Matin:

Not at all. I had never met anyone gone through anything like that before. I think at the time, there were pieces of like honor killings. That was something that was in the dialogue. But forced marriages and being able to predict that might happen to me, not at all. One thing that I've learned after having gone through this experience is that it's not particular to a particular religion or a particular culture or even a particular country. I just want to put that out there, even though it's in the top five. Almost all marriages, to some extent, there's other factors. It's not always circumstantial. I personally think almost all marriages, to some degree, are circumstantial. Of course, that's different from forced marriages. But arranged marriages and forced marriages and marriages in general that are more circumstantial, I feel like it happens across cultures and across different religions like Catholic, Christians, Jews, Hindus.

Sumaiya Matin:

I think one of the things is that people tend to associate particular cultures or particular religions. So one, being a slum, for example. There's a common misconception that if you're Muslim, you're more

likely to be put in a situation of a forced marriage, and that's completely not true because in the Quran explicitly says that that's not something that's condoned. One of the things that through my book I try to explain is the difference between cultural practices, religious practices or what religion says, and then what's actually happening. The exploration also of patriarchy and systems and structures in general that don't believe women or believes that women don't know what's best for themselves or women are always in need of help, it's beyond religion and it's beyond culture.

Sumaiya Matin:

Given all of that, at the time, I didn't know much about any of this and I didn't really expect any of this. I really didn't know that this would happen to me. For the people who are listening, that's one of the crucial parts of this journey and it's also one of the reasons why it was really hard for me to even talk about this topic for so many years. I'm in my 30s now and I'm now writing about this experience I had when I was 19, and that's because of some of the fears that I had around how this would be perceived as specific to Islam or specific to particular culture or a particular country or particular set of people. That's always been my struggle with how do I talk about this as a human rights issue and extract it from all these other things that would feed into people's biases.

Taylor Harris-Mungo:

That's a lot of weight to have to hold. You are telling your own story, but from the outside, there are those that might look to it as, I don't know, proof or some sort of indication of a larger wrong with the lack of understanding of the actual context of the situation. But speaking to your memoirs, speaking to your book and your story that you've taken your time to think about and to write about, your book is called *The Shaytan Bride*? Did I say that right?

Sumaiya Matin:

Yeah, *The Shaytan Bride*.

Taylor Harris-Mungo:

And so, for those of us who don't know much about Islamic mythology, what's the story of *The Shaytan Bride* and what similarities do you feel it has to your own story? Why did you choose that title?

Sumaiya Matin:

There actually isn't any entity called the *Shaytan Bride*. It's something that I created myself. There's so many different layers to this. There's a woman that I met in Bangladesh who people were assuming was possessed by a jinn because she was also resisting getting married and suitors. There were all these rumors surrounding her about why. Was it because she was possessed or because she fell in love with someone else and that was not acceptable? What was the reason why she was so like what a Westerner would look at and say are symptoms of depression and being isolated and withdrawn?

Sumaiya Matin:

Stories about women that don't necessarily fit into the mold and then also an actual woman in Bangladesh that I come very close to, thinking about that, I basically crafted the essence of a woman like that as the *Shaytan Bride* and I created an entity for myself. But it's also, *Shaytan* is akin to the devils. It's basically like in Christianity, it's Satan. If there's some Sufi philosophy, like some philosophers believe that before the devil became the devil, before *Shaytan* became *Shaytan*, he was Iblis and he refused to bow

down to Adam because that was actually a sign of him being so in love with God, the ultimate sign of monotheism. Why should I bow down to anyone else other than you? Even if it's a human being or even if it's someone that you created, that resistance was seen like an act of devotion.

Sumaiya Matin:

I play with that in my story. I look at this alternative description of the devil and I also connect it to the idea that sometimes the women who don't fit the mold, they're called the Shaytan or the girl that's like a Shaytan. When you say devilish girl or the language that we use to describe characters, female characters, that resist or have a voice, I look at that and then compare that with the story of Iblis who became Shaytan and what that act of resisting meant. Was it an act of independence? Was it an act of love for God? What was that? And then, there was also the idea of Shaytan in your heart. The difference was with the Shaytan was that when after he was banned from paradise, he was like, "Well, I'm going to lure humans into acting on their instincts basically."

