

Episode 35 : Sumaiya

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This transcript is non-verbatim.

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What does it mean to be Swedish and Bengali in Sweden? In today's episode, Sumaiya shares with us her stories of growing up in a suburb close to Stockholm, as well as her experiences as a cultural producer. Her story is about the challenges of being a mother and raising her daughter in a society that, despite its international reputation, continues to exclude and discriminate people.

I'm Fumi, this is #OUR_racism, and this is the story of Sumaiya.

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Sumaiya was born in Stockholm, Sweden, to two Bangladeshi parents. She has one sister and two brothers, all born in Sweden. Sumaiya and her siblings grew up in a suburb close to Stockholm which was ethnically diverse. Despite the diversity in the area she grew up in, Sumaiya says she and her siblings grew up being othered by their peers, and they all found different ways to deal with it.

S:

My parents are Bangladeshi. And it was interesting since I was brought up in [a] very... they were really proud of their cultures. We were wearing traditional clothes on holidays and eating the food and celebrating all the things that you do, and like [having] ornaments in the home and everything like that. So the whole family was really proud of their culture. But then, when you stepped out of your comfort zone in your home... [For example], when I was quite young, I had *mehndi* – it's like henna, you do it on your palms and other places on your body but most of them on your hands – and it was after a celebration of... I can't really remember but something very traditional.

And I went to school and had it, and my classmates, even if they were diverse and everything – yes, I did go to school close to where I lived, so it was diverse – they were all like, "What is that? It looks like burn marks on your hands. Why are you wearing that?" And of course that made me feel ashamed of myself and my culture. And I just started to wear gloves because they don't wear off just immediately, you can't just wash it off, you have to wait until it comes out by itself in like two weeks or so. So it was a long time that I had to bear with me, that feeling of not... yeah, it was interesting, like just to switch the feelings, like at one point you were really proud in the right context; and then when you just stepped out of it, the feeling just changed. And I think also it's a human factor that you want to... it's a survival factor, I think, that you want to adapt to the situation you're in. So instead of standing up for myself – because who does that when you're five ? – I just tried to take it off, wear everything off, to be basic, and just to blend in. That was kind of it.

And even if my siblings went to school and... there's only two years in between all of us, so we can see each other in school and all of that. But it was interesting because when we saw each other [at school],

we didn't really take contact or anything. We were like, "We're part of our own groups in school." So when we got home, we were all friendly and stuff. But at school, we didn't show that much... we didn't interfere in each other's lives that much and didn't even sit next to each other or talk to each other when we saw each other, and just ignored [each other] and went [our] separate ways.

We didn't talk about it when we got home, like, "Oh, I saw you doing that in school", but it was just something that... and maybe that's also part of the internalized racism, we wanted to fit into our groups of friends. And we were all very different : I loved to read books and be a little bit in that area; my brothers, they were a little bit rowdy, they were more physically active, they did pranks and stuff; and my sister, she was a little bit... she didn't have a lot of friends and she didn't have a big group of friends that she hung out with... she was sometimes bullied and stuff.

So we all had our challenges in school. And I guess we didn't want to interfere in that, since... yeah, I guess, it was also like bursting a type of bubble of like, this was somehow a comfort zone. Maybe that sounds weird, but it was like our comfort zone since we were born in Sweden, and this was also part of our culture, and we were still learning how to be a part of it. So at home we all knew the rules of how to be Bengali. But then in Sweden, we were Swedish and we had to follow the rules of being Swedish which was not to do the stuff we did at home maybe, and so we got new roles among our friends, but also in the context of being Swedish.

F:

Sumaiya says she started speaking to her sister about their experiences growing up once they became adults. However, talking with her parents on this subject is still a challenge.

