University of Pittsburgh

Questions of Faith Crossing Continents: Can't Spell Alisha Without (Moulana) Ali (Shaheed)

(Moulana = learned Muslim scholar; Shaheed = honor for deceased)

Alisha Upal

afu2@pitt.edu

32 Trotters Field Run, Pittsford NY 14534

585-635-9342

Questions of Faith Crossing Continents: Can't Spell Alisha Without (Moulana) Ali (Shaheed)

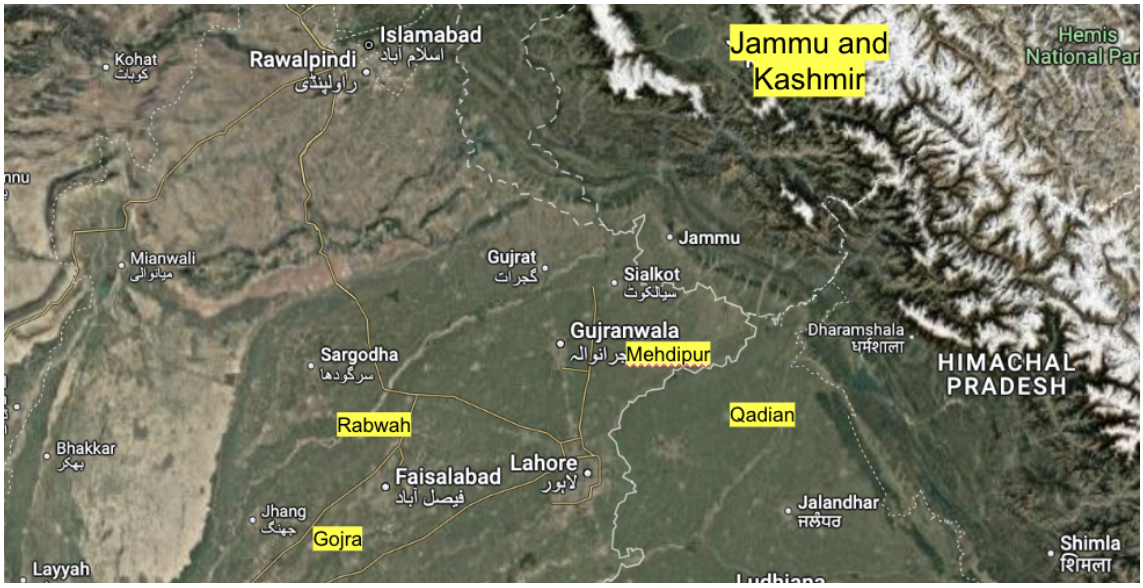
(Moulana = learned Muslim scholar; Shaheed = honor for deceased)

My Dada-jan (paternal grandfather), Moulana Ali and I almost share a name, but he might not appreciate that. My name "Alisha" is a rejection—a rejection of the name "Fateha" that Huzoor (The Fifth Khalifa of the Ahmadi Messiah) gave me, a rejection of our religion, Ahmadiyyat. It contributes to the great difference I feel between my life and the life Dada-jan lived. There are fourteen years after the end of his existence and before the beginning of mine. A short gap in the scheme of a life—but its uncrossable nature makes it feel infinite. I've never exchanged a glance, a touch, or a word with him.

And then there's the geography: continents and oceans stretch between Pennsylvania and Pakistan, a total of 7142 miles. Beyond the physical distance between the two places, Ahmadis such as my family cannot obtain visas to Pakistan. South Asia as a whole is elusive as my passport does not allow me to cross India's borders either. All I understand of Dada-jan's life is an echo and all I understand of the Pakistani world is a shadow of its true form. Putting on shalwar kameez for each Jumma, I remember looking in the mirror and thinking how beautiful my culture's traditional clothing was. I felt proud, but then the thought came: would Dada-jan have seen it the same way? I imagine him drinking chai by the village's river, his clothes damp with monsoon humidity. To him, that kurta wasn't a symbol of identity or tradition—it was just clothing. My only understanding of Pakistan is burdened and defined by its contrast to the West. Dada-jan's experiences must have felt natural and whole in a way I can't know.

What further complicates this exploration is how the memories and narratives of Dada-jan have been affected by my family. My family's memories and their narratives are

curated, the former subconsciously and latter consciously. I wonder: what's missing from this curation and why? There was also the generational distance, bridged by my father and Dado-jani, Sameen—my Dada-jan's wife—who connected my bloodline to him. When I sat with Dado-jani each evening after school, she would tell me stories of him in Urdu, in cursive-sounding script. I could only catch fragments of the stories. Maybe it was only her eyes I was grasping anything from. As I grasp for truths from among the stories bequeathed by my parents and grandmother, Sameen, I also turn to diasporic literature to help me flesh out gaps and mysteries in Ali's life. These include works by Asian-Americans like me, such as the 2022 memoir of Neema Avashia, "Hindu Hillbilly Elegy," the 2000 Pulitzer winning short story by Indian-American Jhumpa Lahiri entitled "When Mr. Pirzada Came to Dine," and Julie Otsuka's 2002 novel about Japanese internment in the U.S., *When the Emperor Was Divine*.



