

# Sultana's Dreamers

Zahra Bukhari



# Sultana's Dreamers

**MFA Thesis Project**

May 2022

Designed by:

\* Zahra Bukhari

In collaboration with:

\* Ifrah Akhtar

\* Sumra Alvi

\* Mala Kumar

\* Sanobar Shaikh

Design for Social  
Innovation, The School  
of Visual Arts

136 W 21st St, 5th Fl.  
New York, NY 10011

# Dear Reader,

I come from a lineage of storytellers and creative makers— of gift givers and ritual designers. I openly accept the gift of creativity from my Nani, the gift of dwelling in dreams from my mother’s Nana, and from my father’s Dadi, the gift of Kashmiri chai. For my family, Kashmiri chai was more than just a recipe, but a ritual that would close the gap between generations. My dad doesn’t remember much about his childhood, but he has not forgotten the memory of his Dadi waking up at 5am during the Pakistani summers to stand in the kitchen for hours making tea for her grandson. I never got the chance to meet her, but I’d like to imagine she didn’t feel pain in her back or the strain in her legs while she brewed a ritual that my dad and I would practice together on weekend mornings years later.

In the spring of 2018 I had the opportunity to travel to Bagh in Azad Kashmir. I am not sure how to articulate the deep feeling of connection I had felt to a land and people I had never seen before. My father’s Dadi was Kashmiri but my only relation to that culture was through chai. You see, I grew up in a mixed household. My father immigrated to the United States from Pakistan when he was seven and my mother when she was two— although ethnically half-Indian, half-English. With my parents growing up most of their lives in the U.S., my siblings and I settled somewhere between the experiences of second and third-generation immigrants.

Because of our ethnic ambiguity combined with having been born and raised in a majority White nation, my relationship to my cultural heritage was blurry. Instinctively, my siblings and I defaulted to primarily identifying with our Islamic heritage which in our family, superseded cultural tradition. We did not speak Urdu in our home, prioritize studying medicine or hide when we were on our periods, but

we did wear shalwaar kameez, cook family recipes and visit Pakistan every couple years. My parents were loving, open-minded and intelligent people. They are leaders and servants of justice who made conscious efforts to distinguish between cultural and religious traditions in our home. In turn, I also felt confident in my ability to do so.

It wasn’t until I was sexually assaulted in my sophomore year of college did I realize how deeply embedded cultural traumas are. They manifest themselves in our behaviors, our words, our traditions, and our bodies. I kept my assault a secret. As socially conscious as my family and community had been, there was a theme of behaviors that I saw were severely tangled in our psyches. I was distrustful of my family and my community to support and care for women in a way that was not critical and disparaging. I had heard how the boys in my community would throw around the word “rape” as if it were simply a cuss word. I would witness women in my community be told that if they didn’t cover their shoulders, they would serve as a distraction for men. I experienced the admonishment of dating but the romanticization of marriage. I noticed over and over again how our bodies and sexuality were being controlled by everyone but ourselves.

Mostly, I was ashamed of myself that after all my work as a feminist community organizer, I could not bring myself to tell my family the truth about what happened to me. Around three years would pass during which I strengthened my ability to dissociate, to hide and harbored resentment for my communities’ cultural ways of being. I resisted psychotherapy and medication to treat my growing PTSD, depression and anxiety until it consumed me. Even when I started

therapy and medication to treat my illness, I shielded my family from the truth. Logically, I understood the significance of caring for mental health but ingrained in me was the shame that I had somehow done this to myself.

When I finally told my family about everything, my brain felt a little less heavy and cloudy. But more than that, I felt a renewed sense of purpose. I had to now mend the broken relationship I had with my culture, my religion and my family. I wanted to understand why even as second or third-generation immigrants, we were continuing to consciously and subconsciously uphold harmful, misogynistic norms under the justification of preserving our cultural identity in the U.S.

My story is not dissimilar to many of the brown women I have grown up amongst and read about. We each share feelings of loneliness, disconnection and an overall sadness for a culture that seemingly does not value us as women. But for the first time in my life, I had felt a sense of deep belonging to my community of South Asian women. The heaviness of isolation I felt had lessened with every vulnerable conversation I had with another woman who looked like me. We were all seeking something to help heal us.

Like all of the women I have worked with, there is a will to reconnect with our culture and reimagine it as a place of support and care. There is an intuitive feeling that our true ancestral ways of being, were not always like this, but had been warped by the years of trauma experienced by our ancestors. If we could dig deeply into a decolonized history of our collective past, maybe we could coax out ways of healing underneath the trauma.

I do not identify as Kashmiri but I do claim Kashmiri heritage because of the gift we have received from my father's Dadi. For us, they were more than gifts but rituals that guided and healed us from the intergenerational traumas we house within our families, our communities and ourselves. In the moments when our relationship felt fractured, my dad and I could mend it by making Kashmiri chai. In the moments when I felt most distant, I would make Kashmiri chai to help ground me.

My dad and I both make Kashmiri chai a little differently from each other now although it still brings us together and strengthens the connection to our ancestral land. I'd like to imagine my father's Dadi knew she was doing more than passing on a recipe. I'd like to imagine she knew she was brewing memories that would transcend time and illuminate the true ingredients of our culture.

—Zahra Bukhari

# My Statement

The purpose of my thesis is not to illuminate White America. It is not a plea to be centered in the narrative of activist academia, nor is it for the sake of creating a product to market intergenerational healing as a linear and established solution. My thesis is a story of how shifting and sharing power amongst each other can decolonize healing spaces. My thesis is for you— for the daughters of immigrants living in America whose lives have been dictated by those around us; for those of us who have been left lonely by our communities; and for all of us who have been searching for belonging in a community of people who look like us.

My thesis is a reflection of the existing abilities of resilience and claiming power that have been given to us by our mothers and grandmothers. It is a rejection of colonial attitudes that have controlled brown women's bodies for centuries. It is a testament to cultural ways of being that are rooted in healing and liberation. And most of all, my thesis is a small token of the deep gratitude I have for Sultana's Dreamers. To Mala, Sumra, Ifrah and Sanobar for embodying the courage, creativity and community that opened my eyes to what true intergenerational healing looks like.

We cannot get stuck in the past— in the traumas that have been passed down for generations under the guise of culture. Although important to be aware of and acknowledge, we must shift our mindset from a place of intergenerational trauma to intergenerational healing. Our mothers and grandmothers are more than just survivors and victims, but are dreamers, storytellers and healers. In reimagining our futures, we are able to know what we are healing towards. I want to end here with a request of my community to ask themselves this: *how will you continue to create the world our ancestors have dreamt for us?*



# Chapter I

## *The Context*

Pre-colonial Indian society and communities coexisted through the multiplicity of their tribes, religions and sects where most of the laws during this time period were primarily customary. In this paper, I will use the term "South Asian" to refer to the peoples who have South Asian ancestry. This includes the Indians who migrated and have settled for generations between the 1800s to the 1900s to countries such as Trinidad, Guyana, South Africa and Nigeria. This "migration" was in reality, a displacement of Indian peoples who were forcibly transported as indentured servants and slaves, "exploited and overworked" in the name of the British Empire (Ghoshal). The South Asian identity is deeply complex, pluralistic and has evolved throughout history. For many, their South Asian identity is entangled with their strong

religious influences such as Islam, Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism which have existed in these societies for centuries.