S:

I guess with my sister, I'm closer now, so we talk about stuff that we went through as children and what we experienced, and what we might have felt then and what we might feel now and what we wish to have done differently. But with our parents, it's difficult to talk about these things because I think they were just like... surviving, somehow, like day for day. And I can just tell by being a mother of *one* child, they had *four*, and I just know that time is not always your best friend. So it was like cooking food, leaving children to school and picking them up, [doing the] groceries, cleaning the house, like all of these things, I think they didn't have time to actually reflect and didn't actually have time to ask us questions about this.

Because one thing that always has been is, it's difficult to talk about feelings. And we've, like me and my siblings, have tried to ask our parents about stuff, like, "Why didn't you tell us more often that you loved us, or like those things?" But that was not the culture. That was not what they did. And sometimes, still, when I ask the questions of, "Tell us more often that you love us, or like do you care about us..." But it's really hard. And for them, it's more like the practical things. It's more the act of showing love than actually saying it with your words. So for them, it's like cooking dinner. And they can't really apologize when they know they've done wrong. Instead, they cook food and knock on the door without even telling you they're coming, and say, "I know this is your favorite food and I cooked it because I was thinking of you and maybe you want it?" And like that kind of things.

And it's really cute and all, but I mean... that's something I had to learn. I can accept that now, that okay, they can't actually say it ["I love you"], it's really difficult for them to express feelings and

different ways of like.. the range of all the feelings, not only when you're happy and all that, but also when you're disappointed or how to express those things. And I guess, yeah, they still have a hard time. And I guess it's because that's the heritage *they* got from *their* families. And probably that's how it is. I haven't really met my grandmothers and grandfathers so much and most of them have passed away so I can't really ask them the question, but I guess that's my analysis of it.

F:

In addition to her parents, Sumaiya says she hasn't managed to speak to her brothers about their experiences of racism growing up.

S:

I guess with my brothers, their way of trying to comprehend these things is to – I guess that's also I think a form of internalized racism – but they try to show that they can be the best type of Swede you can be, regardless of all these features that you're born with. Because obviously they've experienced racism as well, even though they might not admit it, but they say like, "Yeah, but like..." They [brothers] like to work harder. They try to get the best car or like work to get the highest salary so they can get the nicest house or whatever that is. But that's *their* way of dealing with these... I would call it internalized racism. But yeah, like hunting for the best... like leveling up so that they can look good in the people that oppresses them in their eyes, like, "Look at me. I can fit in." Like, "Look at me. I'm also this and that."

F:

For many years, Sumaiya didn't know how to make sense of her childhood experiences. She says it wasn't until her late teens, early twenties, that she finally began to see the world through the lens of racism.

S:

I guess when I started to theorize around racism as a fact and as a phenomenon, I think it was when I was around 16 or 17 and 18, when I started to read Frantz Fanon about White mask and Black skin, when I was able to understand enough English so I could read the books in English because they weren't translated into Swedish because the literature wasn't really there. Like, I couldn't get my hands on all of the things to be able to learn even if I wanted to. So I guess it was when my English was getting better and when I was learning to get hands on the books that could express these things that I couldn't really formalize myself. And also talking to other people and understanding that the term "oreo", like I was a Brown person with like a White personality or something like that, maybe that was also a problematic thing. So yeah... it was later teens and beginning of my 20s, I guess, that was when I was getting more and more deep into those thoughts, I would say.

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F:

After high school, Sumaiya studied and practiced dancing, and worked with documentary films. Today, she is a cultural producer in a municipality close to Stockholm where she works on producing and organizing concerts and cultural events for the local youth. She says her role is ripe with challenges.

S:

So the interesting thing is, it's a very White neighborhood, I would say, and people have good (high) standards, except for one group of people which people often refer to as "socioeconomically..." like, they don't benefit everything, like maybe their parents are new to Sweden or... and they have different ethnic backgrounds. So that's the biggest group that I see that is the People of Color, I would say. So they work a lot with the youth community and I do work with them a lot to... we work with the police and with other kind of social services to prevent criminality and stuff like that.

