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Shiva Has Arms Enough to Hold Us All

When I was a child, my mom signed me up for Indian classical singing lessons. I learned *sa re ga ma pa tha ni sa* at the same time that I was deciding "Longview" by Green Day was my first favorite song. That simple rolling bassline moved me in a way singing scales could not possibly. My older brother, who I looked up to so much, would supply my Sandisk mp3 player with new albums to listen to every couple of months – he brought me up on Green Day, Tool and Iron Maiden. I quit my music lessons before long. It was tedious to sit on the floor of that old woman's home and learn songs in a language I did not understand. I didn't know anyone else taking these lessons. The girls who did Bharatanatyam dance were not my friends; they were the daughters of mothers who shunned my mom's delicious mango pie at the Diwali function, just because it was made with gelatin.

"Oh, *no,* we don't eat that. Do you even *know* what's in gelatin?"

Why should I learn the songs of a culture represented by these bitter aunties? I had no idea of the vastness of my heritage, only of the Indians who were wealthy enough to come to America. This certain class of Indians brought with them a judgment for those different from them that I didn't understand. Now I see that it was self-protection; shun what is unfamiliar in order to protect what you've brought with you from home. As an American kid with very little experience being in India, this mindset actively excluded me. These aunties could have opened their arms and taught me about the things they held dear, things that should belong to me, too, but instead made me feel like I could never belong to them. My mom did not fight me when I quit my music lessons. She felt the shame they imposed on her and stood her ground with

pride by signing me up for art classes and soccer instead.

My mom is a singer. Every time we get together with family, she is asked to sing the old ragas, each uncle requesting their favorite. She won awards when she was a girl in India for her clear soprano voice and her unbelievable skill that let her step so delicately and precisely from note to note. It must have hurt her when I quit my singing lessons. She never showed it, but it must have. My mother, along with every other Indian that left their home to seek education in America, left behind a rich and beautiful culture for bastardized “chai tea lattes” and white washed yoga. It hurts to admit that a Dunkin’ vanilla chai latte is actually pretty good. I left my mom at home, singing along to her ragas, and followed my brother to hardcore shows in sweaty bars and basements. My limited understanding of my heritage made me feel like I had to choose between her culture and mine, as if they didn’t overlap.

Personal identity is an extremely important western value. Americans in particular idealize the concept of self-sufficiency; the American dream is all about individual accomplishments and wealth. We expect our children to leave home when they turn eighteen and be independent. We commend people for bearing their hardships alone. We love to drive alone in our cars, going anywhere we want and answering to no one. It was in this individuality driven search for freedom that I curated the pieces of my identity, regardless of the community focused culture my parents were raised in. There is something in punk and hardcore that reached the part of me that felt I could never belong to anything. I was too brown to be white and too American to be Indian; if I was going to belong to something I had to make it myself. I clung so hard to my music because it was all I had that felt like it was mine. The pain of creating oneself is so intrinsically American.

How we shape our identities has much to do with the perspectives we are raised with. In Akshay Ahuja's essay, "Death Metal and the Indian Identity", Ahuja tells the story of his friendship with Pradyum, a metal guitarist who lives in Bangalore, the same city my mom's parents live in. Ahuja himself lives in Boston, and so views Pradyum through the lens of someone with an Indian-informed American perspective, much like my own. Pradyum's take on Indians' musical taste is that "most people in India were willing to listen to anything, that they didn't believe in 'identity music'- that is, they didn't care enough about any one genre to build their identity around it" (Ahuja 13). Pradyum values the individualism of America over the "shallowness", as he calls it, of Indians. This distinction goes along with the assumption that these two perspectives are not only separate, but opposite. Ahuja describes Pradyum's look as "James Dean"-like; leather jacket, motorcycle, the whole bit. He's serious about his death metal and his room is painted black. He's a perfect American rebel, except for the fact that when he has Ahuja over "[h]is mother insisted [Ahuja] sit down and immediately began to bring out plates of food" (Ahuja 13). Even though Pradyum puts forth this dark brooding image, he is still a Good Indian Boy who, "[o]nce the practice was over, … picked up the cigarette butts littering the roof. 'Let's not make a mess,' he said" (Ahuja 16). On one hand, Pradyum experiences that pain of forging individual identity in a sea of non-belonging, but on the other hand he is an Indian in India, a native in his homeland.

Ahuja points out the apparent opposition between cultures when he notices his own emotional reaction to the band practicing in the devramane, the shrine that most Hindu families keep. He finds that he is "strangely bothered by this; they all found the old strictures rather silly and considered ignoring them a constructive, radical gesture. This seemed backward to me, since

actually following them is a similarly radical gesture for an Indian in America" (15). Ahuja highlights the juxtaposition, encouraging the reader to wonder: are these two cultures mutually exclusive? They seem to be in practice, but Ahuja's mention of a Shiva statue in the devramane recalls a favorite childhood story of mine. Shiva is the god of both creation and destruction, death and dance. The most iconic image of Shiva, the one which stands on my shelf and likely the one present in Pradyum's devramane, is of the god dancing the Shiva Tandava, the dance that is the source of the cycle of creation, of preservation, of dissolution. In his hand he holds a drum, and each beat of the drum brings something into existence. He dances on the back of a small pitiful creature, Muyalaka, who represents ego and spiritual ignorance. Shiva must break the back of ego and dance to release the souls of all humans from the snare of illusion. Is that not the most metal thing you've ever heard? Hidden in the radical rejection of traditional Hinduism is a secret homage to Shiva himself, of which Pradyum may not even be aware.

The dancing Shiva on my shelf is a personal reminder of my innate Indianness. Me being Indian is a simple fact of my identity that can never be taken away. I know now, as a critically thinking adult, that Shiva would enjoy a hardcore show as much as I do. What is the mosh pit but an incarnation of the Shiva Tandava? We dance to expel darkness, to connect with what is real, and to be in community. Holding band practice in the devramane may have struck Ahuja as disrespectful but it is not shameful to mix cultures. The truly radical part of playing metal to Shiva is that it *makes sense*. Shiva would love metal – it reflects all the things he represents. This is the ultimate truth: your heritage is yours, and there is always room for you in it. No bitter auntie can exclude me from my own blood, and Pradyum need not choose between his home and his music. All aspects of my identity and his reside within ourselves, no shame, no conflict.

Works Cited

Ahuja, Akshay. “Death Metal and the Indian Identity.” *Opening Conversations: A Writer’s Reader*, edited by Haivan V. Hoang, et al, Hayden-McNeil/Macmillan Learning Curriculum Solutions, 2015, pp. 10-18.