In 1947 when the British Empire left India, they "created political boundaries" to group together Indians of similar subcultures in essence creating Pakistan and Bangladesh<sup>1</sup> (Berglee). What followed afterwards were years of civil war, genocide and tragedy that carved up the once unified lands of India. In modern day, the Indian subcontinent<sup>2</sup> refers to the countries and peoples of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Maldives and the Kingdom of Kashmir<sup>3</sup>. Since these boundaries

1. Originally referred to as "East Pakistan"

2. Some sources include Afghanistan although there are stronger political and cultural ties to Central Asia (britannica.com)

3. Although declared independent from Pakistan and India during Partition in 1947, parts of Kashmir are still under occupation by Pakistan, India and China

have been drawn in the recent past, the peoples of South Asian heritage today tend to have a complicated view of their identities. Even in South Asian American communities, there still exists tensions between Pakistanis and Indians. One of my Indo-Caribbean community members told me about a South Asian American man saying to her that "the Caribbean is a bastardization of South Asia" (Asiyah). These political boundaries and conflicts created by colonizers have fractured the relationships we have with each other. For the sake of this paper, the term "South Asian", while flawed, speaks to the traumas experienced by our shared ancestry of peoples who experienced traumas caused by British colonialism of the Indian subcontinent.

Although some injustices against Indian women existed in the social

narrative of India beforehand, systemic oppression against women was firmly established during British occupation of the Indian subcontinent. However there is also evidence of pre-colonial norms of less regulated gender roles of people "practicing androgyny [and] gender fluidity" (Hazarika 331). Practices like *satī*<sup>4</sup> and policing women's dress were socially upheld before colonization and deemed barbaric by British colonizers who felt justified in implementing law and order. White British feminists framed Indian women as those who needed to be freed from the Indian man although ironically, British women themselves had "very few legal rights during the Victorian period" (Chitins 1373). With this shift of power, British colonial powers embedded their patriarchal

4. Historical Hindu practice where a widow sacrifices herself upon her deceased husband's death

gendered beliefs and norms of controlling women's bodies, into the fabric of Indian law, and tradition.

In a one of her talks<sup>5</sup>, designer and advocate for visual sovereignty, Sadie Red Wing offered that "we cannot begin to talk about decolonization without talking about land rights" (Red Wing). Although referring specifically to Native Peoples in present day America, the same sentiment holds true for British colonization of India. Around the 1700s, "imperial forces [in India] created a more masculine economy" which gave some men the right and power to own land as opposed to pre-colonialism where tribes and villages communally lived with the land (Oldenburg 4). The implementation of this new economy also led to the "crude destruction" of India's artisan

5. Global Guest Lecture at the School of Visual Arts

and textile craft industries (Tharoor 371). Women in rural Indian villages who depended on weaving and looming for work, were left powerless. Therefore an Indian woman's self-worth and proximity to power could only be achieved through marriage to a man or giving birth to a son. More significantly, there was now an environment of competition between Indian women fueled by the need to claim their socioeconomic power. The significance of marriage and destruction of their sources of livelihood were systemically upheld by colonization which would result in being the root cause for the intergenerational traumas experienced by South Asian American women today.

Years later, South Asian, immigrant families in America would continue to be affected by these traumas and treat their women through a colonized lens. South Asian-American

women are pressured into a culture of traditional gender roles, a “deepened preference for sons”, Eurocentric beauty standards, hyper-sexualization of young girls, stigmas around gender relations and slut shaming (Oldenburg 4). More urgently, in some cases we see a development in the practice of honor killing and a concealment of domestic and sexual violence. The regulation of gendered binaries, expectations and roles became polarized. Since these norms were being practiced generations before by the time South Asians immigrated to America, there was a general understanding that this is what South Asian culture embodied. However, as mentioned in the book *My Grandmother’s Hands*, we learn that “...if [trauma] gets transmitted and compounded through multiple families and generations, it can start to look like culture” (Menakem). The patriarchal

norms that South Asian American communities today have been holding on to, are a response to the traumatic events of colonization, war and conflict and that were experienced by their ancestors.

In an effort to sustain cultural identity in America, South Asian immigrant families stubbornly and fiercely hold onto these patriarchal practices. In a land where White supremacy prevails, the “need to preserve our heritage in America” no matter the practice, created a cultural community where “trauma is perpetuated” (Osaki). As generations of South Asian immigrants establish families and communities in America, young South Asian women are subjected to shame as a tactic to pressure them into conforming to these ideals. However there is also an argument to be made that our

ancestors who were subjected to the humiliation of British colonialism survived a “low morale of this period [that] devastated [their] social structure and psyche” (Pervez). Therefore, the shaming tactic employed by South Asian parents and elders to devalue women in the community, is also an example of intergenerational trauma. Although this does not justify the reasoning behind South Asian misogyny, it illuminates the deep fractures within an immigrant community struggling to keep their cultural identity alive.

Between adhering to colonized gender norms, competing against each other for social status and the weight of responsibility to preserve cultural heritage, South Asian American women are declining into mental anguish devoid of autonomy and power. Although there is “little data” on the

mental health situation of South Asian American women, studies by the APIAH<sup>6</sup> note that “immigrant South Asians are particularly prone to depression and related mental health issues”. Furthermore, the report goes on to detail that there is even a “higher rate of suicide among young South Asian American women than the general U.S. population” (Elias). We see in these women, a struggle to develop an authentic identity around being both American and South Asian. From their parents, to their White peers, to each

6. Asian & Pacific Islander American Health Forum

other, South Asian American daughters are forced to form an identity around the expectations of everyone but themselves.

It should come as no surprise to children of immigrants that the same studies reported that "South Asian Americans had the lowest rate of utilization of mental health services" (Elias). The stigma around mental health in the South Asian American community is dangerous. Even in the cases where mental health issues are being addressed, women are met with shame and guilt for not enduring the pain and suffering like their ancestors have before them. Even the mental health services available in the U.S. rarely address the intricacies of the immigrant experience or specificities of intergenerational trauma. The language around therapy is "inaccessible" and therefore avoided, further

propelling feelings of "loneliness" (Elias). For years, the South Asian woman has fought to take back the power to control their bodies and sexuality. Unless these women are given the power to reclaim their identity and develop autonomy, intergenerational trauma will tear apart our communities and inevitably destroy any hope of preserving cultural identity in America.

## Chapter II

### *The Process*

As a daughter of immigrants with a history of neuro-divergence, sexual trauma and major depressive disorder, my own mental health was paramount to ensure I was doing no harm to both myself and my community. Like many others, my struggle with mental health was amplified during the COVID-19 pandemic, forcing me to pivot, rest and recuperate. Starting in January 2022, I increased individual psychotherapy sessions from once a week to twice a week to address the possibility of burnout and a decrease in emotional capacity. I sought a therapist with lived experience similar to my own whose practice includes specialities in trauma and multicultural identity formation. Together, we worked to build a relationship of trust, develop tools for trauma-informed research and space to reflect on the complexity of my cultural identity. The hardest part of my thesis was not the endless hours of interviews or writing this paper, but was listening to my intuition when I felt my physical and emotional capacity weaken. I had to recognize that “a big part of community is building a relationship with yourself” (Harper).

In a world that values humans based on productivity combined with the immigrant pursuit of the “American Dream”, I often operated with little regard to my physical and emotional health. However, as Black artist educator and community organizer Tricia Hersey claims in her work, “prioritizing rest is, at its

very core, a form of resistance” given the world we are living in (Kurlinkus). If I did not pause to rest, I was only furthering the exploitation of BIPOC bodies for the sake of upholding a system that was in opposition to my values. This realization marked a major shift from focusing the work on intergenerational trauma to intergenerational healing. I believe in the importance of acknowledging and educating ourselves on the past, but for the sake of informing our present selves and future lineage. It greatly decreased the possibility of doing harm as an untrained practitioner in the field of psychotherapy and instead centered trauma-informed care and cultural intuition in my design process to make space for rest.

