

This Being Human
Episode 19 — Nargis Jahan-Uddin

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik. I'm canvassing the world for the most interesting people, to hear about their journeys, their work, and what it means to be alive in the world today. And perhaps nobody has captured that experience, of being alive, better than the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi in his poem, "The Guest House."

FEMALE VOICE:

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness, some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

So welcome to *This Being Human*, a podcast inspired by Rumi's words and motivated by all those who carry that message forward in the world today. Today, Nargis Jahan-Uddin, founder of the online community Muslim Mamas.

NARGIS JAHAN-UDDIN:

I don't know if you've read *The Book Thief*, where it's narrated in a really sorrowful tone by Death himself. And the way in which he describes holding onto the souls is so beautifully explained, that he feels like he's holding the souls in his hands. And for me, sometimes I feel like that, especially when I get anonymous posts. And the trust these women have placed upon me to hold on to them and to hold onto their secrets — I feel like that is an honor.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Nargis Jahan-Uddin has a window into the world of Muslim motherhood in a way that few others do. It all started on a lark, about 10 years ago, while she was at home with her first-born son, feeling isolated. In a moment of desperation, she turned to Facebook for parenting advice. Her post generated so much conversation that she decided to create a discussion group called Muslim Mamas. She struck a nerve. The community quickly exploded in size and has since become one of the most influential social media spaces in the English-speaking Muslim world. Their public Facebook page has over 130,000 followers, with more than 20,000 women in the private discussion group. There, they share their hopes, their concerns, news and some of the most intimate details of their lives. And it gets serious, too. Nargis has found herself combatting vaccine misinformation, helping women navigate abusive relationships, and moderating the day-to-day bickering that takes place in any online community.

Nargis joined me from London to talk about how she went from a childhood in the inner city to building this growing motherhood media empire. And please be aware that we'll briefly delve into some heavier topics, like postpartum depression and domestic violence. Please take care while listening.

I started by asking Nargis how Muslim Mamas began, a story that is deeply linked with her own journey to motherhood.

NARGIS JAHAN-UDDIN:

I came from a very, like, academic and career-focused life. So to suddenly have a child and have my whole life turned on its head where I was enclosed, mostly at home — my life revolved around my child, I was having conversations with a baby — my whole social space just became

so confined. And that did lead to a lot of frustration, a lot of social isolation, a feeling of loneliness. And I felt disconnected. So, on one of those occasions where my son was sleeping, as babies do, with his bum in the air — he was sleeping with his bum in the air and I was staring at him thinking, *Where has this child come from? How is he mine? How is he sleeping? Is he breathing? What's going on?* In that moment of sheer frustration, I posted a photo of him on my rarely used Facebook profile. I don't know what I was hoping to get out of it. It was just a moment where I thought, *I need to share this*. And as soon as I did that, within 10 minutes, I started to get friends who I had lost touch with, friends who I don't see anymore, friends who live in different countries. Suddenly, this wealth of knowledge, of connection, of experience, it all centered around that one photo of my child. And it was that moment where it hit me and I thought, well, all this time where I thought I was on this journey of motherhood alone, there are so many others who are going through this. So, yeah, that's how Muslim Mamas came to be. I do joke to my son quite a few times. I say, "Well, let's have a look, how many moms your bum launched this year?" And he's known as the bum that launched a few thousand moms, still. My son and his famous bum.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You know, Nargis, you've created this space where 22,000-plus and growing Muslim mothers can talk to each other with no one else looking in. So let me ask you, could you give us a snapshot of what people are talking about? What's on their minds and their hearts on any on any given week?

NARGIS JAHAN-UDDIN:

Oh, well, there's a reason why we're a closed group [laughs]. So conversations can range from *my child is not eating, my child is a fussy eater, my child is unwell, child-focused topics*. It could range from that to, *I'm having a terrible time in my marriage, I don't have anyone else to turn to, what can I do now?* So it doesn't just... we don't just cover parenting topics on Muslim Mamas. We can talk about whatever affects the Muslim mother life. And we would talk about general stuff. We would talk about current affairs. We could talk about what's going on in the world. We could talk about our fears and we could talk about our joys. So it's so varied.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

It can get heavy. Some people turn to the group to talk about the most serious and intimate things going on in their lives, when they have no place else to turn. Many women have turned to the group when they're dealing with abuse. Often these people will pass on their messages to Nargis or one of the other admins, so they can share them anonymously. Nargis remembers one woman in particular who the community rallied together to help.

