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Abstract

Introduction: The Project and the Point

I am what I could call a newcomer to my field. I did not discover the world of identity and policy and border conflicts until my junior year of college, when it suddenly entered my life. I wanted to reconcile my identities and understand what it meant to be me, and I was introduced to a whole new world because of it. When I first started learning about South Korea's history and realising the parallels between the Korean and Indian Peninsulas, I had not heard of this work before. I had to study a lot of this on my own and write my own answers to my questions. So, I thought writing a Capstone thesis on this would be a good way to push myself creatively and provide me with the resources needed to better understand my question: what does acceptance mean to different places with border conflicts? Which identities play a role in this acceptance and who is it offered to? This paper hopes to explain my thought process behind choosing Korea both as a place to study and as a place to study in, and how it informed my viewpoint on acceptance.

I was born in Lahore, Pakistan, a city near the Indian-Pakistani border. Even this, the location of Lahore, I realise, speaks to my identity. Although I moved to America when I was only two-and-a-half, I pride myself in keeping in touch with my home cultures, through language, food, music and religion. Growing up in the US as a Muslim immigrant in the post-9/11 era was not always easy, though at the time, I would not know if my experiences were due to me being Muslim. Maybe it was just because I looked different. My skin was not light enough nor dark enough to fit into any specific predominant racial group. I was not skinny enough to be popular and pretty and sought after. I was a little awkwardly shaped, with skinny legs but a chubby face. I had a need to impress people and it was evident I wore my heart on my sleeve; I could cry easily, and maybe that is why I was different. I do not know. When people turn you away, they do not often tell you why. It is a question that remained in my mind every time I felt isolated, every time I was made

fun of. What did I do wrong? Sometimes it felt like I was a tennis ball, thrown back and forth between different players in different ways, but ways that hurt nonetheless. I did not know how to be a player and I did not know how to leave the game. I was just a little kid but I had internalised the feeling of rejection, over and over and over. This was just the way people were, I thought, they just need me here so they have someone to push around. But if I left, I would have no one and being alone scared me even more and so I stayed.

This was how I spent my days in school until I reached my sophomore year of high school. It was my breaking point, I recall. Freshman year was just too much. New people, new school, new part of town, but same old behavior. So, I decided to change myself. It was tiring to run after people who were hurtful and I wanted to stop so I tried to distance myself slowly. I was very cautious of hurting their feelings, but I finally realised I could not help myself get better if I stayed with them. It was not easy but the rest of my high school career was filled with stoic expressions and a focus on studies — I did not know how to be nice without being taken advantage of, so I stopped being nice. I remember, people told me after they got to know me a little, how scared they were to talk to me, and I remember the satisfaction I received from that knowledge. I was on top for once. If I was feared, I could not be hurt. Somehow, some people wriggled their way into my life and for them, I am thankful. They are the reason I found the strength to be kind and understanding and accepting. They tell me I was not that scary or stoic, that I was still a nice person though I find that hard to believe, to be honest.

Why is this important? Although I did not recognise the weight of my Indian-Pakistani identity until college, I had clearly struggled with acceptance forever. It was not a new concept to me, so maybe that is why it felt so significant — my nationality and ethnicity became another way the world found to reject me.

A forever Pakistani in India, a word nearly synonymous with terrorist, an Indian *muhajir* (immigrant) in Pakistan, and an immigrant in the US. Who was I? Where was I from? I did not know. It seemed to depend so much on histories that existed before me, that I had no control over. This time, however, rejection did not stunt my growth or make me want to give up. This rejection fueled me. I wanted to know why I was categorised this way, when I can trace my ancestors decades back to India, when I was born in Pakistan, when I was raised almost exclusively in the US — none of these seemed to be enough for these societies and governments to accept me, but why? What could I do to be more Indian or Pakistani or American? How could I change how they felt about me?

It turns out, I changed my mind before I changed myself. *Nepantla*, the in-between state, wrote Gloria Anzaldúa — I like this word. I like that though most of my Pakistani family is from Karachi, I was born in Lahore, in-between India and Pakistan. I like that I was born a lefty but do half my tasks with my right hand. I like that I am the middle child of three girls. I like that although I am more introverted, I can switch on an extroverted personality. I am just in-between, I guess. As it would turn out, this would be all the acceptance I needed.