When researching traditional design processes of engaging community, I felt an inherent aversion to the sterile language and distanced role often employed by the researcher. In rejecting some of these exploitative practices, I aimed to “not let the institution [of design academia] tell me how to be” (Rittner). Instead I focused on my lived experience where I saw the most deep conversations within my community be personal, organic, and often around food. I knew exactly how to approach my design framework because I had been practicing, witnessing and partaking in that approach my entire life. And most importantly, the women before me had been creating these spaces for gathering long before I had. From threading

salons to tea parties there is a history of South Asian women who “gathered on winter afternoons and summer evenings to gossip, knit and exchange recipes and folk wisdom” (ix, Oldenburg). My cultural intuition was pointing me in the direction of replicating a space for the same kind of comfort that would invite my community to truthfully share their stories with me.

I connected with South Asian American women through casual and conversational interviews all while bearing in mind the invading tendency we have to be secretive, closed-off and competitive amongst each other. We would often meet over coffee and tea where I would start by transparently sharing my own personal journey to this research. As film director Khaula Malik shared with me, “identity is the entry point of [healing] work”. I felt that if I embodied vulnerability, trust and openness around my struggle with identity, I could create space for South Asian American women to feel secure in sharing their personal experiences with me. The conversations would become more than data points for my thesis paper, but the first steps in practicing what intergenerational healing felt like. The work started with “what [we could] learn by making space to come out together” as strangers when the togetherness of South Asian American women was not necessarily viewed as a healing method for intergenerational trauma (Rittner). In having these personal and open conversations together, we each felt a little less lonely.

## Chapter III

### *The Community*

# COMMUNITY

## Petal Color - Heritage

- Indian
- Pakistani
- Indo-Caribbean
- Bangladeshi
- Other Diaspora
- White / European

## Age

- \* 18-24    ✿ 25-35
- ✿ 36-45    ✿ 46-55

## Religious Influence

- ♥ Islam    ✿ Hinduism

## Familial Role\*

- Eldest / Only daughter
- ☀ Mother

## Relationship Status\*

- Y Married    ✿ Divorced    ♀ Widowed
- ↑ single    † Committed Relationship



\* If mentioned

## I. Control

The expectations and roles around marriage for women begins from such an early stage that young girls are being hyper-sexualized and to be highly critical of their bodies and behaviors. In a conversation I had with Mala, she recounts "some older uncles saying, 'Mala is growing up so fast, we need to get her married!' and how it made her feel "so uncomfortable and anxious that grown men were joking about adult behavior". Mala's story is echoed in the sentiments shared by Sarah who recalled her mom telling her: "Don't be alone with male cousins and uncles" and to be aware of "clothing and how I conduct myself around men". Like many young South Asian girls, Mala and Sarah knew that choices about their body were not their own to control. While South Asian culture around dress for both men

*They knew that choices about their body were not their own to control.*

and women are traditionally more modest, the narrative in which women are expected to adhere to these norms are far different from that of men. From to being told to keep their hair long to being told to stay out of the sun in case they get too dark, the communal policing of their bodies is ultimately internalized into their psyches. From a young age, they are groomed to believe that if they guard their sexuality and bodies from men now, it will prove worth the sacrifice when they ultimately earn their happiness through marriage.

The added layer of religion deepens the complexity of how some of these cultural practices continue to be upheld. For example, some women like Maria who have Islamic heritage explained that since one of the major religions in the South Asian subcontinent is Islam, "there is a blurry line between culture and

religion" especially in regard to the expectations around women's modesty. Similarly, while still identifying strongly with Islam, Zainab felt that in tandem with cultural values, her parents also "pushed their religious values on me". On the other hand, Asma believes there is an inherent biological and psychological reasoning for the limitations around women's clothing. She believes the practice for men to "lower their gaze" is scientifically more difficult than it is for women and therefore in Islam, "as far as clothing goes, men do not have the same restrictions [as women]". Whether or not Islamic law and jurisprudence dictates the specificity of modesty for women is another issue. The issue mainly lies in the use of religion to uphold the oppressive narratives for women's modesty when the same narratives are not used for men.

Additionally, when the narrative is being used to further the notion of South Asian women making choices for the sake of others, it fractures the relationship they have with cultural and religious communities.

## II. Entanglement

Notably though, many South Asian mothers who grew up in America such as Asma, recognize these traumas and therefore in raising their daughters, have actively refrained from perpetuating the same patterns that suppressed her own expression of identity. As mentioned, while adding complexity to how we make choices about our bodies, religion can also help to alleviate some of these challenges. When addressed with cultural traditions that she is unsure of Maria states that, "I am Muslim first and

Pakistani second". For her, Islamic values and guidelines supersedes those of her South Asian culture. Similarly, Professor of Islamic Law and Jurisprudence Atiya Aftab, only chooses to uphold cultural norms that are in line with her Islamic identity. Growing up in a mixed cultural home, Atiya was more easily able to differentiate between cultural and religious norms. She chose to prioritize her Islamic practice because as she states, "from its core [Islam] is pure equality" (Aftab). Although much like Maria and Zainab, she does admit that for a majority of the South Asian Muslim population in America, it is hard to separate Islam from South Asian culture. The added layer of religion, while providing community for some, can be so deeply entangled with culture that some will decontextualize religious practices to justify controlling women's sexuality

even though if the religion like Islam, is inherently equitable.<sup>7</sup>

For many South Asian Muslims living in America post 9/11, there was a resurgence of women like Arshe who felt "empowered my identity and sense of community". In my conversations, while a majority of my community members were Muslim, 17 of 27 women identified strongly with their Islamic heritage. Even though the events of 9/11 inspired a wave of blatant Islamophobia and violence against brown people, the Muslim American community was also in turn, pressured to reclaim ownership of their identity which created for some South Asian women, a renewed sense of belonging. Women like Atiya, Asma and Arshe<sup>8</sup> who lived in America both before

and after 9/11 tended to identify more strongly as being Muslim American than South Asian American. However, their daughters or the younger generation<sup>9</sup>, were more inclined to identify with their cultures or religions before identifying as American. For many of them, they felt a stark disconnect from their White

7. Professor Atiya Aftab, Islamic Law and Jurisprudence at Rutgers University

8. 5:1 of the women I interviewed who grew up in America during the 1970s–1990s actively chose to identify as American over the younger generation who grew up in the late 1990s–2000s

9. South Asian American women 18–26 years old

American peers. That disconnect was illustrated by both cultural differences from "not being allowed to sleep over white friends homes" and the use of "American" as a shaming tactic by the older South Asian generations (Fatima). Ifrah was told she "just [wanted] to be American" whenever she "brought dating up". These instances instill a negative connotation to the term "American" further polarizing the two identities and leading to a further sense of isolation.

