

## “LANGUAGE OF INTELLIGENCE”

## FOR LESSON

*Growing Up  
and Fitting In*NARRATOR **Rabia Ahsin**

**AHSIN** I grew up in a very, like — I wouldn't call it a religious, but religion didn't necessarily play a very obvious role in my life, but culture did. And so I knew I was Pakistani. That was, like — I knew I was Punjabi. That was very much ingrained in everything that we did. The language, food, clothing, you know. I grew up on, like, Punjabi stage dramas and *Star Trek*, and those were, like, the two things that, like, kind of, made up my childhood. Like, for example, when I came back from school, it was — I had to be in **shalwar kameez**. That was — there was no question about it. Like, I switched out of my, in quotes, “Western clothing,” to, like, my home clothing, which was shalwar kameez. And so it was — and it wasn't because it was, like, oh, this is more modest, but that, no, this is your culture. This is what you wear at home. You speak the language — even though we didn't speak Urdu at home, because it was embarrassing. [laughter]

RUN TIME **2:38****SHALWAR  
KAMEEZ**

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

**ALI** How — how so?

**AHSIN** So, okay. So basically, me, my brother, and my sister, we're, like, about a year apart each, or a year and a couple of months. And so when that translates into, like, school, we're literally only just one grade — there's a difference of one grade, so we're often in each other's circles, or at lunchtime, or whatever the case was. And, like, speaking Urdu in school — even though Urdu was my first language, speaking Urdu in school was seen as, like, this, kind of like, “Oh, you can't speak English. That's why you speak this other language.” Even though by the age — by the time I was four years old, I could read in Arabic, speak in Urdu, understand English, and speak whatever I could.

But it was, like, understanding, you know, multiple languages at such a young age, and yet there was this fear of, like, if I spoke in Urdu in school, they would

assume that I was automatically the other, or I was, you know, not as intelligent, because, you know, for some reason, at such a young age, English is ingrained as, like, the language of intelligence. And so there was this fear amongst me, my brother, and my sister, and then — and it wasn't even like we sat down and spoke about it, and decided one day that we're just no longer going to speak to each other in Urdu. It was just kind of, like, known that we're not going to do it. It's kind of lame. Let's just speak to each other in English.

But my parents really took a hit, because they spoke to us in Urdu, and they spoke to each other in Punjabi, but when they'd get mad at us, they'd speak to us in Punjabi, so it was, like, something that we were very familiar with. And yet we struggled so much to speak it, especially after a certain age, where you haven't really practiced the language. It becomes very difficult for you to engage in it on a — on a more meaningful level. And so I could understand it. I can understand various dialects of Punjabi even, and — but I can't speak it to this day because of that fear.

**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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