The purpose of this project, which consisted of trying to be conscious about my experiences and interactions and use words to record my sentiments, was to be able to see if there was something that gave me more acceptance in South Korea versus the acceptance I received growing up in the United States. While this was the initial purpose, as I spent my time in Korea and as I wrote these explanations, I learned quickly there was a lot more than just a formula to acceptance and fitting in. I often write letters to myself, which is where the idea came from, but this was the first time I was openly sharing these with others and trying to be really brutally honest about how I felt. The posts I shared below talk about some dark themes that were really present in my life

before Korea, but also some positive times when I felt good and safe and okay. I was posting these on a private Instagram account I made as I was experiencing them, followed only by the closest of friends and family — but others nonetheless. Sometimes I received positive feedback, sometimes just a ‘like,’ but in any case, it was interesting to see people’s responses to my words, because I had never talked about a lot of these things to any of them. It was nerve wracking and at times, became another way I sought acceptance and approval from them, just wanting them to realise I was hurting or to celebrate some positive experience with me, because I was so far away without most of them.

In any case, the actual project was the letters and notes and pictures, and this is just an explanation and discussion of what I learned.

Letters from Korea: A Glimpse into Life in Korea

— Tuesday, February 19, 2019; 7:30 pm

I arrive in Incheon, South Korea, grumbling about the fact that I had to sit still for an extra hour because North Korea was a no-fly zone, so we had to take a detour over China. That is what it seemed on the map, anyway. I am tired and sick of sitting and a little bit sleepy because I can never sleep properly on flights, but I am here. I, who worked so hard to come here, am here. The scenes blur together and suddenly I am sitting on the bus to Seoul. It is dark outside and there are wide lanes here, I notice. The moon is full and bright and it is welcoming me here. This place seems so familiar, I keep thinking. This place feels comfortable. The address to my Airbnb is confusing to the other helpful passengers of the bus, and to the driver, too, so once I get off this bus, I am not sure how I will get to my destination, but what does it matter? I am here.

It turns out it matters. I am lost, hopelessly so, but I am not afraid, because my taxi driver, an old man with slow speech and kind eyes, assures me he will not abandon me. We drive in circles, staring out the windows sharply, hoping the accommodation will materialise in front of us. I have started memorising the neighborhood at this point, but nothing changes. It stays dark and we stay confused. I am just about to give up hope when the crude map in my hand matches where we are and I thank the taxi driver profusely for helping me, which he waves off with a wrinkled hand. He sends me off with his wishes and compliments on my Korean and I am blushing because he sounds sincere and I am just so thankful to have found the place. Is this acceptance, I ask? So soon?

— 7:15 am • wednesday, february 20, 2019

so first day in south korea and sometimes it feels like i've always lived here and sometimes it's so new. i like this feeling — everything feels good here. i feel older in a sense, even though i'm new and don't know much. does that make sense? maybe not. there have been some issues with a person but at the same time it's a little endearing because it seems like she thinks i'm better than her and so she has to prove that I'm not but just the fact that she sees me as competition is a compliment, no? so far, i don't mind it enough to get irritated. even though these days i run on 4 hours of sleep a night, i have lots of energy so shoutout to my willpower and shoutout to my body for loving me. it is 7:18 am right now (i woke up at 4). yesterday i walked nearly 8 miles, which is the best thing ever. how do i already have so much to say — zoob is right, i really do talk about every detail. but i like doing that — it makes the minuscule moments mean something, you know?

— 9:10 pm• thursday, february 21, 2019

...i touched hands with the pm of india (his speech was HYPOCRISY X10000), the president of korea waved at me and bowed (like nodded his head type bow) and the former secretary general of the un said namaste to me (he was a old polite man and i said ☒☒☒☒☒ to him). that was day 2 in korea i would just like to thank Allah for allowing that to happen. i walked 11.5 miles and my feet feel a little unhappy with me (in my defense my shoes are great it's just that the roads here are very uneven so it hurts to walk here), but rest assured that i am satisfied beyond belief. also the owner of the coffee shop downstairs is an awesome person and even though i don't drink coffee or tea, i will be a regular to the shop. i've never been a regular before and day 2 in korea and i am! this is a magical life i'm living. i hope you all are finding some magic, too.