### III. Disconnection

Inevitably, the pressure of conforming to misogynistic attitudes about controlling our sexuality deteriorates our mental health can push us further away from our religious and cultural identities. At least two thirds of the women I spoke

with are currently or have previously sought out mental health services. The most common themes that emerged in our conversations exposed deep feelings of anxiety, inadequacy, hurt and loneliness. Hadiqah shared that, "there is an unhealthy obsession [with dating and marriage] that makes me back away". Similarly, Asiyah felt that she, "had to be separated from [her] identity community in order for [her] to feel comfortable". Some women have even resigned to a life of secrecy to satisfy the need for autonomy although withholding so much of your life from your family as Sumra told me, "[it] impacts your mental health so much". Similarly, after finding out about her secret boyfriend in high school, Asma recalls her parents' punishment of being "under lock and key". At school she said, "No one would talk to me. You cannot explain to your White



friends what is going on". The further use of punishment to control our choices continues to influence how we understand South Asian culture. The tension between living in White America as a brown woman struggling to develop identity leads to isolation and shame from both communities.

#### IV. Servitude

In the constant battle to form an identity, we are subconsciously developing coping behaviors that divert our focus away from ourselves to serving others which further burdens our emotional capacity. At least 21 of the women who I spoke with were either the only daughter or the eldest daughters in their family. From serving tea to guests to getting straight As, to helping raise younger siblings,

South Asian parents had another level of expectations for their eldest or only daughters to fulfill. Not only were they expected to play the role of eldest child, but mediator between their parents and often, therapists to their mothers. Rima shared with me that "from a young age, [my mom] was word vomiting her trauma onto me". Daughters like Rima recognize that our mothers are also victims of intergenerational trauma and have probably endured similar feelings of loneliness to our own. We are taught that being in service to others is a way in which we can be in service to ourselves. As the eldest sister of three, Ifrah said she often struggles with "the expectation that we need to take care of everyone and have maternal instincts". While sometimes easier to focus on someone other than ourselves, the pressure of keeping the balance in the family unit compounded with

ignoring their own emotional needs, leads to further mental fatigue and deterioration.

#### V. Awareness

Over half the women I spoke with knew or were familiar the term "intergenerational trauma". Aside from its recent buzz in mainstream mental health narrative, we have already been researching and reflecting on why the disconnection between ourselves and our cultural communities exist. Even if the language around intergenerational trauma was not used, the stories and emotions shared with me were indicative of a communal cognizance of pain. In her own research, Sarah claims it is "no coincidence that Urdu music is sad— there is a cultural awareness of pain". This awareness

of pain, Sarah argues, "is almost romanticized". We are taught that our ancestors from the Indian subcontinent are survivors of displacement, war, rape, and poverty. However, these stories come with a narrative that "valorizes endurance" (Elias).

However, emotions like sadness and grief when expressed on a personal level, are viewed as being powerless. Women like Asiyah shared that in her home, "the minute I started crying, that was the weakness". Sanobar said in her home, "I felt like I had to actively not express myself". While the scarcity mentality has taught us to be deeply grateful for the sacrifices of our ancestors, it is at the expense of giving any weight to our own struggles.

The lack of communication around feelings of sadness slowly wears away at the community's most intimate level and fuels the disconnect between

generations. Sofia shared, “my mom was not a good communicator. We were always left guessing. I made a conscious effort not to do that with my family”. Hadiqah also anticipates she will not know “how to create an environment where kids can come talk to you” when she becomes a parent since that was not modeled in her own home growing up. For many of the women I spoke with, conversations around sensitive topics are generally avoided rather than addressed. Sofia also shared that she never even asked about prom because she “already knew the answer”. For her, it was not worth the emotional effort of engaging in dialogue to make her parents understand American society. The journey of immigration has furthered the space between generations since their environments have so drastically changed over a short period of time. Al-

though mentally exhausting, Sarah said that “pushing back” against her parents’ expectations “has ultimately been a very good thing”. Women like Sarah who have addressed conflict and done the work of setting boundaries has helped them “to understand [their parents] better”. With each of the conversations I had, there was an overall wish to close the cultural gaps between themselves and those who came before them.

## VI. Expression

Due to the awareness of their shared pain as South Asian American women, there is a conscious effort to connect to our culture in a way that is our own. When asked the question “what are some rituals that make you feel most connected to your cultural

heritage?”, there were over fifty mentions of creativity, storytelling and community. Creative expression has given us the freedom to be ourselves when we could not be ourselves in other aspects of our lives. Historically, South Asian women have been able to explore self-expression and autonomy through creative means from cooking, sewing, drawing, storytelling, etc. without fear of shame or limitation. Sana said that “designing and making makes me feel like I am in control” while Samyuktha shared that “dance feels like a transformative space where we can unpack trauma”. When words are difficult to express the complexity of our thoughts, we turn to creativity as an outlet. Several of the women mentioned listening to stories of their grandparents as a way of feeling most connected to their culture. Sofia shared with me that she hopes to

continue the “tradition from handing things down from mother to daughter”, for her own lineage. Connection to our culture exists where the line between generations blurs through the power of creative expression.

For those women who are aware of it, the cultural dissonance within South Asian communities in America create a hopeful future. After some reflection throughout her life, Asma shares that her parents who immigrated to America, “believe in idealized beauty that is stuck in the past. They force their kids here to look like kids from when [my parents] were there”. For Asma and many others, this cultural dissonance was in some ways, reassuring that culture and tradition can evolve. In reference to the pressure she felt to fit into a particular gendered role, Sanobar explained that “what [our parents’ generation] put on us spiritually, was

a defense mechanism to preserve culture". While the expectations and gender roles for South Asian Americans have been challenging and at times, detrimental, the desire to connect with South Asian heritage remains strong. Rima said that the "values instilled in me by my Eastern culture, are core to my being". If there is a shared understanding that the version of South Asian culture in America is outdated, then we can remain hopeful that our practices here have the ability to evolve and shift in the same way they have in the land where they originated from.

Although communicating with older generations because of cultural differences can be challenging, storytelling has been a way to bridge this gap. Many women like Ifrah and Sumra mentioned that they felt connected to older generations when "listening to stories about how they

*The values instilled in me by my Eastern culture, are core to my being.*

grew up". When shared in the format of a story, communication flows and is understood more easily when social cues and language are a barrier. Additionally, scientists and doctors have found that "many different areas of the brain light up when someone is listening to a narrative" (Renken). When we tell stories, we are engaging parts of our mind that we do not normally use to process information therefore making it easier to see a fuller picture. Therefore when we sit with our parents and grandparents as they tell us childhood stories, our neurological functions "help us [to] see a situation from different perspectives" (Renken). I left so many of our conversations feeling elated and deeply connected. I realized that simply talking and listening to the stories of these women was more than just empowering— it was healing. When South Asian

American women gather in community, we can use creative storytelling to express the vulnerability that leads to intergenerational healing.

Chapter IV  
*The Collective*

# SULTANA'S DREAMERS

*Sunobar*



*Ifrak*



*Sumra*



*Zahra*



*Mala*



## Our Purpose

In this community of South Asian American women, we will co-design a space for creative storytelling and healing from collective intergenerational traumas.

## Our Commitment

- \* Every Wednesday
- \* Jan 31–Mar 28
- \* One hour per week
- \* Voluntary participation
- \* Total of five women
- \* Virtual meetings

## Power and Positionality

In order to create a virtual environment that felt safe and supportive for trust and vulnerability, each of us had to understand our own identities. As leaders and co-designers, “we have to be so attuned to ourselves” through understanding how our own power and positionality shows up in the world and between each other (Proctor). The first few gatherings established alignment on our expectations and purpose through crafting a community agreement, giving access to my thesis research and resources, and designing our identity maps. In doing this, we created a foundation of transparency, accountability and understanding of what we were bringing into the space for ourselves and for each other.

