

In Search of Freedom, Inshallah

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Still photo from the film *In Search of America, Inshallah*.

"Freedom cannot be achieved unless the women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression."

– Nelson Mandela

Inspired by the words of Nelson Mandela and a personal story, my upcoming film, *In Search of America, Inshallah*, explores the meaning of freedom.

The film's protagonist, Shaheen Ilyas, is a young Pakistani woman who arrives in Los Angeles to search for her husband, Ali Ilyas. Five years prior, right after their marriage, Ali had left his wife and homeland to pursue better earnings and a better life. While Ali has been absent and living the American dream, Shaheen—bound by the rules set by her husband and his family—has remained a good and loyal wife, expected to uphold the obligations that come with traditional marriage.

Yet Shaheen, an educated Muslim woman, can no longer stand the injustice. She leaves her in-laws and travels to America to discover her worth in marriage, society, and life. But upon her arrival, Shaheen is thrown into the unknown, the USA. Her first experiences in this new country include having both her luggage and passport stolen, and an uncomfortable encounter with a homeless man. A happy-go-lucky Mexican cab driver, Victor, offers to help Shaheen until she can locate her husband. In the process, he becomes her first male friend. But little does Shaheen know that the husband she cannot wait to find is married to an American woman named Green. In the course of the film, Shaheen's and Green's paths cross as they search for what they think they need in their lives. Along the way, the audience comes to understand how both women face oppression and control exercised upon them by society.

The film's focus on Shaheen, however, leads the viewers on a journey of her specific struggle. A dependent, Pakistani housewife comes to America to find her husband but is instead forced to find her own identity—will she live by the traditions she has been raised with, or choose to make her own rules? In the process, Shaheen comes to understand who she is and what she really wants out of her life. She discovers a new sense of hope and a kind of freedom she only dreamed of. This discovery leads her on a quest to right the wrongs in her life, and to start making decisions for herself.

Close to Home

On the basis of their gender, women around the world are forced to live under many restrictions and constraints laid upon them by society. Unfortunately, in many cultures it is assumed that a good wife is one who obeys her husband and nurtures her family, but does so as a silent partner in marriage. In these scenarios, a woman is expected to be a "yes-woman" to her husband, regardless of whether or not the husband is loyal, responsible, or abusive. To me, it is very disturbing that women are supposed to tolerate this injustice. I strongly believe that we all need to work toward changing mindsets about this reality and increase awareness about gender equality.

I grew up in the Muslim-majority state of Kashmir. Surrounded by the numerous women of my family, I have always loved and respected them. In fact, *In Search of America* is inspired by a tragic story concerning one of my female relatives, Shazia. In my own family, when it was decided that Shazia had reached "the right age" for marriage, she was forced into an arranged marriage. Shazia was only 18 and had aspirations to discover what life had to offer her. Not thinking of her education or any of her interests as a human being, her family chose her husband. Initially, Shazia resisted but family pressure eventually squashed her protests. As an obedient daughter, she complied and married the man. Out of respect for her family, she gave up her dreams of higher education, and buried her fears of incompatibility with the chosen suitor.

Shortly after their marriage, Shazia's husband Zafar left for the States. Zafar expected her to stay home and take care of his family until he returned. Duty-bound by all the traditions and cultural restrictions of his family, Shazia, as "the woman," felt compelled to abide by these rules whether she liked it or not. The family claimed these were her moral obligations to them as a Muslim woman. Though she questioned the treatment towards her, no one spoke up for her in the families.

After years of silence from Zafar, Shazia decided one day to take the leap and fly to a foreign country in search of her husband. She found out that Zafar remarried in the States for American citizenship, and was cheating on her. Her husband's plan was to keep this secret from her until he received citizenship; then he would return home and be a good husband to his wife. When Shazia confronted Zafar, he beat her for raising her voice against him. When she asked for her legal rights in light of the exposed infidelity and deception, he ridiculed her and accused her of being a bad Muslim woman. This devastated her to an extent that she decided never to marry again. Her family was ruined because of this scandal, and she endured severe psychological problems because of the man who played with her feelings.

Shazia showed tremendous potential to enjoy more in life than being a servile wife to a dishonest man. Following the demise of the marriage, I had hoped Shazia would finally begin her studies and pursue something she loved. Unfortunately, this experience took too heavy a toll on Shazia. To this day, she has not recovered and has not been able to reinvent herself. In Shaheen's character and story, I have expressed the hopes that I had for Shazia.

From Reel to Real

I have an agenda for creating this film. It is to encourage a social initiative to create awareness of the need for gender equality and respect toward women on the part of men. I want to make sure that women – mothers, sisters, wives, daughter, and friends – can be proud of the men in their families and circles of friends, and that women feel respected, valued, and safe with the men around them, because that is what women deserve. Education and awareness can bring this change.

