

# The Pakistani Dream

By

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The Indian woman who teaches online meditation classes squeezes my hand with feeling, “I am sure you will find a nice man here, dear.” I return a queasy smile. She knows me from a meetup group for South Asian divorcees, almost all of whom arrived in the United States on the coattails of a spouse who was an American citizen, and have stayed on, if not wedded happily ever after, at least first-world citizens ever after, who do not have to explain their life choices to an army of extended relatives back home. Her assumption that I want to stay on in the cradle of first-world luxury is not particularly presumptuous. The American passport, as commonly understood in developing countries, is a ticket to freedom and social superiority, a magic portal to a world without humiliating visa rejections and third-world invisibility. When children of elite Pakistanis dream of escape, they conjure up a cross between Disneyworld and Manhattan, an eternal playground of steel and glass sprinkled with dollar dust.

The American dream was well entrenched in my generation of Pakistani kids who grew up in the 80s. Pakistani state television showed duly censored versions of Full House and Star Trek; teens scrambled to grab contraband tapes of MTV and Rocky from crowded video stores. It was only natural then that Pakistani youth, born and raised in the era when President Reagan is rumoured to have called Afghan Mujahideen the moral equivalent of America’s founding fathers, would aspire to dress, behave and talk like American teens they had never met except between the pages of Archie comics and the frames of Hollywood movies and sitcoms. General Zia-ul-Haq, largely credited for introducing a particularly virulent brand of Islam to the country’s social landscape was a staunch partner of the Americans, helping them fight the Godless communists’ invasion of Afghanistan. While neighbouring India remained an ally of the Soviets, its economy closed to the world, Pakistan cheerfully passed the baton from British colonialism to American imperialism to create yet another generation of teenagers who existed physically in the confines of their conservative

country, but thrived mentally in the Upper East Side apartments that flashed across their television screens.

I woke up every day to Andre Agassi pinned to the wall in front of me, locks flying across the fields of Flushing Meadows, New York. In sweltering summer afternoons my cousin and I would insist to be driven to the air-conditioned music store that stocked the pirated versions of Springsteen and Madonna albums, and hand the man behind the counter a painstakingly assembled list of songs we had heard on Channel V. In fifteen days the store would turn the request list into mix-tapes on shiny TDK cassettes that we would soon wear down on our coveted Walkmans. An intimacy with American pop culture was the currency with which we wielded power and prestige.

A rent-a-book shop near me stocked Sweet Valley High and Sweet Dreams romances that fueled fantasies about dating and love - western style. What would it feel like to date openly, we wondered; have a handsome, well-dressed guy show up at your door and whisk you away as your parents waved you goodbye? Pakistani dating was a series of furtive phone calls and closeted kisses informed constantly by the threat of discovery. American high school, in comparison, seemed like a hedonistic paradise of sinful self-indulgence.

Girls who came back with stories of Magic Kingdom and Universal Studios at the end of the summer ruled my school the way blonde cheerleaders reigned the high schools of Hollywood films. For the slightly less fortunate, one way to access America was through relatives who visited from 'abroad'. The things they brought with them carried the sheen of those distant lands. The American lunch box with its finely crafted plastic and authentic cartoon characters announced its presence from far

across the playing field, the possessor of which was immediately granted an elevated status.

The urge to go and live in the US then, particularly New York, that shining chimera of all that represented America was the ultimate desire of every young upstart's heart.

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The sun beats down aggressively from the windscreen, interfering with the cooling of my airconditioned car. Somewhere ahead the main artery of the city has been blocked by protestors from assorted religious organizations, chanting the slogan 'Go America Go' – the subject of much derision and amusement amongst the English-speaking elite who understand its American usage. The clerics chant it in its most literal sense, inadvertently cheering on the country they want to condemn to damnation. This is the other side of Pakistan's relationship with America, and 'it's complicated'. Even as young people are deeply influenced and enamoured of the economic and cultural might of the world's sole super-power, so are they struck by envy and disenfranchisement in comparison, even the ones who are repositories of American pop cultural knowledge.

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On a balmy evening I find myself outside a sprawling house with a red-brick façade within the army's stranglehold of Cantt. The green wrought iron gate trellised with a delicate pattern of gold and silver leaves is in no way distinct from the tasteful gates dotting the rest of the lane. Is this where I am supposed to be? Should I ring the

bell? Suddenly a security guard emerges on cue and asks me to step in. “Name, Madam”, he says brusquely, imbued with the importance of the premises he is guarding. Quickly, he goes down the printed list and makes a tick halfway down the printed page, glances at the ID card I extend to him, demands a photocopy and finally points me through the door to a spacious, marble-floored living room. A slew of fellow bloggers greets me. We have all been invited by the American counselor in Lahore for a meet and greet. I’m unsure how the selection is made but I am not asking. I’m just glad to be part of a select group of ‘young writers’ the Americans are trying to woo. Tyson Perry\*, the chiseled Information Officer at the Consulate is our main contact. He spreads himself around with an ease and candor that belies his important position, downing drinks and making friends with Pakistanis seemingly without inhibition. He is even rumoured to have a Pakistani girlfriend. Munching on nuts and sipping on my Coke I find myself in a circle with him and his foreign office counterpart from Karachi, and a Pakistani girl I know from college. Perhaps it’s the effect of the alcohol in their hands or just that neither of them really cares what Pakistanis think but the conversation veers towards the amorous overtures they receive on the daily: “You won’t believe the number of women who come on to me”, says Tyson in a mock wounded tone, “Like physically come on to me. I literally have to fend them off”. His Karachi colleague laughs raucously, “They can see the green card on your forehead”. This bizarrely undiplomatic exchange between two diplomats is echoed a year later in another event by the US mission where the new counsel insists on speaking to young bloggers in English – kids struggling with the shape of the foreign words on their tongues – over fancy hors d’ oeuvres. She had boasted about the thoroughness of diplomatic training a while ago and how they’re given host language lessons before deployment, so I ask her to try out her Urdu language skills

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\* Names have been changed

on the young lad stumbling over his English words. She is appalled at the suggestion. I'm never invited again.

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“Open to The Third and Final Continent, please”, I say with some weariness to my class of 9<sup>th</sup> Graders. We are reading Jhumpa Lahiri today, the grand dame of the South Asian diaspora experience. The protagonist in her story moves from India to England to Boston with unhindered alacrity somewhere in the 1960s, ultimately finding a job as a librarian at MIT where his wife soon follows him. The story hinges on the gradual evolution of love between two people who were strangers before they married. All I can read into it is the privilege of being able to switch countries with such ease.

What is privilege, after all, if not freedom? Money's greatest gift is not the ability to buy you things, but its capacity to set you free. Free to have dreams and to follow through with them. The ideal way is to be born with money, but if you aren't that lucky a ticket out of the global south is your next best bet. So what if that road is paved with self-hatred, dumbing down, being ashamed of your own language and smiling through gritted teeth at green card jokes. Becoming part of the imperialist machinery will make it all okay.

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