

“TO KNOW WHERE I’M FROM”

NARRATOR **Rabia Ahsin**

FOR LESSON

*Growing Up
and Fitting In*



ALI When did you start wearing the **hijab**?

RUN TIME 3:16

AHSIN Oh, man. Okay. So I started wearing hijab, like, three days before 9/11. But it was, like, not — I would wear it to school. And I wore it because my mom, I remember growing up, was like, “Oh, you should wear it.” But only to school. It wasn’t something —

HIJAB

a headscarf worn by Muslim women.

ALI Did your mom wear hijab?

AHSIN She didn’t really, but it was something that [laughter] she wanted us to do, just for, like, this, kind of, like, oh, you know. They wanted me to wear **shalwar kameez**. That was a hundred percent. They were like, “You have to wear shalwar kameez.” At one point they refused to buy me, like, American clothes, because they wanted to, like, instill — and I say American. Obviously, all of that is, like, in quotes, whatever that means. But they really wanted to — they didn’t want us to lose our culture, and I think there’s a real fear for immigrant parents that their children will no longer understand, love, or uphold the same kind of, like, respect towards their cultural upbringing that they did. And so they very much wanted us to wear shalwar kameez.

**SHALWAR
KAMEEZ**

a dress worn in South Asia that consists of a long top (kameez), pants (salwar), and a scarf.

And then at one point — so basically, my mom would tell me like, “Oh, you know, I think you should wear the scarf.” We didn’t really call it hijab back then. We just called it a scarf. And I remember I would wear it sometimes, and I’d be like, “Mom, they don’t allow it in school. They say no hats in school, so I can’t wear it.” So, you know, I — I — I guess — I would say that, like, every year for, like, two, three years. And then one day I was just like, “You know what? I’m just going to wear it. Who cares? Whatever. I’ll see if I like it or if I don’t.”

And then it was fifth grade. So it was two thousand ele— 2001. And, yeah, I put it on, and three days later, 9/11 happened. [laughter] And like, now — you know, it was, like, interesting, because as soon as I put it on, nobody really, like, thought anything differently or — you know, it was — it was something that was normal, I guess, because they’d seen other people do it, and they’d seen, like, their friends’ moms wear it, or whatever the case is. And it wasn’t something like, “Oh my God, why are you wearing this thing on your head?” And again, I would only wear it to school, so if anybody saw me after school or at home, or wherever, I wasn’t — you know, I didn’t have it on me, so I wasn’t even — you know, I wasn’t, like, Rabia changed so much.

But I remember being really excited. It’s sounds — it’s going to sound so stupid now, but I remember being really excited that after 9/11, Pakistan was something that was — you know, people knew who Pakistanis were, and Pakistan was something that was, like, known. It was in the papers. Like, I remember getting so excited reading, like — because we — we would have the *New York Times* and *Daily News*, like, daily delivered into our classroom. And for social studies or whatever, or current events, we used to call it — but we had to, you know, read articles, or, like, get ideas — like, talk about what was happening in, like, whatever, the real world. And I remember getting so exciting that, “Oh my God, people are going to know where I’m from.”

Because it was something that I had to constantly explain to people, or I would tell — you know, they didn’t really understand where, geographically, my family came from. But a lot — and then I was, like, you know, “They’re going to understand why I wear this.” For me, I thought of it as, like, as a — initially, that Muslims were in the news, I thought of it as, like, a positive thing. Not because — I didn’t, obviously, realize or understand the connotation of, like, what was

happening, but to me, it was like, “Oh, I’ll be known. I no longer have to explain myself to people.” And then I realized I would actually have to end up explaining myself to people for the rest of my life.

BIO Rabia Ahsin was born in 1991 in Midwood. While studying political science at Brooklyn College, she joined the school’s Islamic Society as well as with the Muslim Women’s Educational Initiative, both of which were targeted by the New York City Police Department for religiously motivated surveillance by an undercover officer while Ahsin was a member. She also became an outspoken activist against human rights abuses, including protesting with Brooklyn College’s newly formed Students for Justice in Palestine and focusing her studies on surveillance in New York City. She went on to work as a special education teacher at an all-girls secondary school.

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