I have seen many Muslim men from my own community perpetuate the preconceived notion of how women "should be" and the limits that "should be" placed upon females: the expectation that she will take care of the house, raise the children, and never step foot outside the domicile, or pursue a career. I believe the reason for such thinking stems from societal rules that become manifest in restrictions on women, but only serve to overpower justice and humanity. Then, there is the puffed-up ego that is "supposed to be" part of being "a man" and the need to preserve the "integrity" of that manhood. But just because you are born with certain body parts does not define who you are, or how you will live your life.

Women who remain silent and decide not to speak up for their rights are part of the problem, too. They think it is acceptable to comply with these rules because their mothers did, when, unfortunately, they are ignoring the variety of options they have in today's world. The world is changing into a better place for women; if they work hard enough they can be heard, even in developing countries. I want to encourage women and let them know that there is always a way to pursue an education, gain skills, or work toward a career. One just needs to be brave and take the bold steps forward. No woman needs permission from anyone to make decisions for herself.

I think the first step in figuring out what possibilities the world holds for women is to step out and explore. This can be difficult in conservative and strict societies. But there are so many resources that one can use to gain knowledge and awareness: books, newspapers, films, and even communication with others. With this in mind, I want women to follow Shaheen Ilyas's example. Shaheen recognizes that she is strong by herself and makes a change that could inspire women all over the world to understand what it means to be free and to believe in oneself and one's ability to redirect the course of one's life.

Religion and Culture: A Parting of Ways

Many believe that the main reason for the injustice acted upon someone like Shaheen is her religion, Islam, and that Islam prohibits Muslim women from a host of opportunities in life. This assumption is false. I am a Muslim and nowhere in the Qur'an can I find a place where women are kept against their will, or away from education. From its inception, Islam gave women social and communal rights. A Muslim woman has rights over her parents, husband, society, property, education, and, most importantly, the right to an opinion and decision-making at any point in her life. But, in many cases, Islam has become an excuse for men to undermine women. This behavior has more cultural roots than religious ones, however. We find this patriarchal behavior in other societies of South Asia and Africa, where the dominant religion is not Islam. The problem arises when the idea is ingrained in men that "women are your property and you are to control them," so anything that has to do with women and their lifestyle becomes a matter of the integrity of "manhood." And so it comes back to the issue of power-holding in society.

My movie will clear up this misconception. Shaheen can be free and keep her faith. She is not obligated to fulfill duties that contradict her will and dreams. A Muslim man cannot use Islam against a Muslim woman as the justification for her suffering.

Changemaking

With media sharing becoming increasingly user-friendly and widespread, innumerable stories have surfaced and challenged many of society's assumptions about what is true. Although mainstream media continues to show bias in the representation of many issues, journalists, writers, and filmmakers from around the world are exposing the problems facing their societies. The Arab Spring has been prominent in the news; Russians are fighting against poverty; the USA is criticized on its inequality, racism, and freedom of choice; South Asia is starting to address violence against women and child labor. Through my film I am doing my part to contribute to these efforts by trying to bring to light a very sensitive and overlooked issue.

My ultimate goal for *In Search of America* is to challenge the misunderstandings toward the issues raised in the film, specifically, the female-Muslim role in films, and the corresponding stereotyping of certain cultural and ethnic backgrounds. *In Search of America* will contribute to bringing about a change in attitude and perception of women's need to be dependent on men. Also, I hope to move my Muslim peers to start focusing more on what they could make out of themselves, rather than what they are "obliged" to be or do in order to fulfill the expectations outlined by society. We must accept that times have changed.

Finally, I hope this story not only brings awareness to the human rights violation of forced marriage and the misuse of Islam to carry it out, but also inspires all women facing similar issues and identity crises, or who are challenging status quo by raising their voices to be who they genuinely want to be. I hope that, in following Shaheen's example, every woman in this male-dominated world will become brave like Shaheen and reject the unjust pressures put upon her.

Please make this movie possible by showing your support on the Indiegogo page, or directly contact me if you are interested in becoming a sponsor or partner.

Born and raised in Kashmir, India, Los Angeles-based filmmaker Danish Renzu moved to the United States in 2005 by himself to pursue his higher education. After studying at Pasadena City College, he successfully transferred to his dream school, UCLA, in 2008. Renzu graduated from UCLA in 2010 with a BS in electrical engineering. Fond of filmmaking since childhood, he did not let this passion fade away. He took film classes at UCLA and studied screenwriting in the prestigious UCLA Writers' Program for two years. He has worked on several screenplays and short films in the past, and is currently raising funds to complete production of *In Search of America, Inshallah*. Besides this film, he is working on a short film on Kashmir, *Loving, Dying or Being Killed*, and a few feature films titled *The Winters of Kashmir* and *The Illegal*.

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