## Virtual Community

The challenges of COVID-19 solidified that we would have to create and be in virtual community with one another. We used Miro<sup>10</sup> and Zoom as our creative gathering spaces and set an hour of time aside each week to meet. We created a playlist together and talked in a group chat to enhance the environment of closeness when physical proximity was difficult to achieve.

<sup>10</sup>. Online collaborative platform (miro.com)

## Ritual Design

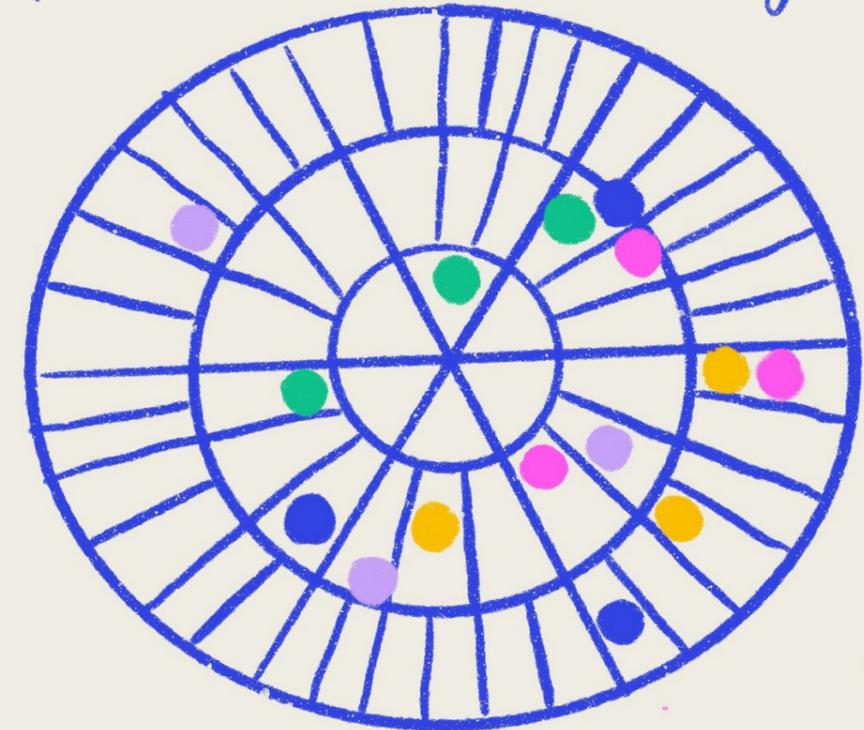
In order to ground ourselves in intentionality and purpose at the start of each gathering, we established rituals. For the first five minutes of our meetings, we used the Feelings Wheel<sup>11</sup> to check in and name the main three emotions we were bringing into the space. The next ten to fifteen minutes of each section was dedicated to a Connection<sup>12</sup> card adapted from a game we co-designed in a previous class. Each person was asked to answer the multifaceted Connection questions which both related to the theme of our meeting and added lightheartedness to practicing personal storytelling. Each time we met, the questions increased

11. Designed by Chetna at Mosaic Eye and adapted from Dr. Gloria Wilcox

12. Card game prototype co-designed by Zahra Bukhari, Ruike Pan & Jenny Winjoy Lin at The School of Visual Arts, Design for Social Innovation

in vulnerability as well as elicited follow-up questions and further discussion amongst each other. In ritualizing these activities, we were able to “tap into the non-functional, non-obvious, and emotional” to embark on a “journey that has twists, serendipity, and surprises” (Ozenc). By relying on the recurrence of this ritual, we created a rhythm in which we could expect and rely on to then allow for newness to grow.

*How are you feeling?>*



## Creative Intuition

In crafting the agenda for each meeting, we would follow our communal intuition to co-design a framework flexible enough to adapt to the needs of the collective. Founder of the creative healing platform, Mosaic Eye, Chetna Mehta stated that, "mindfulness helps us honor the mystical unfolding of creative energy, without us being overwhelmingly-preoccupied with the final 'product' or how it may be received". Each week, the agenda was iterated upon from our previous interactions and conversations. Most memorably, in the second week of our meetings, Ifrah shared the short story, *Sultana's Dreamers* by Bengali feminist pioneer, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. In the story, Sultana dreams of "Ladyland" where traditional gender norms and roles are switched where women lead

in the public realm while the men are expected to stay in the home. The story resonated with us so deeply that it would become integral to our healing process. In prioritizing trust-building, we had made space for Sultana's Dreamers to emerge.

*Mindfulness helps us honor the mystical unfolding of creative energy.*



The Collective

- THE AGENDA -

<u>Date</u>	<u>Theme</u>
Feb 2	— Gathering
Feb 9	— Identity
Feb 16	— Intuition
Feb 23	— Space
Mar. 9	— Imagination
Mar. 16	— Expression
Mar. 23	— Lineage
Mar. 30	— Connection

# Gathering

Feb 2

## Connection

What is the story behind your name?

What is something you miss from your childhood?

## Activity

### Community Agreements

- How do you want to feel as you move through this creative journey?
- What do you need to feel safe, comfortable and excited to do this work?
- What are your expectations from fellow community members?



1. Cultivate safe and respectful relationships
2. Light the creative spark within each other
3. Grow and evolve both as individuals & as a group
4. Create a comfortable space for honest participation
5. Be intentionally engaged and present when we meet
6. Bravely share our stories and thoughts
7. Express support and care for one another
8. See silence and discomfort as necessary steps to change
9. Establish a structure that supports realistic growth
10. Hold each other accountable to this agreement

# Identity

Feb 9

## Connection

What does your morning routine look like?

