

What Am I?

“So, what are you?” The question was peculiar. One I’d heard before – yes, but not one I had ever truly known how to answer. It was so simple yet so complex: what am I? Human, female, sixteen and eternally pessimistic, but that didn’t matter in the context. What is my heritage? My ethnicity? That is a whole different question altogether.

“I’m mixed, Indian British,” I say, in a practiced, almost impulsive way. I always cringed at the word “mixed”, as though somehow two people, two cultures, were placed into a pot and stirred thoroughly until I was produced. I suppose it is better than being half and half: half of one, and half of the other, but never fully either. To the Indian side of my family I was White, and to the White side of my family I was Indian.

The question became much more common, much more so as I grew up. My brother had darker skin so everyone presumed he was Indian, maybe Pakistani, but when he started drinking, people started to question. I was always an interesting in-between. “Mixed,” they would say, “Mixed what?”, and “That’s so exotic!”, and I had no choice but to elaborate. Not that I hated it; the interest in my background and life made me feel more interesting than the common person, like an endangered species, despite the fact that mixed people are becoming the most common ethnic minority in the UK.

I grew to enjoy it, to like my interesting background. I was never one for talking, but it gave me something to talk about, something to use to make conversation, to make myself seem more interesting than I actually was. My brother, on the other hand, struggled. He felt excluded. He would wince every time someone asked if he was with me and my mother. My friends were accepting; we were all from different cultures and we enjoyed learning. His did not. They liked to keep to themselves, to keep to certain ethnic groups – those that he felt he didn’t fit into. He began to leave it behind, his past and his heritage. When he went to university and started again, he was much happier for it. I never wanted to leave it behind. It was bad enough that I had never been to India; I didn’t even know the language.

There was also the clash of religions. My mother’s family were strict Protestants, and we always celebrated Christmas, without fail. We also celebrated Eid. The two celebrations were so different that I became hopelessly confused. I was brought up as a Muslim - why was I celebrating Christmas? Not that I was complaining; “You’re so lucky,” my friends would say, when I told them I got two lots of presents a year. I didn’t understand at first - didn’t everyone? But I began to understand that the normal would have been one or other, not both. The religion was a formality; we were only Muslim because my dad would not have been allowed to marry my mother if she hadn’t converted, and so the subject was dropped, it became something on the side-lines.

It was uncomfortable but better than following something you didn’t believe in. Like my ethnicity, my religion became something in-between, undecided. I became agnostic, because the determination required to follow a religion to its end was something I didn’t have, and didn’t know if I ever would.

I was talking to my father one particular afternoon and he told me that he wanted to be cremated. I didn’t think anything strange about it at first, but then my mother explained to me that, no, Muslims were never cremated, and then made him write it in his will because ‘No way in hell I’m telling your

family'. It was only later that I realised that she expected that they would blame her for his change of mind, that she was the one who wanted him cremated because it fell within her views. They didn't realise that she couldn't care less.

Despite this, though I never fully felt a part of either culture, I could respond to my friends' talk about Asian customs, as well as my friends' discussions of British politics. My combination of knowledge on two different cultures made me in some ways better versed on the customs of both, and of the mixed race, a part of society that was hardly represented in media or literature. My background meant that there were always people willing to listen to me, and I became interested in listening to others. My school was very mixed – only a third of my friends are white- but I could sympathise and understand different ethnicities due to the partial knowledge of both points of view. I learned to listen intently, to gather as much knowledge of the cultures around me as I could so that I could learn more. I became the perfect candidate to debate my knowledge on subjects of prejudice and colour, fitting into the slot of white and Asian at the same time. I could be on one side or the other, and though I would argue that I felt more British than Asian, I still had a better knowledge on the subject than many others.

I was always proud of my heritage, I never tried to hide it because the fact I was mixed race never bothered me, but it became tedious that it had to be mentioned to every new friend, at every interview and on every questionnaire, as though it were relevant to anything other than my skin colour or my name. I suppose it was and people always wanted to know, and something like heritage is not something you can just ignore. Not that it should be, either; the modern clash of cultures and religions feels like a breath of fresh air, that with every argument and difference that comes between the different cultures in Britain, new cultures and understanding are born and, although mixed race people similar to me felt like an in-between, the fact that mixed is an ethnic category in itself on UK questionnaires shows how far Britain has progressed, and how much the meaning of 'British' and 'Mixed' has changed in society. So perhaps, one day, it will not be 'What are you?', but "Who are you?"

Anisha Talati

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William Hulme's Grammar School