Sumaiya Matin:

The rest of the memoir, when I talk about my mental health experiences and how I struggled to keep my heart open, I explore how different ways that Shaytan could have been influencing me and then ways that I resisted that to try to still have belief in God and belief in faith despite religion being used as a tool for coercion. There's a lot of different layers to this, but it's interesting because I looked at the intersection between gender, culture, faith, spirituality, religion, and how all of those things work together.

Taylor Harris-Mungo:

It's really interesting. You were just talking about the mythology around Shaytan loving God so much that he refused to bow to Adam, but then also being this lure, this devil who's trying to lure in humans. In your own story, being that defiant woman, that woman with a voice, was it ever said that you were being lured in? Was that something that you heard?

Sumaiya Matin:

People thought I was possessed. It was the way that I was behaving and the passion that I had and the figure, for lack of a better word, and willpower, I guess. There are some points where that learned helplessness kicked in where I felt like I couldn't get out. It didn't matter what I did. It would never result in me getting out. Even after that experience, coming back to Canada in the remainder of my life, sometimes I do feel like that again. And to have that feeling of agency and control over my life, sometimes I fall into a place where it's hard to have that. The fact that in such a situation where I was expected to give in basically, the fact that I continued on, it was just like there must be some other force here at work.

Gilad Cohen:

All of this is happening in the early 2000s, am I correct?

Sumaiya Matin:

Yeah.

Gilad Cohen:

So it's also at a time when as you're going through this huge shift in yourself and your relationship to others around you, as you're talking about the shift with culture and understanding and all of these tensions, the world itself is also going through this shift. 9/11 is a thing that wasn't too far away from that experience, and there's just a huge level of distrust and fear and even Islamophobia running rampant. What role do you think, if at any, that whole environment played in your family's decisions, or even how did that impact your family?

Sumaiya Matin:

It's definitely a key theme in my book and I do explore it a lot. I would say it was a very important factor, I think, that fed into the course of events and how they unfolded. I don't necessarily know if it was realized or if it was acknowledged to be a factor, but taking a step back now, looking at the whole thing in retrospect and what I was experiencing at the time, I think definitely those forces were at work, those bigger societal forces and politics and those big events that were happening. I think as a young girl, just like any regular person going through childhood to adulthood, you're trying to figure out who you are, your identity, who you're going to eventually become. And so, I was going through that process.

Sumaiya Matin:

And with all the backdrop of everything that was happening, that was part of the discourse and trying to understand who I was in my family and conversations about what it means to be a Muslim, how do you represent yourself as a Muslim, as a woman, for example, in the clothing that you wear or your behaviors or what you do. And so, all of those questions about what Muslim identity meant, those were important questions that did come up in my family conversations and did influence the concern that my parents had at the time.

Sumaiya Matin:

And so, right now, there's much more of an influx of immigrants. You have more halal restaurants, you have more modesty is like a thing now. There's Instagram models basically doing modest fashion, where at that time, there was a huge lack of representation in the books I read, the shows that I watched. I was much more inclined to be white, I guess, if you want to say that. A lot of my friends, they had various backgrounds. I don't even think I had that many Muslim friends. And even the high school that I went to, it was predominantly Jewish, no European. And so, in terms of how the landscape was like in my family, the conversations about Islamic and Muslim identity was very pertinent.

Sumaiya Matin:

And when I went through this experience, I, myself, started to think more about that and I started to think more about what it means to be a Muslim. And you'll see in the remainder of the memoir, first half, as a child and then as an adolescent, when I become an adult, it's not something that a family discussion. It's like an internal discussion with myself where now I'm like, "What does it mean to be Muslim?" And it's not even just Muslim. It's also just in general, when you are an immigrant and you're coming from a different place into a new country, the whole conversation around assimilation versus integration. Do you come in with the idea that you have to change your beliefs and values to fit into what is the status quo or the norm to be able to function in that society and drive in this society? Or is it more that that society has space for you and has accommodation policies? I don't even like the word accommodation. I feel like it should be much more organic in terms of how society evolves as its population reflects diversity.

Sumaiya Matin:

And so, we all know that Canada is colonial. It has a history of racism that still exists today in our various institutions. And so, having that awareness now and that knowledge and being able to articulate some of those things and see it, how that plays out, it's this conversation about what it means to be a person who doesn't represent that dominant person in these high influential positions in corporations or in the media or wherever. Now, it's a conversation that I have with myself. I'm constantly trying to figure out how my ethnicity, my religious identity, my religious beliefs, how those things are actually a strength for me. I think those things played a major role in what happened because those things were very important to my particular family and have now become very important to me as well.