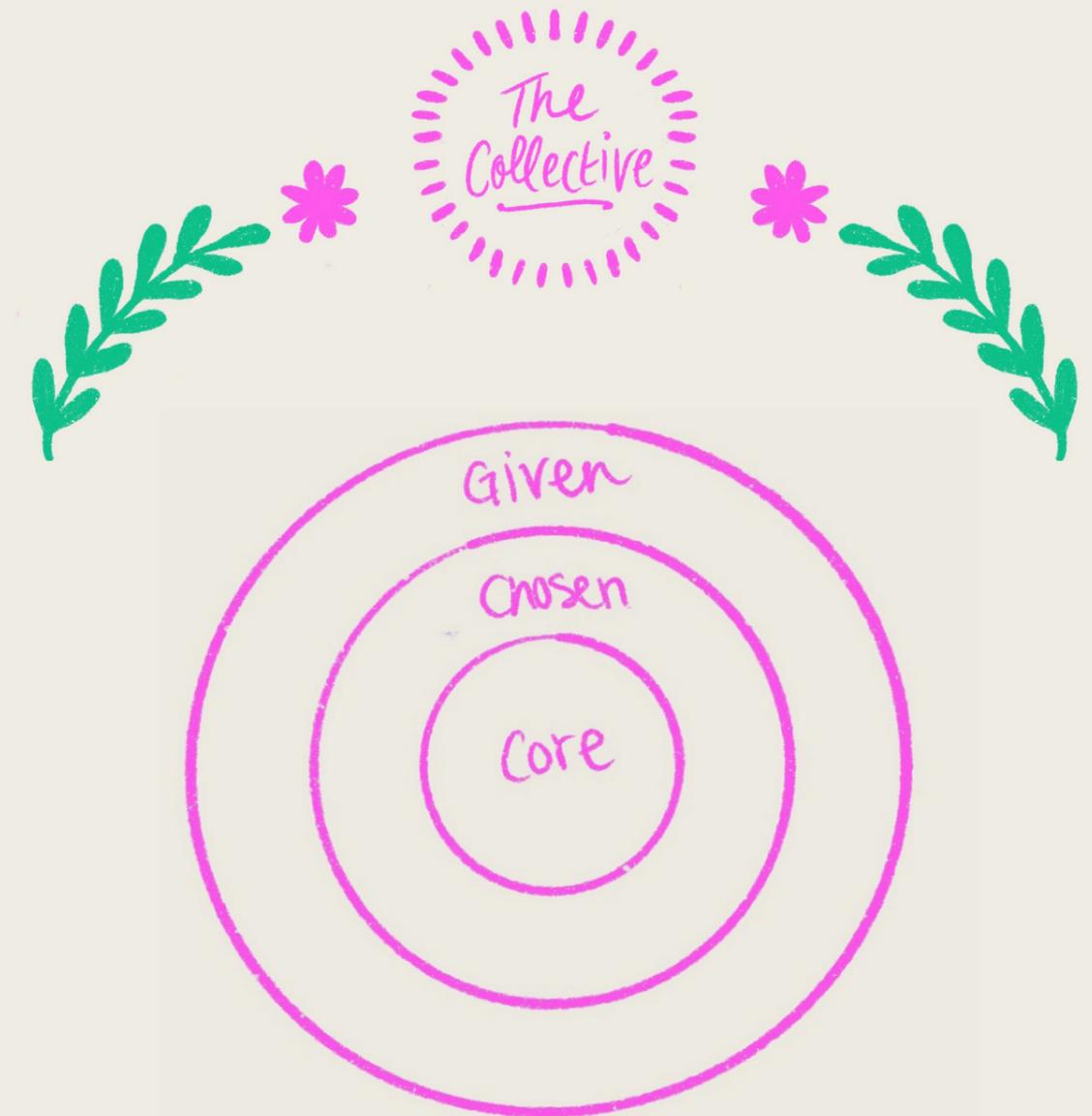
## Activity

### Identity Mapping\*

- **Given:** Identities you were born with and cannot change
- **Chosen:** Identities you have had most or some choice in adopting
- **Core:** Characteristics that are essential to who you are and drive the choices you make

## Ending

Choose three identities that resonate with you most



# Intuition

Feb 16

## Connection Cards

What is something you're 'supposed' to know about desi culture but don't?

## Activity

### Character Development

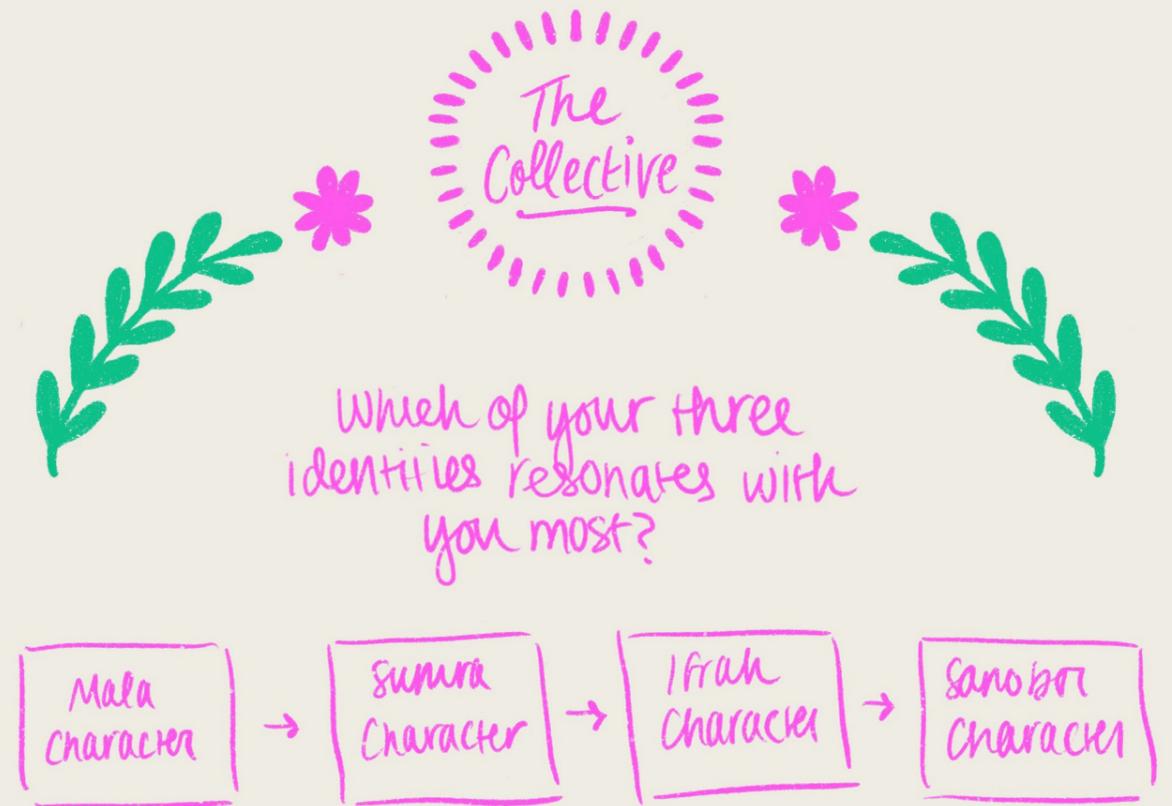
- Create a futuristic character based on your three most resonate identities.
- Every five minutes, rotate to the next person's board to iterate on their character

### Character Profile Prompts

List three dominant feelings they tend to gravitate towards.

What is the story behind their name?

What does their morning routine look like?



# Space

Feb 23

## Connection Cards

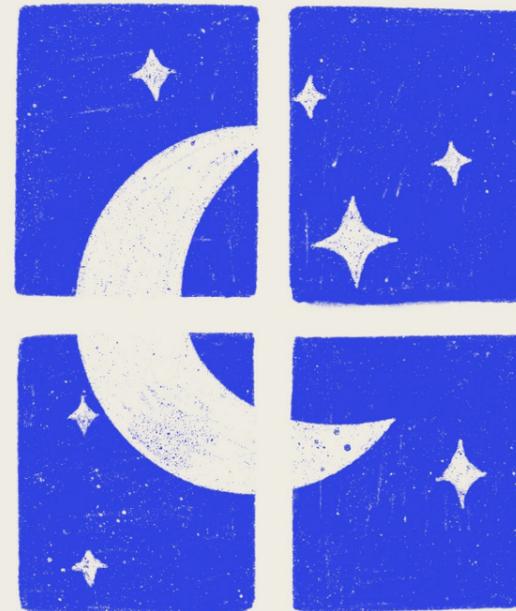
What is something you learned to do from an elder in your community?

## Activity

It's Your 100th Birthday!\*

- What are three wishes you have for yourself?





\* Sultana's Dream  
One evening I was  
lounging in an easy  
chair in my bedroom  
and thinking lazily  
of the condition of  
Indian womanhood.

# Imagination

Mar. 9

## Connection Cards

Is there something you've dreamed of doing for a long time? Why haven't you done it?

## Activity

### Reimagining Ladyland

- Jot down ideas you have in response to each subsection
- The ideas can be notes, pictures, links, etc.
- You can change or challenge anything under "currently" section
- Anything you add must be aligned with the values of Ladyland

# WELCOME TO LADYLAND

Virtue • Knowledge • Love • Truth • Nature



# Expression

Mar. 16

## Connection Cards

AS you were growing up, did you feel like you had opportunities to express yourself?