— Friday, February 22, 2019; 8:00 am

It is frighteningly cold outside and I am so happy. My breath hangs in the air and our suitcases are scattered about as we worry about getting to Yonsei University with so much luggage. An old woman comes down the stairs slowly and is startled by the four, non-Korean girls blinking back up at her, easily 12 suitcases stacked to the side. She starts talking, saying her son owns the apartment we stayed in before moving to the dorms, and tells us she will call him. He will help you, she assures us, he can help. I am bowing now, thankful she showed up because how could I call a taxi service with no phone? I did not think this through. I am the oldest of us four, I scold myself, I should have prepared better. Her son stands with us in the cold while the taxi comes, easily a thirty minute wait. He even helps load the luggage into the huge van and warns the driver to drive safely. I do not know how to thank him, so I apologise for the trouble, to which he shakes his head and goes to stand next to his mother. She's putting some lipstick on; she was on her way out somewhere, I notice, but she stayed. I bow to her, too, and she takes my hand in hers and tells me to do well. It has only been a few days and yet I feel I am home.

— 5:43 am • saturday, february 23, 2019;

i'm all moved in for now — i still have to unpack and stuff but that will happen slowly. it was a truly hectic day but a good one. i learned there are many nice people here that are so willing to help out. the community is very much united. this unity is one of the reasons i came here to study so i'm glad to already see it in action. my airbnb host stood outside with us for forty minutes in the cold, waiting for the van he called to take us to the dorms, because we didn't know we should have reserved it the night before and we had too much luggage for one day. it was actually really funny because randomly he asked me when my flight was and i said, "my flight? in june..." and he looked confused and asked why i was going to the airport right now then and i was like,

“...airport...no! we need to go to yonsei university!” and once he laughed and fixed that, he was like, “ah you’re studying here, i was wondering why you had SO much luggage!” there were like 12 suitcases and he thought it was for the five days we stayed at his place. quite hilarious. situation with competition girl is better already, Alhumdullilah. i kinda spent all of thursday unable to even look her in the eye (i really can’t be fake) and making the least amount of conversation with her possible, so i think she already learned not to be too forward with me. i was just polite, not friendly, and all day friday, she acted more normal, less aggressive. it’s a relief — i hate drama. this is the most drama i’ve had since i left starbucks at ucr in 2017. also, i didn’t take pictures friday so enjoy korean ice and yet another bt21 line friends store (they’re everywhere, yay!)

update: 6:27 am • crying for the first time in korea because i watched a video of a baby hearing for the first time. Amazing.

— 5:18 am • sunday, february 24, 2019

i met with jiwon’s mom yesterday and even though i promised myself not to exert myself, i was running late when trying to get her flowers, so i ran ran ran to the front gate of yonsei. she asked me if i was, “ ” (zobia’s older sister) and said it was so nice to meet me. when she asked me where i wanted to go get dinner, i said i didn’t know too well, but i just couldn’t eat meat. and she asked me if I could eat halal food and i was so surprised! she even had a halal restaurant in the sinchon village across from the university ready to go! it was indian food (most halal places are either indian or turkish here) and the waiter/owner spoke hindi and was really happy that i did, too. we ordered a lot and since it was my first time eating a meal in the day, i was literally starving. and the food was super good — definitely will go back. she asked me lots of questions about how

i'm doing so far and how the dorms are, where i've been already. after finishing the food, which she paid for, she told me she wanted to take me to a bakery so i could get breakfast for tomorrow and she walked me all the way to my dorm! it was at least a mile away from where she needed to go. we couldn't even find the bakery and the girl at the convenience store wasn't much help because she was a foreigner and didn't know where anything was. so in the end, she took me to this place called lord sandwich. it's british themed — very interesting, olden day britain. she bought me a sandwich and bread for the morning and told me to call her when i needed help and that we would meet again when jiwon came to visit. earlier she had given me a package, so when i got back to the dorm, i opened it and she put so many hot packs in there! she brought me a hair styler and when i opened it, i noticed it said, "swarovski crystal!" so now i have a crystal encrusted hair styler...i was so surprised. her kindness was so overwhelming. i'm thankful that i haven't had much homesickness or feeling of helplessness here. rather, i feel a bit at home already. people like her are making it even easier and after i met her, i thought i must have been an amazing person in my past life because how could i deserve so much kindness. as expected, Allah is always there. i'm sure hard days are ahead and i hope that i am able to remember these first few days and all the love and support i received from those back home and here. how did i get so lucky, to have you all in my life? i'll work harder to be a better person. this is how i feel right now, super, super lovely.