Taylor Harris-Mungo:

Going through this experience, I know that you mentioned coming back to writing this after so many years after it happened, but what has recovery and what has healing from this experience look like for you?

Sumaiya Matin:

I feel like I'm still going through the process, to be honest with you. I feel like I'm still trying to make sense of it. The first few years after coming back were so challenging, so challenging because you could see the impacts of it in terms of, well, not only from a practical, financial perspective because I missed a year of school, had to pay back all of the tuition, and getting behind on the life goals that I had. It took me longer in terms of the impacts of post-traumatic stress. So if I was working... My brain started to work a little bit differently than it would have maybe if I hadn't experienced what I experienced.

Sumaiya Matin:

And then also, just relationally, you could see some of the impacts of the trauma in terms of trust and safety. Safety became such a huge thing for me. There are times where I just not feel safe in my body or environment, and I would just have to figure out ways to ground myself. So there was a lot of these things that I had to navigate.

Sumaiya Matin:

Initially, I didn't have the words to put to those experiences. I didn't necessarily have the access to supports. That's what drove my interest in social work. I wanted to be a therapist at that time, and now I'm a therapist. That's what drove my interest in that field because I was just like, "I need to make sense of what's happening to me, but also the family dynamics and so many other things." And so, healing, for me, has been all about learning. Learning what I was experiencing, what I had experienced, so reading about it, trying to find spaces where I could have conversations about those topics but not necessarily directly revealing what happened to me. It was all about safety, and I didn't feel ready to do that.

Sumaiya Matin:

Feeling also looked like a lot of self-care, and I know that word gets thrown around a lot, but for me, that was just establishing a routine and trying to do daily functioning, go through daily tasks. Also, it looked like learning about religion too because I had felt that religion and Islam had been attached to so many different political nuances, and I just needed to extract it from all of these other things. And so, there was a lot of inner work that I did in terms of my relationship with Islam and with God, praying, trying to find different books to read on the topic, just trying to be in a place of wonderment again about God and

religion. And to some extent, I had experienced spiritual abuse. It was the use of religion as a tool for coercion. This is what happens in so many other situations. Like in war, this happens all the time. You use religion as part of your agenda, and usually it always plays out on women's bodies.

Sumaiya Matin:

And so, healing looked like learning more about that and separating it out from all those other things. Yeah, and then, just finding different ways to express my experience. And so, for me, writing has been a big thing for me. And of course, family relationships and really working on communicating who I am to my family members and establishing trust again, and that's taken years.

Gilad Cohen:

Sumaiya, thank you so much. I feel like I was on a journey today of perseverance and strength and hope despite the circumstances. You have a memoir coming out soon. Can you tell us a little bit more about... For folks who are interested in picking up the memoir, how can we go ahead and do that?

Sumaiya Matin:

So it's coming out on September the 7th, 2021. You can pre-order it now actually if you go on indigo, the indigo site. You can also order it through Amazon. You can also get it at your local independent bookstore as well. You can come visit my Instagram page if you like because I have a link there too that will take you to all these different other links. Just type in The Shaytan Bride and you should be able to pre-order it now.

Gilad Cohen:

Thank you so, so much, Sumaiya. It was great to chat with you today.

Sumaiya Matin:

Thank you for having me and thanks for all the great questions.

Taylor Harris-Mungo:

Definitely be picking up a copy of your book. Thank you so much for this conversation. This was brilliant.

Gilad Cohen:

Thank you, everyone, for tuning in. My name is Gilad Cohen and I'm one of your co-hosts here on The Hum.

Taylor Harris-Mungo:

And I'm Taylor Harris-Mungo, your other co-host.

Gilad Cohen:

Our producers are Alex Castellani and Rachel Lewis.

Taylor Harris-Mungo:

The Hum is an initiative of JAYU, a charity committed to sharing human rights stories through the arts.

Gilad Cohen:

Help support JAYU and our year out initiatives like this podcast, our annual Human Rights Film Festival, our monthly events, and our iAM program, an initiative that provides free arts and social justice mentorship to hundreds of equity-seeking youth each year. You can make a tax receiptable donation at jayu.ca/donate.