

Episode 41: Mishti

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This transcript is non-verbatim.

F:

What does it mean to be Singaporean? In this episode, Sharmishta, or Mishti for short, shares her ongoing journey in becoming comfortable with her identity, and asserting her identity to those around her.

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

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M:

My name is Sharmishta. I'm Singaporean, and really a citizen of many worlds, as I like to think of. I moved around the world growing up: across the Middle East, Europe, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. And, you know, I think very much my identity is tied to these different places, and really, home is always multiple places. So currently, my family is in Vietnam, so I could consider Singapore and Vietnam my two different bases.

I would like to think that racism and the topic of racism in my life really relate to having this hybrid identity of having one nationality that's on my passport, but also being such a product of the different cultures and specifically the different people that I really grew up alongside. And in that case, there are so many nationalities and so many types of individuals that I studied with and worked with and got to know during my different moves and travels. I would like to also think that I talked actively about race issues growing up. Unfortunately, that was not the case. And I think this is something that I would love to share.

You know, I went to so many international schools growing up. And I grew up with people that were given a world of experience at a young age. And there's so much challenge and opportunity there of tough issues that are surrounding you in the country that you're living in, but tough issues that we don't talk about at the dinner table or in the classroom. And without getting into the politics of it, I think race was always treated as this very sensitive topic *precisely* because there were so many different cultures in a classroom. And from a pretty young age, I think at these international schools, we were told, you know, "Your race doesn't matter. It's really who you are."

And I think we can kind of agree here, right, Fumi, that it's... that's a complicated statement. And that statement, if said in that way for many, many years, cultivates a type of so-called "Global Citizen" that just doesn't even realize how race is at the crux of all these social issues and social challenges that we are surrounded by. So that's where I'd like to start. And I do have a story to share with you that is related to race, but was positioned as a geography lesson, a *poorly* conducted geography lesson. And I will never forget this because it took me, I think, many years to kind of realize just how problematic our educators can be if they have a certain view of the world.

So I was six years old when I moved from the UAE and from Dubai to the UK. And I moved to a small suburb in the UK. It was primarily Caucasian. There were a couple of South Asian and non-Caucasian immigrants in the area. But [it was] primarily Caucasian. There was one established private school that my parents enrolled me in. And there was a public school [too], and the reason my parents put me in the private school was because when they went to do a tour of the public school, they soon realized just how homogenous the demographic was at the school, and they were worried that I might so-

called "stick out" in perhaps a way that they wouldn't want a six-year-old to, right? So they put me in this private school. And again, [it was a] predominantly Caucasian student body but [with a] pretty open-minded parent community, very kind classmates, very kind educators.

So Miss Walker... I'm going to call her out by name because she should be called out by name. I was six years old. I moved to the UK, and my first day of class, Miss Walker introduces me [to the class], couldn't pronounce my name – which is okay, it's a very long name – but said, "Mishti has moved from Saudi Arabia." I was six years old, and that was not correct. I lived in the UAE and Dubai, vastly different geographies. And I was very introverted and shy growing up, like very, very shy, and I've never... before that, I think I had never spoken up to an educator. And so she was pointing at the map and pointing at Saudi Arabia. And I reply back in my soft voice, "No, I actually lived in the UAE, Miss Walker. I lived in Dubai. It's over *here* on the map." And I wasn't being precocious. I just was really naive, and I genuinely thought that she forgot that I lived in the UAE. But she said, "Nope, that's in Saudi Arabia. It's over here, Mishti moved from Saudi Arabia." And I said, "No, really, it's not there. It's over *here*." And I did respond back this time. And I got up, and I pointed at the map.

My classmates, of course, like I said, all my classmates were so kind in the school, and I had good friends. So that was never an issue. But she [Miss Walker] *insisted* that I lived in Saudi Arabia. And this is, you know, 2000. This is pre-9/11¹. Sensitization towards the Middle East was a vastly different conversation. So that was the end of that story. But throughout that year in second grade... I mean, I was new to the school, my mom had also noticed that... like, my parents would come to parent-teacher night and Miss Walker would basically not talk to my parents. And she would seldom approach me in the classroom. And so, thank goodness for kind classmates because I always had friends, I was always surrounded by people. But my teacher just wouldn't talk to me. And anytime I asked a question, there would be this resistance to wanting to interact with me. Her daughter was my age and all a bit avoided me in the classroom, just did not talk to me, and you could tell that she probably had instructions to not talk to me. And even after that incident, Miss Walker referred to me as "the person that had moved from Saudi Arabia." I've never been to Saudi Arabia. So all this to say was a problematic experience.