• 5:38 am

— Sunday, February 24, 2019; 11:24 am

I take a walk around the campus after settling into the area. My feet hurt because I have been walking too much – I reached 12 miles on Thursday. It is quiet right now, no sound save for the dirt crunching beneath my boots, because school has not started and it is the weekend. Although I

never thought about the bare winter trees this way, I like how they look now, because I can see the sky through them. I read *Turtles All the Way Down* by John Green a few days ago and now I cannot help but see trees differently. I take a picture because my skin looks nice and so does my hair. Usually, being alone like this scares me. I like the quiet but not the solitude. Something, though, about the air, or the campus or the trees makes me feel like I am not alone. I do not know it yet, but I will crave this contentedness soon. I will want it to be so quiet that I can hear nothing but my own thoughts.

— 7:50 am • monday, february 25, 2019

yesterday was a nice day. i spent most of it with the girls i came here with and i have to say — our relationships are getting better, even with comp girl. i think slowly, slowly, i realize the nicer i am, the more patient i am, the more results i will see. yesterday i saw the sun again after a couple of days without it. i notice the sun doesn't really set here — the sky just kinda fades into black. there's no brilliant display of color or obvious point where the horizon is changing color. the whole sky changes, i suppose. i'm already finding myself more comfortable being myself. like i'm fading into my actual self, slowly. yesterday and the day before i noticed a muslim girl (two different girls on two different days) and was able to go up to them and talk to them and both times, they were so grateful because they had no one here and were feeling very down. they both said they were so happy that i talked to them and i am happy i can be a little bit of relief for them. i feel more like zehra here. the zehra i have wanted to be for so long but have kept away. it's not that i can't be her at home but i get scared. here, it's easier to unlock that part of me because no one knows me anyway. i like that. for once, i am enjoying the unknown of myself and looking forward to learning

more about her. also please congratulate me, for the first time since 2/12, i slept a full 8 hours (and more!) • 7:58 am

— Monday, February 25, 2019; 11:59 am

We had UCEAP orientation today and I cried because we talked about the ‘s’ word and I cannot help but feel guilty for losing Camille. I tried to cry quietly so no one could see me and ask questions as to why I was crying over a mental health powerpoint. I think I succeeded but the tears did not take away the guilt locked in my throat and my fingers cannot stop shaking. I need help, I think, but starting over is too hard, so I will not go. Not now, anyway. I still cannot accept it, I know. It hangs over me as if I did it to her, and the images in my mind late at night are burned there forever. Images I created myself, that no one confirmed. I still cannot forget them, however. Acceptance, I think, requires a bit of giving up and giving up is hard. Will I ever move past this? I take a picture of the contact numbers for mental health help and dab at my tears silently.

— 6:24 am • tuesday, february 26, 2019

it’s funny how sadness creeps up when you’re least expecting it. it’s not a permanent one but it’s an underlying one that makes me wonder how long will it take before i can feel okay about this and is it even possible? i’ve been better about mental health awareness as i got older and older, as i learned more about my own mental health but it’s still hard to ask for help or to show someone i’m having a hard time. in a short lecture about mental health, when the lecturer brought up signs of suicide and how to recognize them, i felt guilt again. i wasn’t her best friend or even close to her at all, i know, but i was her teacher. it’s not as if we didn’t discuss personal topics in class. it’s not as if i didn’t know she was having a hard time. i know it’s irrational to think like this, to

or my weight. i'm working on it and i wish this wasn't such a long battle. self worth should be more permanent; i hope i can make it more permanent. here's hoping. • 4:31 pm

— Saturday, March 16, 2019; 3:51 pm

Even though I don't really feel like writing this right now and I may have to take a lot of breaks because I'm on a bus, I think it's important to write down what I'm thinking. I just visited the DMZ and even saw into North Korea. That's kinda hard to believe. A year ago if you told me this was going to happen, I would not really believe you. But now it's happened and is over. I wonder if the people who came on this tour even understand the severity of the situation. I wonder if I do. I feel like the common person has such a luxury when it comes to matters of the government. If it doesn't affect them then it doesn't matter to them. It's not a good mentality but I also can't say it wasn't my mentality before. Even the native Korean students who came didn't seem to be as moved as I did, which may make sense. This wasn't a bucket list item for me, I think. I was so surprised to see North Korea. Even the flag just shocked me. It's hard to think too deeply about what goes on there but I prayed for them and asked Allah to end their suffering if there is any and to protect them. I wish governments could actually help their people and I wish there was some moral test we could conduct that would certify people with ethics and morals to join only. There's so much corruption and pain inflicted on innocent people. I don't know what to think right now. Let me pause, I'm feeling nauseous. Sorry, I fell asleep at some point and then I was distracted. Desolate. That's the word that comes to mind when looking at the area surrounding the DMZ. It's really crazy. I wonder who will understand?