And sometimes we arrange concerts. And my bosses are always like [to me], "You should not think so niche." Like, I book sometimes artists that I know these kids will like and want to go and see. But sometimes my bosses think that I think too small and just for *this* group of people, when there is a lot of people who have high standards and who can afford to go to concerts on their spare time these kids cannot, to book a bigger artist that is more people pleasing, I guess.

And this is my feeling often when I'm at work, that the things that I work with, we get a lot of critiques for putting too much emphasis on the POCs in the communities because they're the smaller group and the minorities, and that we should focus more broad(ly), I guess that's one thing. But we also know that the broad group [majority in the community], they can support themselves more easily than the smaller group. And so we should support them because that's our job, basically, as a municipality to do, to help and give a good spare time for the people who maybe can't do it by themselves.

F:

Sumaiya explains why she focuses on the more under-privileged youth despite all the pushbacks.

S:

I always try to work from the perspective of feeling like, "What did I feel I needed myself when I was young?" When I was growing up in my local community, I didn't feel like there was enough to do for us who was like... we were a lot of kids who didn't have much to do and all of the things that I wanted and I felt that I needed, like places to talk about these experiences, perhaps, or safe zones where I can just be myself and stuff like that. So that's what I'm trying to practice when I'm at work: to give other children who have these experiences to do it for themselves.

But that's the thing. Like people still live... people can't really use words of describing racial injustice and stuff like that. And I guess this is the result of it. Like, even though I'm in a place of... how do you say it... I can shift the perspective and do stuff for children that have my position now as a child, I can help them. But I'm kind of not always allowed since these structures still exist and are still the majority of how people think and feel that we should live by.

F:

Sumaiya continues her reflections along this line of thought.

S:

The art and dance world and also the, I guess, the performance art world, it's very White. That's also my feeling of why I haven't been able to stay in one place, like I've been changing jobs all the time and feeling like I don't fit in here, like how will I... how can I put the best of my experiences and my knowledge and everything of that in here so that... I guess what I'm trying to say is like, it feels

sometimes, nowadays, I've struggled a lot with my bosses who often, yeah, maybe they don't really understand my perspective always.

So a lot of people say to me that I'm "a social genius that I can fit in all [contexts]" because I have manners so I can just adapt. And so my bosses always say, "Oh, you're so likable. Everyone likes you and stuff." But in reality, I come home and cry because I have this gut feeling that that I don't do enough or people feel like I'm not following the straight line and wanting to do some stuff differently. And I've also thought about changing jobs because of that, because I feel like I'm not really... I don't feel part of the group or like, I get a lot of... you can say I get criticized for not being, I guess "Swedish enough". I'm trying to come up with a good example [to illustrate this].

When I was on parent leave, I was out for ten months. And during that time, it was both Covid, but during that time, they hired another person to replace my work for that time. And when I came back, they were like, "Oh Sumaiya, no, you're not going to do what you did before you went on parent leave. We're going to shift the focus of your work to more to do with this." So I was more of a cultural producer for both adults and children before, like the whole spectra. And then when I got back, they shifted my focus and the person that they hired just for that period of time when I was gone, they gave her a permanent contract so that she could continue. And she was White. But nothing to do... even though we're not going to look at that, but she booked more that kind of type of artists and she went more with the line that *they* wanted to have. And they liked her a lot.

But they couldn't say that to my face, like, "Oh, uh..." It was just like a symbolic thing for me, that I was replaced because I couldn't really deliver what they were expecting me to do when I choose different artists than what my colleague did. So she got praised for that and she got a contract and she was hired. And I got shifted because I didn't deliver on what they were expecting. And for me, that was a big wake up call of like, "Is this what I should be doing?" Like even when I'm trying to use my voice and I'm trying to take a direction for people like me, I don't get the... they don't trust me with that. I guess that's it. I can't really feel trusted with my bosses in my own work where I should.

F:

Sumaiya shares her take on the current situation in Sweden concerning debates around racism, and how that feeds into her experiences in the work place.