And I'm so lucky that my educator in my third year, my third-grade year, the year after, was the complete opposite. She actually was pretty well-traveled herself and thought it was really important and interesting to actually draw on all of our travel experiences in the classroom. And I think that really changed how I also saw the world. And so, when 9/11 happened that year, Miss Benbrook, my third-grade teacher, she was so progressive, and she actually wanted us to do a reflection. I mean, we were in third grade, like what do we know, right? But she wanted us to do a morning reflection on our perceptions of what had happened and what we understood and what we didn't understand. And I just think that's a beautiful thing, because at that time, race issues and identity issues were at a peak, especially in the west where there was a lot of fear and fear-mongering happening.

So that is my story of identity. And, you know, it was a poorly conducted geography lesson. But it was clearly by someone or an individual that thought that first of all, she probably thought I was of a certain race that I was not; second of all, probably associated certain stereotypes with people who have lived in a certain geography that was not her own. And I think all of these issues, you know, it is xenophobia at its worst. And it's even worse when you are influencing youth at a really influenceable age, a very young age where you would probably believe that Dubai is in Saudi Arabia, and that would be incorrect. And you probably would believe certain perceptions of people who have lived there or have experienced life there in some way.

¹ On September 11, 2001, members of al-Qaeda, an Islamist extremist network, committed a terrorist attack by hijacking airplanes and crashing into, amongst others, the Twin Towers in New York City, causing an event known as the September 11 Attacks, or 9/11.

So that's my story. I think it took me a few years to really realize the weight of such an incident. And my parents and I never had a conversation about it. Like, my mom would offhandedly say, "Oh, you know, Miss Walker is clearly not really open to talking to us." But we never had a serious chat about it. And I think that's where a lot of issues of racism also stem from: we just don't talk about these very problematic conversations when they happen. And if we don't, then we just let them to the side and we say, "Oh, but you know, next time if it happens, we'll talk about it." There is no next time, right? And I was like, what, six, seven years old. My clout in a classroom with a teacher that was leading the charge was extremely low. And I wish we equipped children with more tools to be able to have this uncomfortable conversation, because for a child, even if you think or you know that you might be right, it's very difficult to stand up to authority, to an older person, and have that chat. But super problematic, and I don't even have to get into why this is problematic. It's someone labeling you without you even having a chance to explain who you are.

F:

Mishti says that over the years, she grew to speak out more actively.

M:

I think one thing that has really shifted, at least in friends' circles, is that if I hear things that are... and I think maybe I should preface this by saying we're all still learning about how to talk about race and we probably will never finish the education in it. So we should all be perfectly clear that we may not get things right all the time. There's a lot that I don't know, and there are sometimes, even just from lived experience, things that I maybe want to talk about but I have no idea how to, and therefore I just don't. And so I should just preface by really saying we're all students of this topic in many ways. But I think what has really shifted for me in the last ten years, and maybe this comes with age and more experience, is, I am more directly vocal if I hear something problematic in a social setting. And when I say I've "shifted," I say it because... and I have another story for you which happened in college.

You know, Fumi, both of us speak French, and so naturally in college, a bunch of my closest friends were French. And this is, again, another disclaimer: This is not a statement about France or people who are French. I love French culture. But basically what happened is, one of my good friends in college, her roommate was from Haiti: she was Haitian and French. And they just weren't getting along. And I will never forget this because we were hanging out in her room one night – it was me, her, and two of our other friends who were French who are also very international and Third Culture Kids like me and had lived in multiple countries. And my friend just couldn't stand her roommate, and, you know, said some things like, "Oh, this person is really, you know, kind of always looking very angry and aggressive." And you know, Serena Williams has talked about this in her podcast with Meghan Markel, about these incorrect stereotypes that we place on people of a certain race. And, you know, the African American community in the US has definitely been labeled incorrectly multiple times for having these so-called "emotions" attached to their race.