— Friday, March 22, 2019; 6:35 pm

for subway but failed, haha, so i just bought some cheese bread and ate it in the park walking around. then i went to look for subway again and found this burger place instead. these days i've been missing american food a lot so i've been eating it a lot. i like america. anyways, i had a little date with myself and ate a burger, fries and soda! woo, so american right? then i went to the han and wrote down some stuff because my therapist gave me homework. it's weird, these days i look forward to spending time alone ~ just a while ago i was so afraid of my own company, of my own mind. things are looking up, then, right? i'm getting better. then, i went to an escape room with my friends and met some new people and it was awesome. i'm glad to have met them. yesterday i went to seokchon lake. it was so pretty and the weather was so nice. these days i'm happy to be alive. thankful i feel this way • 4:55 pm

— Thursday, June 20, 2019; 2:30 pm

It is time for me to leave and my heart physically hurts. Is that normal? I am sitting in the airport bus silently, because I do not want to take my eyes off the city for even a moment. I saw my Namsan one last time and I cannot help but cry. When can I come back? Will I be Korea Zehra when I return or will I be the same as before I even came here? I realise, as my city fades away, that I am getting tired of change. I like stability and consistency, yet I run from it and busy myself to numb the uncomfortability. I want to create a stable life here but how? I cannot just leave everyone and everything behind to move here because I enjoyed my four months. This place means more to me than just a study abroad experience but that is hard to describe to others. I can only feel that. I hope to return and to make more established friendships but I do not know how that will happen.

Letters from Korea: A Reflection

I wrote most of this while in Korea, so I could remember how I felt and what was important to me, but I chose not to share everything I wrote. I tried to share both good and bad days, but some things are more personal and harder to release into the world. I learned a lot about acceptance and in-betweenness while in Korea, especially about how good it feels to be accepted, how relieved I was when people praised me. I am not sure that was the best lesson to learn, because maybe it makes me want acceptance more. But maybe, it makes me realise acceptance is subjective. In Korea, acceptance had a lot to do with me speaking Korean to random people. They were anticipating an uncomfortable conversation with a foreigner and I was able to communicate in their comfort zone, so they felt positively about me. This was a recurring theme. Others I spoke to, non-Korean people of colour, often international students who had been studying in Seoul for several years, told me tales of racism they faced and backlash from Koreans. While the racism and discrimination I faced during my time in Korea was very minimal, once I spoke to them, I realised once again that nothing is black and white. My confident “Hello!” in Korean dispelled many people’s distaste of me being a foreigner and shifted their sentiment to amazement, but many who were not comfortable speaking the language or were not as fluent were not treated the same. Language undoubtedly played a significant role in my acceptance to the Korean strangers I met. I do wonder, how deep this acceptance was, and how far they were willing to accept me into their society. Would I be able to be an influencing public figure in South Korea because I study the country and can speak the language? Would they let me marry their children? Would they accept my children? Would I be able to speak out on racism and discrimination within South Korea without being told I have no right? Would I be able to gain the same privileges South Korean citizens have?

Some of the answers to these questions are already a ‘no,’ I know that much. Some are more murky, and rely heavily on the people in the country and the people I surround myself with. Some will only be answered with time and progress and growth in a world that has long blamed ‘the other,’ and harboured negative sentiments towards those who are ‘different.’

Letters from South Korea: An Explanation

I wanted to just explain some of my emotions in my short letters. I tried my best in Korea, that much I can attest to. Even on hard days, something about the place or my determination to succeed did not let me wallow for too long — I always kept pushing. I cannot say that is the case always in the US, where I have a tendency to be stuck a little longer. I cannot blame it on place, though. I am not sure it has to do with that at all.

Looking back, I realised so much of acceptance had to do with my own mental health and perception in the moment. On days when things were hard, everyone seemed against me — that’s how it always feels, Korea or not. On days when I felt good, people’s compliments were just those — compliments. I felt special and recognised for my hard work. Looking back, I realised acceptance is a “fickle friend,” who is not there to help you feel better about your differences and fit into the society you’re in. In the end, a concept like acceptance is a social construct like any other. What are they accepting you for? Who are ‘they’? Why do they decide what is ‘acceptable’? Looking back, I realise our journeys should not be about seeking or finding acceptance of others, because it’s just so subjective and pointless to chase. Acceptance is a pretty way to say approval and we shouldn’t be seeking the approval of anyone. We exist — no one gets to decide if they approve our existence. We already exist, so we must be accepted.