## Activity

### Our Characters in Ladyland

- Choose one of the creative prompts to develop your character as a citizen of our Ladyland
- What sector of Ladyland do they find themselves engaging most with?



### Creative Activity Prompts

1. Write a journal entry from their perspective about what they did in their day.
2. Draw a portrait of them in their favorite place.
3. Create a timeline of the most important moments in their life.
4. Write dialogue for an argument they are having with someone they care about.
5. Draw a "family" tree of the most important people in their life.
6. Make a playlist of songs they listen to when they are doing their favorite hobby.

# Lineage

Mar. 23

## Connection Cards

What is one funny  
you do for yourself  
when you are having  
a bad day?

Would you rather go into  
the past to meet your  
ancestors or into the future  
to meet your great-great  
grandchildren?

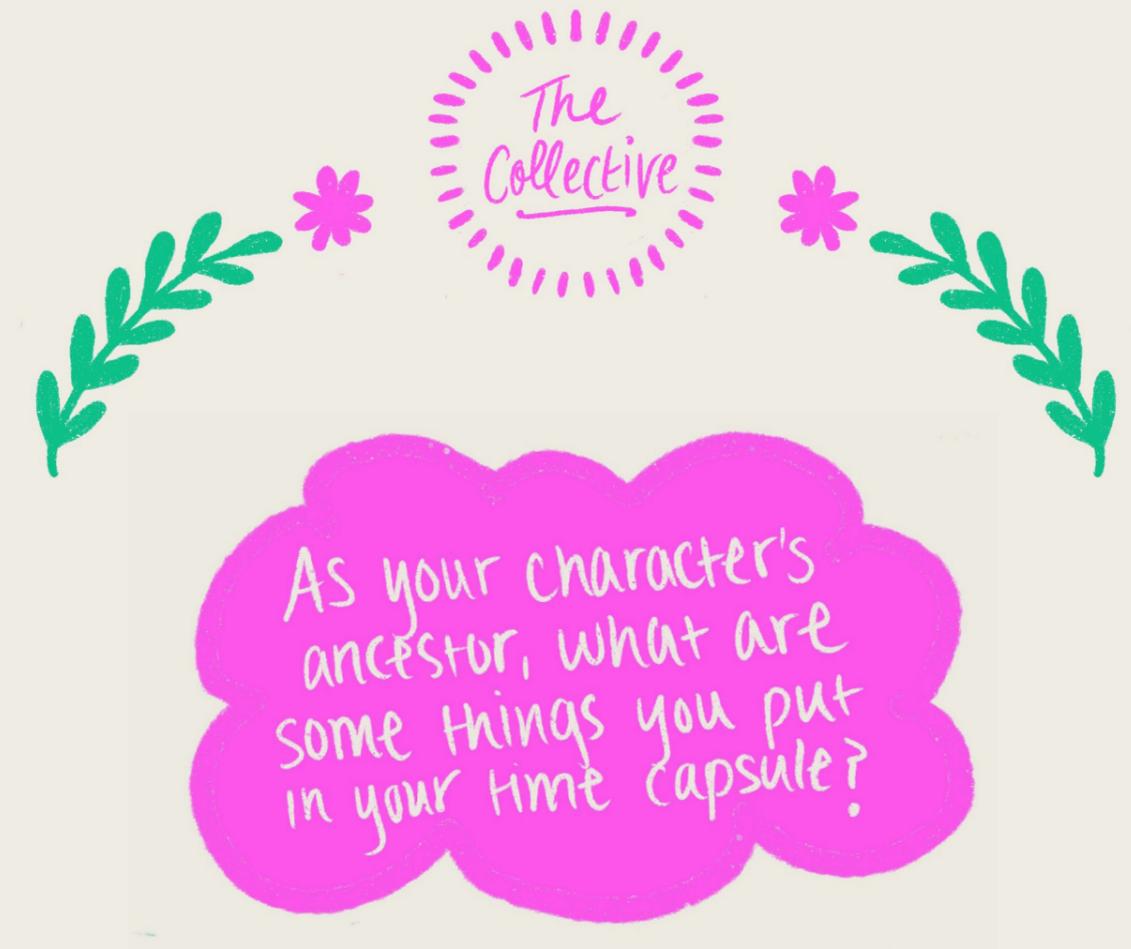
## Activity

### Good Ancestors

We find out that our characters  
open up a time capsule  
and realize it is from you

### Brainstorm:

- What objects have meaning to you?
- What represents a joyous time in your life?
- What characteristic do you love most about yourself?
- What is something you know how to do?
- What reminds you of home?





## Reflections

We began the process of reclaiming our power in reimagining a future co-designed both by each other and ancestors like Rokeya Skhawat Hossain who dared to dream. In the second half of our gatherings, we built upon Ladyland with our own ideas of what a world of intergenerational healing looks like. Ifrah imagined a world where we have “[moved] past the survival tendency” while Mala dreamed of “confidence that the next generation learns from our mistakes”. Through storytelling, we are able to empower ourselves and each other by blending the realistic parts of our lives with the imaginative world of Ladyland. In doing so, we co-created a space where we had the freedom to express our stories and see ourselves as liberated individuals. When writing our characters, Sumra shared that “in an alternate timeline, there is a Sumra

who is super spontaneous” which gave life to the possibility of expressing the otherwise hidden parts of her identity. In an activity where we developed our own Ladyland characters and iterated upon each others’ work, Mala and Sumra shared that through storytelling, their ideas “blossomed” and “gradually got more and more imaginative”.

In our discussions, we recognized the challenge and possibly re-traumatizing experiences of practicing intergenerational healing through conversation, when language is inaccessible to our parents and grandparents. We realized that intergenerational healing can also look like using creativity as an outlet to express subconscious states of being and therefore transcend language. In one of our last gatherings, we learned that our characters were our own

descendants, which enabled us to identify “what we were healing towards” and see ourselves in our inevitable role as ancestors (Rittner). In our last gathering, Sanobar said she imagined using the Connection cards to get to know her mother “not just as a mom, but as a person”. The creative activation of our minds shifted our perspective on how we saw our elders. Throughout this process, we honored the fact that our grandmothers and mothers “did their part” and now it is time for us to do ours (Saad). Creativity and storytelling spaces were places for us to connect to elders. In reimagining futures, we were also rewriting our own histories where our ancestors like Sultana not only suffered and survived, but gifted the opportunity and strength for us to continue as Sultana’s Dreamers for our own futures.

# SULTANA'S DREAMERS

I could see this collective growing into a space for healing for a larger network...  
-Sanobar

I want to know her more as a person - not just as a mom.  
-Sanobar

Our identities are deeply complex things.  
-Sumra

It seems like we don't dream often. Instead we follow expectations and plans.  
-Ifrah

I gradually got more and more imaginative  
-Mala

## Chapter V

### *The Healing*

After our final gathering at the end of March, I felt myself longing for the community we as Sultana's Dreamers, had built together. I knew the experience had been transformative for each of us but did not realize the deepness of that transformation until a few weeks later. In between one of the weeks that Sultana's Dreamers had met, I agreed to join a therapy group of second generation Arab and South Asian American women co-created and co-led by my therapist. I felt a familiar pit of anxiety start to solidify in my stomach as I replayed how I would introduce myself over and over again. Even as the meeting began, I started to feel a looming regret for agreeing to be a part of a group where we were required to share our deepest challenges and insecurities with strangers.