So my friend was going on about it in French. And I don't know why... maybe she didn't realize that her Haitian roommate speaks fluent French... you would think that she would know. Or maybe she knew and didn't care. But she's going on and on about it. And her roommate walks in, and my friend just keeps going, right? And our other French friend made a joke, which I basically have blacked out and I don't really want to like talk about that, but he made a very crude joke that was fundamentally racist. And this girl heard the joke and was clearly very upset but didn't know how to... I mean, how do you even express it when you're in a position where it's you and four people and one person made a joke about you that's so offensive? And she just ran out of the room and slammed the door. And I said, at the time – and I wish I had said more, and this is why I said none of us will ever be at the level that we should be on this topic – I said, "That really wasn't an appropriate joke to make. It's not a comment that anyone should make. It's not a joke." And they said, "Well, we're French. That's just how we talk about it."

And on the one hand, I can't believe that one would place their nationalities as a justification for making that type of joke. I think you can probably do the guesswork on what type of joke that was given the context I've given you. But on the other, I also just don't believe it. I don't think that is how French humor works. I don't think that's correct to say that. I don't think that every French person would make a joke like that. It's these individuals that have a very privileged view on the world that felt like it was okay [to say such a thing]. What was even more problematic is that of the four of us, two of them were actually not French and Caucasian. They were actually of not mixed race, but they had mixed religion and mixed nationality in their backgrounds too. And throughout college, these friends of mine would say things like, "Oh, it's just the French way." And I just don't think that was okay. And I never said anything after that conversation. But that conversation in itself is just so troubling, and I wish I had said more. And I wish I had taken a more direct stance, like, you know, "We cannot be friends if this is the kind of truth that you seek to perpetuate."

And so that's where things have changed for me in the last ten years, it's that now when I hear things... I had a colleague when I was in the public sector use a certain word to describe people who are Japanese. I think you can kind of also guess what the word is. And, you know, in the West, you don't use that word. But apparently, in Singapore, it's very common. I've heard it many times. And I actually asked my colleague, "You do realize that using this word is really derogatory. We don't use it, especially given war history. We're taught to never say it." And they said, "Oh, but I use it all the time, it's a really colloquial expression in Singapore." And it's true. I've heard it even in my current workplace. I've heard it in other social settings. And then *now* that I've lived here for two years, I realized people actually use the J word even to refer to just Japanese cuisine, or assert the community of Japanese individuals.

And so I realized, "Oh, it's *literally* an abbreviation for them in their mind, like short form." It's not used with a mal intention of "this is me being aggressive" or thinking a certain way about the Japanese community or Japanese food. And so that's where the distinction is. There are clear microaggressions like the college incident that I mentioned to you that isn't even a microaggression: it's straight up just an aggression, right? And then there are instances like this when short form differs across cultures. And so when they use the J word in that way, they're not thinking of it in any other way but, "Oh, this is just a short form. It's easier for me to say than the entire label." And it's still problematic, but I can also see how for someone that is Western-educated, hearing that a lot can actually be in itself kind of troubling because it's just something that you are taught to really not use or steer clear of.

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F:

Mishti is currently residing in Singapore. She shares about the demographics of Singapore and how people react to her identifying as Singaporean.

M:

So there a couple of things about Singapore that are always going to be exciting for me and for anyone that wants to visit Singapore. We're a multiracial island of six million people. We have four official languages: English, Mandarin Chinese, Tamil, and Bahasa Malaya, so Malaysian Bahasa. And just like we have these four official languages, we also have multiple racial groups in this country, predominantly Chinese Singaporean, but also Tamils from South India, and Malay. Those are the three major race groups. And then, of course, we have Eurasian, which is a mix between European and Asian. And then we also have so many different foreigners that live in this country from really around the world, [so it's a] United Nations of nationalities.

So I think that's what's exciting about Singapore, that because of our natural geographic location, travel convenience, and advanced development, the island has always been home to, of course, individuals that have lived here for generations, but people that also come here specifically to work, you know,

high-skilled foreign talent. And what is actually interesting about Singapore is that we have somehow managed to keep our locals happy while also continuing to bring in foreigners from different places.

