

# Sarah Mohammed

**Bio:** Sarah Fathima Mohammed is a fourteen-year-old Muslim-American emerging writer and high schooler from the San Francisco Bay Area in America. She has been recognized by the Alliance for Young Artists & Writers and the National Poetry Quarterly. Her work appears or is forthcoming in *Canvas Literary Journal*, *Rattle*, *Girls Right the World*, *The Rising Phoenix Review*, *Apprentice Writer*, *The Heritage Review*, and elsewhere. When she is not writing, she serves as managing editor for *The Aurora Review*, reads for *Polyphony Lit*. She loves archery and Latin.

## Terrorist

I.

It's September 11th, 2011. I am in second grade and, as usual, the TV in Mama's bedroom plays the news before school— The footage before the bombing shows New York in its best season on a breathtaking late-summer day; the gleaming buildings glitter with life. Today it is blasting out those horrific headlines once again in remembrance of that shocking attack that amplified the threat of terrorism here in our country and brought home a fear that challenged the idea that we are “the land of the free and home of the brave.” My eyes widen in disbelief as the planes crash straight into the towers, sending chills down the valleys of my spine as they collapse.

After school, my friends have heard about the attacks, bright with a gawking curiosity, they start probing me with questions about terrorism:

*Why do they do that?*

*Does their family support them?*

*Who teaches them that?*

I am seven, so I reply curtly and softly:

*I don't know.*

*I don't know.*

*I don't know.*

They eagerly lap up my short responses like warm chocolate melting against their tongues, and each word only seems to encourage them. Just kids themselves, they press on and on, asking me how in the world I could not know.

I finally ask them why they choose to spit these questions at me, and they look at each other knowingly, finally pointing to my smiling aunt walking towards me to pick me up, her hair neatly wrapped in a hijab. They glance back at me, expressions wary, and ask me a final question before leaving:

*Are you a terrorist?*

My eyes drop and I feel scared, for the first time, of who I am. Why does it have to be me who my friends think is terrorist? Why does my religion and culture suggest I am a bad person?

II.

On the streets with my family, I see folks are lining the crowded traffic lanes with anti-Muslim signs. Some people walk by freely, ignoring the hateful messages, but when we walk past them, they scream savagely at us, guttural voices cracked with a jagged sort of hatred. One man waves a tattered cardboard sign in my face:

*Go back to your country.*

I am a child of this country. I have nowhere else to go.

III.

I laugh at my aunt's jokes as we help carry Mama's home-cooked meals to the park to celebrate Eid, a time of celebration, silence, prayer, family, and happiness. The powerful aroma of the spices, unleashed by Mama's deft hand and her skillet, waft through the entire park. My eyes shine with joy as I tell Mama:

*This is my favourite day in the whole entire year!*

We had just put out the blankets and carefully spread out the banquet when a mob of yelling people approach—they chant and wave their signs telling us to *go back*, as if America were not our home as much as theirs, as if I were not formed in the body of this country, my only home. They spit at us until we back away, our faces crestfallen. We scramble to head back, quickly gathering up the home-cooked banquet and confining its aromas in sealed containers. As we approach the safety of my Uncle Waffiq's car, our alarm grows as we make out the words *GO AWAY TERRORIST* spray painted on his windshield. Our dismay is complete when we arrive to find his car broken into and defiled by defecation. Uncle Waffiq spends three days repairing it, missing work at the local jewellery store. I will never forget the look on his face, usually so reserved and graceful, tightened with anger and melancholy.

We stay home for a week, afraid to go out except for work, celebrating Eid in solitude, exiled from our community. We can't even feel comfortable buying groceries, not with people spewing hate at us in the supermarket aisles and telling us to leave Americans alone.

I was born here and raised with American values – you know, the self-evident truth that “all . . . are created equal,” that “prohibiting the free exercise” of religion is so fundamentally un-American that the first article of the Bill of Rights forbids any such thing. In spite of these principles, I am an American child who is not treated as American because of the colour of my skin and the religion I practice.

Eid is no longer my favourite day in the whole entire year.

IV.