NARGIS JAHAN-UDDIN:

She would post about an abusive relationship that she had with her husband. Her husband would beat her in front of the children. He would belittle her, mock her, tell her she is a horrible person, hit her, give her bruises. And as she posted, her posts got progressively worse. And every single time she posted, we had an influx of mamas on the platform telling her, "listen, you need to reach out, you need to get yourself out of this situation. You need to do this for yourself and for your children." It took months for her to make that decision to do that, and I think the turning point for her came when her husband gave her poison and said, "it would be better for your children if you just took this." In that moment of sheer desperation, she called the police and she knew that she had the whole of Muslim Mamas, the community behind her. She reached out to me and the admin team. And together we worked on getting her out of that situation, because the police helped her for one day. After that, we helped place her in a safe

house. We helped set her life up again. So Muslim Mamas, it's not just a social media platform that you see. When I say it helps change and transform lives in a positive way, it really, really does.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Nargis's childhood in the then economically deprived neighbourhood of Shoreditch, East London, shaped her sense of community in a way that underpins everything that Muslim Mamas does.

NARGIS JAHAN-UDDIN:

Do you know, I have very fond memories of my childhood because I see all the beautiful things in my childhood, the way we used to play outdoors and sing and walk to school together, and all of these memories that I have. Looking back in retrospect, I see the things that I didn't notice as a child. I see that we grew up in a place where there was always broken glass, there were always condoms on the floor. There were always needles around. These are things that I didn't pick up on when I was a child, but I'm sure my parents did. While I was being brought up in that community, we did go to schools, but I had never known anybody to have gone into university at that time. Everybody who looked like me would either go work in a restaurant or a factory or they would end up in prison. I don't know how I have such beautiful memories of it because I did not see any of — I had my blinkers on. So that's the community I was brought up in.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

The backbone of Nargis's sense of community comes from her grandfather, whose own grandfather planted the seeds of their future in the United Kingdom generations ago.

NARGIS JAHAN-UDDIN:

And my granddad has been a major influence in my life growing up. He was the muezzin, which is the person who leads the call to prayer of the local mosque. He was very community-focused and very community-oriented. And he has taught me from the very beginning that our lives, the main purpose in our lives is to be of benefit, to capture and assist those in need, to hold them in our hands and offer value to them. And this is where I feel I got my sense of community and love for the community and love for the people. And this is where Muslim Mamas came from, that sense of growing community or building community, of connecting.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Your granddad came to England from Bangladesh. What brought him to the UK in the first place?

NARGIS JAHAN-UDDIN:

Oh, there's a funny story there actually. My granddad came to the UK to work in the factories. I think in the 1960s, 1970s, he came to work in the factories. But actually his story stems a lot further back. His grandfather had come in the early 1900s into the UK, had come on the ships, and he had come, he looked around — I think he landed somewhere in England — and he looked around and said, "No, this is not my place. I can't live here." Because England at the time was not very well developed. And, you know, there were still mud huts and the roads were not very well developed and all sorts. And, and he thought, *No, I've got beautiful green land and a big mansion in Bangladesh, I'm going back!* It's so funny that that happened in the very early 1900s. And then my grandfather, a good, you know, 60, 70 years later, had come here to work. And he brought his family over. He came here, he worked and slowly brought his family over to come and set up a life here. It's only when they started having children when they realized that actually this will be their permanent home, their children's home. Their children are being

brought up in a completely different culture. And this is the thing: we're British Bangladeshi and we're being brought up where we're not quite Bangladeshi because we don't fit in in Bangladesh and we're not quite British — because, you know, we don't look very British at the time. I mean, the face of Britain has changed, of course, and it's evolved and it's very multi-coloured now. But at the time... Yeah, we were sort of in a limbo. So it was very important for my parents, my granddad, to establish a community, a community that they didn't have. And this is — I feel this is why my granddad worked very, very hard to establish that community, to make us feel like we belonged somewhere, to make us feel that we connected somewhere.

DR. ULRIKE AL-KHAMIS:

Hello, I am Dr. Ulrike Al-Khamis, the Aga Khan Museum's Director and CEO. We hope you are enjoying this episode of *This Being Human*. If you like what you hear, please support us by rating *This Being Human* on your podcast app or by leaving a review. By sharing your feedback, you will help us grow our audiences and reach more people with the podcast's extraordinary human stories, wonderfully told. Thank you so much. And now, back to *This Being Human*.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

When it came to education, Nargis was a pioneer, blazing a trail to become the first person in her family, and also the first woman in her family, to go to university — at the prestigious London School of Economics at that. She credits her mother for pushing back against convention, tradition that cut women's education short at high school.