So I identify as Singaporean. And I get asked *all* the time, at *least* once or twice a week, "You're Singaporean?" or, "Are you a Singapore citizen?" or, "Are you really Singaporean?" or, "Where are you from?" And I get asked this so many times. And I've been asked it even though I was *in government*, in a very sensitive political policy role, where I had to go through several layers of security clearance. And yet, I had colleagues or compatriots ask me, "Are you Singaporean?" You obviously have to be Singaporean to work in a role like that, representing the government. So we can talk about that. But for me, that question is about identity as much as it is about people's perception of race. And they [people] look at me and they hear how I sound, my accent, and they assume that I'm not so-called "really Singaporean" or I'm not really from this place. And I have other friends who are Singaporean that had also had similar experiences because they have very colorful backgrounds that don't follow a certain archetype.

I am an eternal optimist, and I genuinely think when most people ask me this question, it's not out of malice. I think it's about a mix of curiosity and never being taught to ask the right question. That being said, I've also had people follow up by asking not just, "Are you Singaporean?" or, "Are you really Singaporean?", but asking, after I say, "I'm Singaporean," they ask, "Where were you born?" This always hits me quite emotionally, I think, because I don't want to take it personally, because I'm *very* comfortable with my Singaporeanness and so proud of it that when I meet any other Singaporean that has a similar hybrid identity, this is the conversation that we talk about. And there are so many. I have friends who are Singaporean that are third, fourth generation Singaporean, and they still feel like they have to explain that they are Singaporean because they sound a certain way or that they're mixed race, right? They're Indian, Malay, Chinese, all of the above. So when people ask me, "Where were you born?", for me, that is when it becomes something quite personal.

And I know most people might say, "You know, they're just asking where you were born because they're curious." I wish the world were like this. But I know when I tell someone I'm Singaporean once or twice and they follow up with that question, what they're really asking me is, "But that's not really where you are from. That's not really who you are. Where your *origin* is, is where you are from." And that is the box that they put me in. So while I think most people ask it from a place of curiosity, to be fair, I think having an American accent and moving this much probably confuses most people and they're curious, genuinely, right, like, "What's on your passport?", "Do you have multiple passports?" But when people ask me, "Where were you born?", I know they're looking at me as my starting point, not where I'm at right now. And I wasn't born in Singapore.

So this is actually a race conversation, right? Because you look at my face or my skin color and you assume that that is all I am, even though I'm *telling* you I am 360 degrees, this multi-dimensional human being who defines myself as a product of all of these different experiences. And that is where I think Singapore still has a way to go. And we are all working hard at it. I'm eternally optimistic that we may not nail it, but we will continue to work and refine and challenge ourselves when we don't get it right, [and that] is [how] the definition of Singaporean has changed and how do we catch up everyone to that definition? And how do we also realize that [the] definition of "Singaporean" is going to change with not just every generation, but honestly, probably every couple of years? And there might be flagship values that keep us together as Singaporeans, but going to a certain school or living in a certain neighborhood does not make you more Singaporean than the person who doesn't live in or go to that same school. So that's actually what's more powerful. And I just wish that people wouldn't ask *just* about the starting point. The starting point is important, but if someone chooses to not share the starting point and explain to you who they are, the only job of the person listening is to believe what that person shares is their identity and who they are.

F:

Mishti says that over the years, she's gotten more comfortable at asserting her identity in all its shapes, sizes, and colors.

M:

So identity is complicated, right? I think it's taken me so many years to be assertive about who I am and what I am. And I think when I was younger, and people would, you know... I had an Indian passport for many years and I had a Singaporean passport. And I became Singaporean when I was like 12, 13 years old. So at this point, more than half of my life I've been Singaporean. And now having represented in governments, having worked at the national level, I am Singaporean more than I am anything else. And it's so beautiful to be able to call a place home and to feel that sense of allegiance, right? At the same time, I think, growing up, because I lived in so many different places, I also felt like I was a product of those places. And I really seldom use my passport nationality to describe who I was. I would always just say, "I live in this place, and this is where I'm from at the moment."