On the first day of third grade at my new school, my teacher calls the roll but stumbles across my obviously Islamic last name. My new classmates’ previously bored faces turn as one towards me, alerted by my name, and I watch them whisper to their friends and point in my direction. Trying to recover the class’s focus, my teacher says that he will always remember my name since I am the only one in my class who looks like she could have that name. He laughs, as if my name, race and culture is a joke, and the other kids chime in with their own derision-stippled giggles.

But I don’t laugh.

The next year, I try to register my name without the last three letters at the end.

V.

My friends ask me where I am going to spend summer vacation and, filled with excited anticipation, I tell them I am visiting my grandparent’s homeland. They glance at each other and laugh—not a full-throated laugh but a choking, sarcastic sneer. Then they ask me:

*Are you learning to be a terrorist?*

They laugh again, so I roll my eyes and, once again, my lips crack that exasperated smile. "Allah," I say, the Arabic equivalent of "Oh my god." As the name for God rolls off my tongue, it comforts me in a way they never can.

But my friends suddenly back away from me, their faces no longer playful. I hear:

*Stop using that terrorist talk on us!*

Then they are gone, all hurrying away from me in a tightly packed row, their arms protectively around each other as if finding safety in numbers.

My eyes turn glassy as I consider the unfairness of it all. How can this simple Arabic word be so frightening and alienating? It is a different name for the same God.

Why must a girl in a scarf traveling East be accused of training to be a terrorist?

Since when has terrorist training become a joke?

VI.

Mama smiles at me as we fill out the forms to move to a new school. She has always taught me not to run away from my problems but to stand up for myself and be who I am unabashedly, but it is not working anymore. Instead, I feel excluded and stereotyped at the institution that is supposed to enrich my learning and empower my life.

Mama assures me that this is for the best. "Sarah, what doesn't kill us makes us stronger," she tells me, slowly rubbing her soothing fingers in circles across my back.

I may never 'blend in' with the other students, but I can use what I have learned from the years of stereotyping to embrace the fresh start and welcome the change.

I start my new school in fourth grade, still embracing my culture, my religion and my heritage. I hold my head up high as September 11th passes, as I enjoy my dinner at the park in celebration for Eid, as the teacher stumbles over my name, and as I tell my friends about my summer plans, tossing in an Arabic word here and there.

Although my fellow Americans' assumptions about me may not change, their adversity has strengthened my self-confidence and taught me that their mistakes have no bearing on who I really am.

## **How Are You?**

"Tu kaisi ho?" a stranger asks me in Hindi. She wants to know how I am doing. I could answer, "fine," but the truth is complicated.

The truth is: tired. I am tired but not physically. Tired of going to India Cash and Carry with my brown friends and seeing the rows of tightly packed skin products, all promising a whiter complexion. Tired of watching my friends try the products and ask for feedback: "Is my skin any closer to porcelain yet?"

I wish they could appreciate themselves for who they are and embrace their creamy, chocolate-coloured skin, glittering like bronze in the sunlight. I wish they would stop comparing themselves to something they will never be and find beauty in their brownness. I wish they could take a patriotic pride in their immigrant family members who worked hard to achieve the American dream. But I know that what I wish is unrealistic: the skin-care advertisements prove that much. Even in India, lighter skin is viewed as more beautiful. Even at our local Whole Foods, the brown cashier had her face heavily powdered in sheer white, as if ashamed to be brown. Her legs were covered by the cashing table but, as I passed by, I caught a glimpse of them: long

and brown—gorgeous. I wished that I had told her they were beautiful, that brown skin was beautiful. The truth is, despite what I wish, brown girls will keep wishing that they could be something else, keep wishing that they can ‘fit in’ with their Caucasian peers.

“Tu kaisi ho?” another stranger asks. The truth is still complicated.

The truth is: frustrated. I am frustrated that someone can look at me, see the colour of my skin and assume things about who I am before ever hearing a word come out of my mouth. Last week, I went to the salon for a haircut, and the hairdresser asked me if my parents had taught me coding yet. It took me a second to process her question. She had not even asked my name, but she had assumed my parents must be coders by looking at the colour of my skin. At that moment, I hated that anyone could make assumptions about me based on my skin colour and stereotypes about my race, however innocuous those assumptions might be.