Parallels in South Korea and elsewhere (India, the United States):

When I first came to South Korea, I was honoured when someone would be shocked at my Korean and compliment me. I was thankful my hard work was paying off. And it certainly went on for a while. I must have gotten over a hundred compliments. But as I spend more time here, I find myself getting slowly irritated at their assumption that I cannot speak Korean because I am not Korean. There were multiple instances when the people I was talking to would directly talk to my friends, though they were not of Korean ethnicity and did not speak Korean. They could have been mistaken for Korean but it was clear that the words were coming out of my mouth; still, they would not look at me, but at my friends, who were lost and looked to me for help communicating. These types of situations occur in the US, too, sometimes. I remember one instance when I was stopped at the airport in Atlanta, and that part wasn't new to me. I'm Muslim, so I've come to expect it. It's honestly more surprising when I'm not patted down or taken aside. But when the TSA agent took my bag, and asked my permission to open it, his supervisor came over and told him that I can't speak English, so he has to be clear on his actions with me. The supervisor hadn't even heard me speak in Urdu, or Hindi, or Spanish or anything! He just assumed based on what I look like, that I couldn't speak English. To me, both microaggressions were just funny stories, but I now realise just how frustrating that type of mentality is, how unfair it is to make assumptions based on what someone looks like. I learned it was less about where I was and more just about people's perception of me. The same thing could happen in India or Pakistan, where by looks I might be indiscernible, but maybe my mannerisms or way of speaking would give me away and I would be treated differently.

Conclusion and Moving Forward:

There is much more to explore moving forward. This project was mainly creative in its process; the research I did was primarily to assist me in understanding certain terms and sentiments, rather than prove a point or answer a research question. As a result, this project has left me with many questions I have yet to answer but am excited to explore in the future. I want to learn more about linked fate and diasporic consciousness, and understand the in-and-out group theories that result in embedded systems of discrimination, violence and hatred — all around the world. These realities and frequently undermined concepts play an undeniable role in the state of the world and societies today, and I will pursue these topics to better equip myself with the knowledge to bring about positive changes.

This Capstone, where I consciously wrote notes and letters to myself in South Korea, allowed me to better understand my sentiments there as having less to do with place and more to do with personal factors, like the people I was surrounded by, my mental health, my ability to take control of a situation. I had almost hoped just the act of going to South Korea, where I had wanted to study and experience life for so long, would be enough in making me happy and that nothing would go wrong when I was there. Instead, the knowledge that I worked hard to get there certainly helped, as did the fact that I enjoyed being there, but it wasn't enough to curb any depression or anxiety or suddenly let me be accepted into society with open arms. It was a place like any other, with its ups and downs, and that's a reality of immigration people often forget. It is hard to move away from friends and family and start anew in a new country, where often the cultures, languages and customs are different, but staying home brings its own challenges — problems don't arise due to society and place alone. Even until the end of the project, and even now, I wish sometimes that I just lived where I belonged fully — that if I was Pakistani, I didn't have such close Indian ancestry, if I was Indian that I wouldn't be Muslim, that if I was American, I would be born here,

be white, just fit the status quo somewhere — anywhere. I still think sometimes that for people who constantly feel in-between, wouldn't it be a comfort to just fit in for a little while? Be born and raised in the same house, go to school with your neighborhood friends and grow up together, fulfill society's wishes and be accepted and not have to worry about being different and breaking rules and being looked down upon. I still think it sometimes, when it gets too exhausting to have to balance this in-betweenness. But during the course of this project, one of the books I coincidentally read was "The Giver," by Lois Lowry, a novel usually read by middle school in the United States, but it was my first time reading it. In the book, society has been stripped of its differences and humans live under what is known as Sameness, where emotions are suppressed, colours are faded to grays, and marriages are matched by the government through a compatibility application process. The lesson from the story hit me hard. It remains one of the only books I have ever cried in. I have always championed diversity and embraced the differences others have, whether they be physical, like skin colour and disabilities, mental, like autism and mental illnesses, or societal, like socio-economic background. But this book made me realise how much I neglected that for myself, how much I ignored the diversity that exists within me. It's not going to be an overnight change but since that day, I do try to appreciate things that make me, me. After all, living under a shroud of similarity is a rather bland life.

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