And then I realized after college and grad school, "Actually, I can say I'm from multiple places. I don't have to say I'm from this one place." And I actually really never asked anyone... I say "never", because I never ask people where they're from. I ask where their home is, or where they feel like they're from. Because where you feel like you're from can also be where you're from at that given moment in time. And your race could be Indian or Chinese, but maybe you grew up in France, right? And you're French. I'm not going to ask you, "Where are you really from?" You're French for all intents and purposes of you saying that you feel French, right, and that you are French.

So I feel the same about my identity. I feel very Singaporean, but then I always, when I explain who I am, my first line is always, "I'm Singaporean. But I grew up in these [xyz] places. And my home right now is Vietnam, but actually, my family was in Thailand before, and so Thailand is also a place that I feel like I am at home with even though I haven't been in like two years now because of COVID." So that is just how complex the introduction statement is. And I could say it's really tiring to always get an introduction. I think growing up, I certainly felt like that: I always had to go through the places that I lived in and all of that. And *now* I realize I do myself a severe injustice if I don't describe myself in that exact multifaceted way. If we don't describe ourselves for all of the different places and experiences that shaped us, then we basically perpetuate this norm of, "I am just this one label and this one box and the box doesn't have a door so I'm just stuck in the box." Right?

And I see it now, especially in the last two years, I've described myself in this manner and people either get it or they don't get it. That's not my decision, right? They either choose to believe what I explain, or they choose to believe me in a certain way and of a certain label. But as soon as I explain it, they then understand, "Oh, this person is Singaporean because of XYZ but they're also these other things and other places because of XYZ." I think that's just so powerful to also color the narrative in this country that a Singaporean does not have to speak in a certain accent, go to a certain school, hang out with only certain kinds of people to be Singaporean. And I'm so proud – and I say this assertively and not arrogantly – I am so proud that as a Singaporean of different lived experiences – you know, my parents don't even live here – that I can say that I am *truly* Singaporean to the point where I moved back to serve in this government and to serve the country, right?

And I have to catch myself many times as well, right, like when I say, "I'm Singaporean," even though I have XYZ experience, like I said, it doesn't mean my experience is better, or it's the way that the new Singaporean should even be defined. It's just *my* definition of it. And one segment of multiple segments that make up our whole identity. And so that's exactly it. And I also have to catch myself when I'm in conversations with people that have such different lived experiences, that they are equally Singaporean, if not more so. Because you always want to be communicating in a way that people also hear you on the same frequency. Because you can say all you want about who you think you are or

who you are, but if you communicate it in a way that is hostile or boxing... actually, in trying to not be boxed yourself, boxing other people in, then you will entirely lose your audience. And it actually ends up becoming two separate monologues at the same time. So there's so much sensitivity that comes into describing who we are and who we think we are.

F:

Against the background of her experiences, Mishti has the following to say on what it takes to be antiracist.

M:

What it means to be antiracist is to have a commitment to admitting when you don't get it right, but *knowing* that even if you don't know how to get it right, there are plenty of resources available in 2023 to be able to learn how to eventually try to get it right. Yeah, it's scary to say, "I'm wrong," or, "I don't know," but it's easier to say that than assume that you're right and keep perpetuating something that is going to offend someone else or make them feel uncomfortable. And we haven't even talked about Asian fragility. So that's fun [laugh].

But it's really stressful to always feel like we have to get it right. And then we're also trying to figure out our places in the conversation. I don't know what my place is in the conversation except for expressing how I feel and what my identity is and trying to understand what other people's identities are, right? I think it's also okay for us to say that it's a tiring conversation. Because that's exactly it: it's never going to end, hopefully, so it is inevitably going to be tiring. It's never supposed to be an easy energizing conversation. You've got to be challenged. You've got to be told you're not right. You got to admit that you're not right.

And I think we should all just be more conscious about the weight of our words. And it's okay to have assumptions. We all walk into conversations with assumptions, shamelessly so. But we should all be more conscious about the fact that what we might assume about someone's race or their sense of identity and what we verbalize accordingly so, can actually very much hurt or color someone's sense of happiness or satisfaction in that conversation. So we will never get it completely right. But let's also just be kinder in thinking about the words that we try to use. It is more hard work. But you should be more careful about it.

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You can find more information about Singapore, as well as other articles, books and videos Mishti 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 October 4th!

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This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.

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A warm thank you to Mishti for sharing with us her raw stories and important reflections on this issue.