S:

One thing that is interesting to know, in Sweden, until kind of recently, their own reflection of themselves out to the world is often that they consider themselves to be feminist as a nation and they have feminist values and also like open-mindedness and all of that. But in reality, the word *race* was forbidden, almost, to use, after I guess in the late 70s or 80s. So the vocabulary to use for like, if or and when you're like... how do you call it, like, if you ever felt any type of racism, it was really hard to talk about it since there wasn't any like language for it, since they took away all of it.

So when people were starting to talk about race, people got offended and thought like, "We're not dogs, we're not animals," and was referring to that, as like, "We're all people, we're all the same." But you could see and you can also see in statistics and demographics that it is not all the same. And we do actually differ people. And yeah, that's been interesting to follow growing up in Sweden.

But I feel like when I talk to my friends who do other things, somehow some stuff is... it's getting better. Like people are, since #metoo, people hire intimacy coordinators, like they want to do better. Like, a lot of art and... how do you say, in the film industry, some people who are a little bit more woke, they are trying to do better. But I guess to pinpoint what the "Swedishness" is in all of this, that stops always the process is, I guess the fact that we don't have statistics on ethnic diversity in Sweden because people think that's racism, to actually have numbers on these types of things.

And I just read on, I think there was a news from a medical paper the other day that said like, there was a doctor who said... because in the paper, they were trying to express that they want to do better, so they have more examples with darker skin when they're doing trainings and when they're working with educators, so that people can see how maybe, let's say like eczema can look on different skins. Because a lot of things you can't, you've always seen it on White skin, so that's the only way you know how it actually looks because you haven't given the examples that it can look different on different bodies. That's one example. So this was what the paper was trying to give awareness to. And then there was a doctor who was like, "Well, I've been a doctor in this business for this and this many years and with my experience, I can say for a fact that darker skin or Black skin is thicker than White skin and it takes more force to [inject] shots."

And I mean, that's an idea of racism that goes like 300 years back. It's so... that's like so so so old. So it's so different, like some places, we are doing better, where we have diversity coordinators or intimacy coordinators to break the silence, and people like me who have taken over some of the arts, like jobs, they are doing so well. Like, they have bandages with different skin tones so nude is not only beige and all of that. So that's just one example. But it's like little little steps. And then there are these people who are still like 300 years back in their minds. So some days I feel like, "Yeah, this is really nice and I like my job and I like the business I'm in," and I feel like I'm at the right place and I do the right things. And some days I feel I'm really lost and I just go home and cry and just take a deep breath and try to wash it off and go back and think like... yeah, because that's the thing: I don't know where I could fit in better than this.

Because I am Swedish and I am Bengali and I consider myself both, and I feel like I can't go to Bangladesh and feel more accepted there. And I won't go to another western country and feel like I'm more connected to that because I don't know anything about that culture or anything. So this is actually where I am supposed to feel like that should be my alley and everything. And sometimes it does in the right context, and sometimes it doesn't. And I guess that's the thing with waking up every day, it's just a different feeling, like, "What do I feel today?" Depending on how I'm responded in different areas or like... yeah.

F:

In addition to her experiences in her school and work life, Sumaiya faces questions around identity in the context of raising her two-year-old daughter, Mena.

S:

It's one of the scariest thing to be a parent, first of all, and to be a parent that is together with a very White person who's... he's woke, but I mean, we still always have our differences in how we want to have things. And one of my biggest fear is that I don't give Mena enough culturally, like... Both of my parents are Bengali, born and raised, came to Sweden in the 80s, they didn't have to do much to be

able to transform their culture to us because they just did what they always did.