Later that evening, I went to an American restaurant with my family, and the server greeted us with a friendly “namaste,” the word uncomfortably dressed in her American accent. My six-year-old sister looked at her in confusion; we do not speak Hindi, and she had no idea why the server would utter this mysterious word. The server’s attempt at inclusion made my sister feel left out. I stiffened—how could she just assume that we speak a certain language based on the colour of our skin and reduce the thousands of Indian languages to this one stereotypical word? My father, used to such comments, offered a dry smile and replied, “Hello. I’ll have the steak, medium rare.” My parents have always been subject to racial profiling, and I will always be subject to racial profiling and, when I have children, they will always be subject to racial profiling.

“Tu kaisi ho?” a stranger asks. Still complicated.

The truth is: sad. I am sad that most of my peers still ask me if I can teach them a few words in “Indian.” Sad that when I go out for lunch with my Caucasian friends, they still call the Sri Lankan restaurant “that Indian place” because “it’s basically the same thing right?” Sad that people can be so ignorant about Indian cultures and still think that they know everything after reading a measly New York Times article about Pakistanis. Sad that this probably won’t change in my future.

“Tu kaisi ho?” a stranger asks.

“Good,” I mumble automatically.

### **God’s Waiting Daughters**

The walk to Kumakonam feels like eternity. Sweat presses against my bare feet like raw hunger, heavy and inescapable. When the miles stretch past the thick humidity and into the musky wood of thatched huts and the rough sand of littered streets, I know I am finally here.

In the bustling village, women push past me, balancing pots on their heads as they walk home. Men sit on the ground under straw roofing selling jewellery.

Umma presses her cheeks against my face, whispers honeyed Arabic into my ear, tells me a childhood fable about the dog and the rat. We sit on the stone kitchen floor, grateful for the cool comfort. I peel onions and chop green beans, listening to the soft rhythm of her deft hand weaving thin white nets. Tonight, we will use these to cover the tattered cloth mats we sleep on so mosquitoes cannot savour our skin.



We work fast because night is already starting to taste the sun, and the men will be back from village trading soon.

After a few hours of slumbering silence, Umma is now backlit by a hundred distant stars. I catch her looking off into the distance, eyes slipping into the shadows of memory. Her breaths sound like sobs in the back of her throat, heated and pulsing like solar flares. I've never seen Umma like this – she has always been the perfect Muslim grandmother, emotion syphoned from her body and replaced by the weighted fabric of a burka, pulled and pressed until smiles are clawed away from her cheeks. I can still see the lurking shadows against her face, reminders of the pains devoted to heritage and culture.

Now longing winds across her face like tears, and I know she is thinking of everything she has lost -- forced to give up education and her youth to marry her first cousin when she was sixteen and live in the household where she is silenced, reduced to the tasks in the kitchen and next to the clothesline.

When Umma's wrinkled eyes touch the sky, I know she is calling god. *What did I do wrong?* she asks. *Save me from this life dwindled into a world of dependence.*

Umma is pleading, eyes cracking with the pressure of craving, the thirst for a world where she can live. She remains a daughter waiting for God, unravelling by the minute, struggling.

While Umma looks up, I cherish my time with her. I am finally able to embrace my Muslim heritage, something I feel unable to do at school in America.

At school, I walk in the hallways of sticky linoleum floors and fluorescent lighting, backpack slung over one shoulder. My teacher stumbles over my Islamic last name.

He doesn't try to get it right, butchering the letters and tossing them haphazardly into my hands. *I'll never forget that name, eh?*, he remarks, voice smooth and charged, burning beneath the surface. Derision-stippled giggles fill the room.

I let my tongue lay limp during the school day, a mere lump of congealed heritage that I tuck deep in my throat so that my vowels wouldn't leak out clunky and offbeat, contaminated by Arabic undertones.

When I look at the sky, I am pleading to God for the life I dreamed of when I came to America, a life where I can finally feel equal. I feel Umma next to me, waiting.