NARGIS JAHAN-UDDIN:

My mother actually pushed the boundaries with that and said, "No, you're going to continue with your education. You're going to go into doing your A-levels. I'm not marrying you off." I was the only girl; I had five brothers. I was doing very well at school. I was getting straight A's. She knew that it would be a shame to stop that. And although she was discouraged by many male family members who had said to her, "Why? Why does she need to study? Why are you sending your daughter to, to school? Why are you-- she doesn't need to study." She said, "No, there's something there and my daughter can achieve something. And I don't want to be the one to stop her." And so at college, when we were applying for universities, I actually thought that I would apply to the local university maybe 10 minutes from my home. So we were a community living within a bubble in itself. So my teachers encouraged me to apply to the LSE. I hadn't known. The LSE was actually my second choice. They encouraged me to apply to Oxford, which I did, but I got the... which, I got in. And I was very conscious that not only was I the first person in my whole family to have applied to a university, I was also the first girl. So I was very conscious that it may be a bit much if I decided to also live away from home.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You know, being the first woman in your family that went to university, you know, what kind of life were you imagining for yourself leaving university? And, I mean, what did that life look like at the time?

NARGIS JAHAN-UDDIN:

It opened so many doors and so many possibilities for me at the LSE, but I still saw myself as coming back to my community where I came from and I saw myself teaching there because I came from inner-city London. I had always wanted to be a teacher in inner-city London. I felt that I could... the experiences that I've had, that stem from where I came from to where I went, I always wanted to come back and offer that back to the children growing up in my shoes.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

With her new degree from the London School of Economics, Nargis was keen to bring back all the lessons she'd learned and apply them to the students at the schools in her own community. She was eager to engage, educate, and inspire. The reality was far from what dreams of her homecoming looked like... but it only cemented her purpose.

NARGIS JAHAN-UDDIN:

I came back and my first experience teaching was when I went into an inner-city school. I was a student teacher. My first day, 13 boys jumped the school fence with knives and the student teachers were locked in the staff room. We were told, "You don't move, you guys stay in here." That was my first day and I thought to myself, *I am out of my depth. What is this?* I had lived in such an enclosed life. And as I had said before, I realized actually there is so much that is needed here. There is so much that is needed for these children. And that was my first experience at teaching. It scared me. It thrilled me. It challenged me. And it really made me think and rethink about what on Earth I was doing there [laughs]. But yeah.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Did it prepare you to start a family?

NARGIS JAHAN-UDDIN:

No [laughs]. I became very engrossed in my teaching after that. After that experience, I became very focused on how I would make a difference to these children, to their lives. What makes a child think that it's okay to jump a school fence and try and attack another child of the same age with a knife? It really made me think about what I could do to help these children, to understand their worth, to understand that they do not need to be enclosed in these spaces where they can't get out, you know? So I became very engrossed in my work.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Since then, Nargis has seen first-hand the life-changing impact a teacher can have on their students, by pushing them to dream bigger, do the work, and stay focused.

NARGIS JAHAN-UDDIN:

So I'll give you an example. I had a student who spent his entire year 11 saying, "Miss, I'm just going to be a plumber, Miss. That's what I'm going to do." [Laughs] That's what he said. And I said to him, "Do you not feel that you could do something else? Is there nothing else that you would want to do with your life? You want to go into plumbing because your dad is a plumber and that's what you see yourself doing." He didn't have any aspiration or any inclination that he had the ability to achieve something more than what was defined to him by his parents or by his community. And I felt connected to that, because that was an experience that I had. So I started researching on other professions and other courses that he could do. I took him through a whole list of options, and then he thought to himself, *Well, actually, I would really like to do this apprenticeship in engineering.* And he did that. I said, "Well, you need to get your grades in English then, don't you? And you need to get your, your grades in math and what do you do that? How do you do that? You stop going out at night, you start studying, you stop, you know, lingering around outside the school until the early hours. You focus on yourself because this is your chance." I don't know if it was me that made an impact in this child's life, but he came back two years later saying that he got his engineering qualification. He has got a job with Crossrail. And, you know, he was set up. And, you know, for me, that was it, that is what I wanted to achieve with my teaching, just to offer that bit of value to somebody's life, that it could transform their thinking. That they could come out of that box and think that, *No, I can achieve something more than what is defined by my own.. the remit of the society in which I live.* So that's what I saw in teaching.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Around this time, Nargis met her husband. They got married, took some time to travel, and went on the Hajj, the pilgrimage to Mecca. Then came the decision to have kids. Becoming a mother for the first time didn't go how she expected. And just a warning — this part may be hard to listen to.