But *me*, who has this duality in myself, I really need to think of when and where I am spreading what, and for Mena to be able to learn my first language, my mother tongue, which is Bengali, I need to work so much harder to be able to give her that, because Eric [partner] won't be able to do that. So that's all on *me*. And that's one of the facts that I feel like that has given me the identity which I bear a lot of my cultural heritage with, is my language. Like, I have that and that's always something that I will be able to bring with me wherever I go. Like, that's one thing that will always connect me to other Bengalis, even if it's like in Taiwan or in the US or in South Africa, all Bengalis, if they know the language, we can always have that in common. And that's why it feels so important for me to give that back to Mena.

But it's so difficult because the language I speak normally with my partner is Swedish, and so I really need to switch my brain to be able to always talk to Mena in that language. And she can't really respond because she's so small. So sometimes it just feels like I'm talking in a language nobody in the room actually understands. And it takes a lot of both courage but also time and... it takes a lot of time to actually be able to give these cultural things to the next generation. It just takes a lot of energy. And I didn't understand that it would be so difficult. But I guess I do, I do really now. But I have a lot of other friends who have similar experiences who also are Bengalis and also have a partnership with [someone with] a different ethnic background or something like that. And so we can share these experiences. And when we hang out with our children, we can always give them that and that's very... I feel very lucky to have that, that community. It would feel so much harder if I didn't have that community to feel like I'm doing a good job raising my daughter because it's... being a parent is... it takes time, and it is hard.

F:

Sumaiya says that despite the various issues Sweden still must address concerning the subject of racism and identity, she is optimistic that society as a whole is slowly but surely moving in the right direction.

S:

It is changing, it is. And I guess it's because we who were the first... I don't want to say first generation, but like second generation, born and brought up in Sweden, and we who kind of had the privilege to use our languages and start working in the arts and stuff our parents couldn't really do when they came here because they didn't have all the tools to be able to do that. So I guess their children, which is us, now, are all grown up and can be that voice that we couldn't get ourselves. So yeah, a lot of my friends have written literature about this, or are working in schools and universities and teaching and giving lectures about these areas. So it is changing. But it still takes... it's not so normalized. Like a lot of people still think that racism isn't... we don't have racism in Sweden. That's what people think, still.

And the example with the doctor, like that's just very much how we can understand it. Like, it always depends on what kind of people you're surrounded with. If you are surrounded with only the same kind of people as yourself, then your narrative will also stay that way. And if you broaden your friend group or people of interactions, just like jumping into a subway and seeing different people, you will understand, "Oh, all of these people have different experiences of different things." And one thing is identity. And that will just be very obvious to [those] who have that, that little small thing that you

experience every day.

But yeah, so it *is* changing and that's a good thing. And I'm really happy to be able to follow this change from when I was young and what I had and what I hope Mena will have. Even though she's at a preschool where the majority is White, I hope she can still get the understanding of a diverse society that she can be a part of, and not just see that those friends that she made at kindergarten is the only kind of people that is all out there and the only experiences there is. So that's my hope actually.

F:

Against the background of her experiences, Sumaiya has the following to say on what she thinks it means to be antiracist.

S:

[Being] antiracist is putting away all your privileges, whether it is your background or your economic status or your political status or anything, and to stand up in the practical sense. Like, if you see someone in your workspace or in your community or whatever, in your actual life during your day, to be able to stop and to be an ally and stand up for that person who is in direct threat to that racist slur or whatever it can be to stand up and be that support. I would say is a true antiracist, when you stop everything and you are in tune and listening that, "Shit, this is not supposed to happen," and you feel that you need to do something about that.

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You can find more information about the Swedish and Bengali community in Sweden, as well as other articles, books and videos Sumaiya recommends people to take a look at on racism, on our website, www.ourcontexts.org.

You can also find the transcript of this episode on our website in English, French, German and Italian.

If you have a personal story to share, reach out to us on our website, Instagram or Twitter – you can find us by typing in #our_racism.

This is Fumi, and #OUR_racism. See you next month, on March 1st!

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This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.

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A big thank you to Sumaiya for her invaluable time and energy in reliving for us some of her painful memories, and sharing with us important reflections on this issue.