I could feel myself dissociating and becoming increasingly isolated from listening to several women share the same feelings of excitement and gratitude for being a part of this group. My therapist then posed the question: How are you feeling right now? It was a simple but familiar question that instantly catapulted me into the reality of my situation. I un-muted my microphone and spoke truthfully for the first time that evening. I was feeling awkward and uncomfortable. The distrust and skepticism I automatically defaulted to, was exactly the intergenerational trauma I had actively been working to abolish in my research. I was reminded of our rituals from Sultana's Dreamers and like muscle memory, I

embraced the empowering space we had created together to move through the cultural trauma of distrusting each other that had been so deeply embedded in my psyche. I was reminded of our ancestors healing concept that, "to cure the body or the mind was an act of belief...to heal was divine" (Rittner). What we had created as Sultana's Dreamers was not a product, but a behavior and ability to heal in community.

While I was writing my thesis paper, conducting interviews and reading articles, the shift was learning to be "effective in the space of the unknown" by witnessing Mala, Ifrah, Sanobar and Sumra. In the framework of traditional social innovation, they designed the intervention, the tools, and the methodology by embodying, practicing, trusting each other (Proctor). Moreover, I felt conviction in my personal practice of co-designing and that social impact work "always shifts and moves" with that movement being a "part of this work" (Osaki). The process of being in community with one another, of iteration, of sharing our stories, and of supporting each other are all indicative of intergenerational healing. As Chetna shared with me, "there is no one who is more of an expert of our own intergenerational trauma than ourselves". The true work of intergenerational healing begins when we make space for each other and within ourselves to co-design creative ways of reimagining our futures.

To cure the body  
or the mind was an  
act of belief... to  
heal was divine.

• JENNIFER RITTNER •



\* **Sahar Ghaheri, Miya Osaki & Jennifer Rittner** for their guidance and mentorship.

\* **Karen Proctor** for her work in improvisational leadership and in helping me to reach a consciousness of self.

\* **Mickey Ferrara, Dori Jacobson, Jenny Lin, Ruike Pan, Neil Jia & Kehan Zhang**, for their support and community.

\* **All the people** who are already doing work in the space of trauma-informed design and healing justice.

\* **All the women** who bravely shared the stories that shaped this work.

\* **Ifrah Akhtar, Sumra Alvi, Mala Kumar & Sanobar Shaikh** for co-designing this thesis journey with me.

\* **My therapist and therapy group** for guiding me through unlearning harmful ways of being.

\* **The women I have grown up amongst** who showed in our shared experiences and conversations, the importance and urgency of this work.

\* **Tom Harris** for his strength and faith in my capacity to heal and grow.

\* **My parents** whose work of healing from intergenerational traumas have given me the opportunity to do this work.

\* **My grandparents and ancestors** for their gifts of creativity and storytelling.

\* **The lineage of women** who will iterate on and champion this work to evolve and unfold across generations.

# Citations

- Aftab, Atiya. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 28 Apr. 2022.
- Aleena. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 10 Dec. 2021.
- Alex. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 17 Nov. 2021.
- Ariel. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 14 Nov. 2021.
- Arshe. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 09 Nov. 2021.
- Asiyah. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 07 Dec. 2021.
- Asma. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 22 Nov. 2021.
- Berglee, Royal. "Chapter 9: South Asia." *World Regional Geography: People, Places, and Globalization*, FlatWorld, Boston, MA, 2018.
- Chetna, host. "Intuition is an Embodied Collaboration." *Creation for Liberation*, Spotify, 04 Nov. 2021.
- Chetna. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 13 Jan. 2022.
- Chitnis, Varsha, and Danaya C. Wright. "The Legacy of Colonialism: Law and Women's Rights in India." *Scholarship.law.ufl.edu*, University of Florida Levin College of Law, 1 Jan. 2007.
- Cynthia. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 20 Nov. 2021.
- Dietkus, Rachael. "Global Guest Lecture." Speaker Series, 03 Nov. 2021, School of Visual Arts, New York City. Keynote Address.
- Elias, Priya-Alika. "The Silence about Mental Health in South Asian Culture Is Dangerous." *The New Republic*, 25 Oct. 2021.
- Ghoshal, Devjyot. "The Forgotten Story of India's Colonial Slave Workers..." *Quartz*, Quartz India, 4 Nov. 2014.
- Hayman, Bernard. "Global Guest Lecture." Speaker Series, 27 Oct. 2021, School of Visual Arts, New York City. Keynote Address.
- Hazarika, Pratishi. "The Quest to Reclaim the Lost Status of Hijras in India: A Reading of Living Smile Vidya's I Am Vidya: A Transgender's Journey and A. Revathi's The Truth About Me: A Hijra Life Story." *New Literaria*, vol. 1, no. 2, 2020, pp. 230–239.
- Inayah. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 22 Nov. 2021.
- Jinan and Malak. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 09 Dec. 2021.
- Kurlinkus, Krista. "Why Rest Is Resistance." *Grant Writing Made Easy*, 11 Oct. 2021.
- Lena. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 12 Nov. 2021.
- Mala. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 28 Oct. 2021.
- Malik, Khaula. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 24 Jan. 2022.
- Maria. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 11 Nov. 2021.
- Menakem, Resmaa. *My Grandmother's Hands: Racialized Trauma and the Pathway to Mending Our Hearts and Bodies*. Penguin Books, 2021.
- Mishaal. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 04 Dec. 2021.
- Molvi, Fareeha. "How South Asian-Owned Threading Salons in the US Became a Space for Community." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 8 May 2021.
- Nida. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 09 Dec. 2021.
- Noori. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 07 Dec. 2021.
- Oldenburg, Veena Talwar. *Dowry Murder: The Imperial Origins of a Cultural Crime*. Oxford Univ. Press, 2003.
- Osaki, Miya. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 30 Mar. 2022.
- Ozenc, Kursat. "Introducing Ritual Design: Meaning, Purpose, and Behavior Change." *Medium*, *Ritual Design*, 16 Oct. 2021.
- Pervez, Salman. "Sharam (Nahi) Karo: Generational Shaming in the Desi Community." *Medium*, 13 Sept. 2017.
- Proctor, Karen. "Artist in Residence", 11 Apr. 2022, School of Visual Arts, New York City.
- Renken, Elena. "How Stories Connect and Persuade Us: Unleashing the Brain Power of Narrative." *NPR*, *NPR*, 11 Apr. 2020.
- Rittner, Jennifer. "Healing Futures." *Global Guest Lecture Series*. 13 Apr. 2022, New York City, Design for Social Innovation at The School of Visual Arts.
- Saad, Layla. "Interviews with Change-Makers & Culture-Shapers Exploring What It Means to Be a Good Ancestor." *LAYLA F. SAAD*, 7 Apr. 2022.
- Sana. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 18 Jan. 2022.
- Sanobar. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 16 Nov. 2021.
- Sarah. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 02 Nov. 2021.
- Segal, Corinne. "Stitch by Stitch, a Brief History of Knitting and Activism." *PBS*, *Public Broadcasting Service*, 23 Apr. 2017.
- Sofia. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 16 Nov. 2021.
- Sumra. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 09 Nov. 2021.
- Tharoor, Shashi. *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*. Aleph Book Company, 2016.
- Tabina. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 06 Dec. 2021.
- Zahra. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 09 Dec. 2021.
- Zainab. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 16 Nov. 2021.
- Zayna. Interview. Conducted by Zahra Bukhari, 16 Nov. 2021.