NARGIS JAHAN-UDDIN:

I was in labour for a very long time. I mean, I had midwives go off on their break and then come back and say, three days later, "Are you still here, Nargis, what's going on?" So my labour was very, very grueling. When my child was born, it was very dramatic. The midwife had spotted some sort of a blip in the baby's heartbeat and she said, "he needs to come out now." And then it was very dramatic in that sense. And when I saw that child in front of me, they wouldn't even show me his face. I didn't even know if it was a boy or a girl. I just saw it was a blue blob and he was completely quiet. He didn't make a sound because he wasn't breathing. And it took about 20 minutes for them to breathe some life into him. I also fainted because I had lost so much blood. I felt like at that time I was out of my body, looking down at me holding a child. I just felt so disconnected and that feeling of disconnection continued throughout that whole first year. I know now what I didn't know before. I know that that's what you call a trauma of labour, a traumatic pregnancy. And then, you know, the baby blues — it could be postnatal depression. I didn't understand that at the time. I just remember being overly possessive over my child, very, very protective. And I did feel disconnected because all these beautiful feelings of joy and laughter and love — I mean, I felt the love - but all of these feelings of joy that I expected, I didn't feel those. And I didn't understand why I felt so disconnected. And I feel now that it's because of this trauma that I had experienced and how it was something that I didn't anticipate. That's what led me to feeling this disconnected. You know, I had some mobility issues at the time. It was very difficult for me to just suddenly call up a friend and say, "Hey, let's meet up for coffee." I had to think about my child's routine. I have got to think about if he's sleeping, when his feeding times are. *Am I close by where I can feed, breastfeed him?* I was breastfeeding and as I, you know, I am a hijabi, it's not easy to breastfeed publicly. So I had all of these things going, and so I felt not just disconnected physically in my social life. I also felt disconnected emotionally. So I was a very, very different person that first year of motherhood.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Nargis, I mean, you took all of that, that trauma, that pain and that experience, and you start Muslim Mamas, you go on to have more children, you create this this incredible community. Let's fast forward for a moment, to now. We've been through over a year of the pandemic where so many mothers, like you once had, have been through so many difficulties, have been through so many challenges around motherhood, around family, around parenting. What have you learned about parenting during this pandemic?

NARGIS JAHAN-UDDIN:

I have learned that emotional presence matters. So, my mother has always been present in our lives for as long as I can remember, she's always been physically there. But I don't know if I felt like I could access her emotionally. I think the way in which she was brought up, she was like a fortress. I've learned in this pandemic the importance of having an emotional presence with my children to talk about what we are feeling, how we are feeling today. And it really made me think about my own children and the community on Muslim Mamas. And I thought to myself, *It's so important to have these conversations about what we are feeling, what we can do to support each other, how we can reach out so people don't feel that sense of being trapped within their own minds, within their own emotions. How do we release that? How do we provide that outlet?*

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Are you comfortable with the influence you have with, with this, with this incredibly diverse group of people?

NARGIS JAHAN-UDDIN:

Being comfortable with that responsibility, it's not, that's not the question for me. The question for me is, am I able to hold it? And I hope that I can hold onto that responsibility because I love the community that we have created. I love the people in it. I love connecting with them. I love every single woman and mother on there. And, as long as I am able, I hope to hold onto that.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Nargis, what does this being human mean to you?

NARGIS JAHAN-UDDIN:

This being human means to me to be of benefit, to be compassionate, and to be hopeful for a positive change.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Nargis Jahan, thank you so much for joining me on *This Being Human*. This has been a really wonderful conversation.

NARGIS JAHAN-UDDIN:

Thank you. Thank you for having me.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

This Being Human is an Antica production. Our senior producer is Kevin Sexton. Our executive producer is Pacinthe Mattar. Mixing and sound design by Phil Wilson. Our intern is Annie MacLeod. Original music by Boombox Sound. Antica's executive producers are Kathleen Goldhar and Lisa Gabriele. Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica.

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