Labeled Google Maps Image of the Northern Region of the South Asian Subcontinent

It is a few years after Partition, around 1950. The dawn chorus in Mehdipur begins not with birdsong but with the call of the azaan, echoing across the small Sialkot village. The voice of Ramdhan Upal, the village chief, is deep and unwavering, carrying the rhythmic Arabic words through the air. His title is numberdar, a blend of the English "number" and Persian “dar” meaning owner, and together this term means he is one who holds a certain percentage of the land revenue. He is a farmer, wood-trader, and settles disputes in the village.

“Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar.”

The beat of the azaan, familiar as breath, is felt in the body of every villager. Ramdhan’s voice stirs the village awake and tethers his people to a shared devotion. To Ali, his son, his voice also carries a personal meaning.

Ali Upal, nine years old, rises from his charpai or woven rope cot. He steps onto the dirt path, the silhouettes of the brown village homes dark against the faint glow of a waking sky. Arriving at the mosque, Ali takes his place at the front of the men’s section. In the dim oil lamp light, his figure appears small next to his father’s. Villagers file in quietly, speaking in Punjabi to each other with their familiar faces illuminated by the soft light. Their shoulders brush as they settle onto the janamaz adorned in peacock blue thread with multiplying mandalas and tessellations.

As he presses his forehead to the ground during sajda, he thinks of Allah and, fleetingly, of a life beyond Mehdipur where his curiosity and ambition might lead him. He can not picture the dusts of Ghana or the snows of Saskatchewan just yet.

After prayer, the men in the mosque often stay behind to talk about matters of faith and life. Ramdhan never misses a chance to bring up how his children are a direct blessing from Allah, a reminder of His boundless mercy. He had lost an entire family in the floods before Ali

was born—a wife and four young children, two sons and two daughters, swept away in the waters of the Nala Dek.

The village whispered of how Ramdhan had been a broken man after that. It was his friend Bashir who first brought food to him during those bleak days, coaxing him to eat even as Ramdhan refused to leave his home. But one day, Ramdhan had locked his door from the inside, barring everyone out. “If I cannot find Allah, I will find nothing,” he had told Bashir before asking his friend to lock the house from the outside as well.

For forty days, Ramdhan remained in the house and fasted. Some thought he had lost his mind, but others said he was performing chilla (literally meaning "forty"), a spiritual practice of penance and solitude. On the final night, Allah answered him with a dream, promising a new life, a second family.

Soon after, Ramdhan married a beautiful sixteen-year-old girl, the youngest daughter of a blind woman who could no longer care for her. Her brother, trusting in Ramdhan’s reputation for righteousness, offered her hand in marriage, knowing she would be provided for. In time, she bore him twelve children. Ali was one of them, a child of Allah’s promise.

The villagers around Ramdhan and Ali whisper “Alhamdulillah,” as they sit cross-legged on the janamaz. Silently, Ali traces the embroidery with his fingertip, following its winding patterns as if pulled by something beyond himself.

Like most villages in Pakistan, Mehdipur’s fortune has long been tied to the monsoon, a season of both sustenance and chaos. Mehdipur is nestled along the shores of the Nala Dek, a river full of flood water. It starts around Jammu and Kashmir, flowing until it reaches Pakistan’s largest river, Sindh. Unlike the rain-fed agriculture of nearby villages, Mehdipur’s proximity to

the river allowed for modest productivity even before the Marala Ravi Link Canal transformed the Sialkot region. The villagers relied on rain-harvesting ponds and the labor of shoveling water through ditches. Some fields were watered by the clanking of Persian wheels pulled by blindfolded bullocks (Lefebvre).

The soil close to the river yields basmati rice, while wheat and chickpeas thrive on higher ground. Every blade of grass belongs to the water's generosity, and yet, water also has its unpleasant moods. During the monsoon, it lifts the water table, making the land rich with promise; in its anger, it claims fields and sometimes lives (Lefebvre).

The conditions of cultivation changed radically when the Marala-Ravi link was established in 1954, connecting the rivers Chenab and Ravi. When the Indus Basin river system was split between India and Pakistan following independence, this link canal was constructed. Although this canal does not provide irrigation water to the area, it made constructing wells easier and cheaper. It is only during the July to September monsoon season that water flows through the canal. Irrigation Department surveyors patrol the canal's banks, particularly at night, to ensure that people are not watering their plots or cutting down the trees that have been planted there (Lefebvre).

Today, the rain did not fall—it pounded, hammering against the earth in warm, furious sheets that blurred the line between sky and ground. The Nala Dek's usually mild currents now roared with turbulence.

Ali paces the small mud clay house, ears turned to the chaos outside. His mother throws a naan into the tandoor, clay oven, and scolds him, "Be careful– you're so close to the door."

Then came a cry– an unmistakably human shriek from outside.

Ali sprints, his mother's shouts fading behind him. His calloused soles slap against the ground, each step stinging, but he ignores the pain. Reaching the riverbank, he scans the waters and spots flailing hands clawing for life.

Without a second thought, he jumps in. The current drags him downstream, but he fights it, pushing himself toward the struggling man. Grasping his arms, Ali locks onto him tightly. Muscles burning and lungs straining, he battles the water, inch by inch. The shouts of villagers waiting on the shore grow louder as they near. At last, with a final surge of strength, Ali pushes the man toward the outstretched hands. The villagers pull him to safety, and then, with a collective heave, they drag Ali from the water as well. He collapses onto the muddy bank, gasping for air. Someone brings a dry shawl to wrap around them, while another offers water. The elders murmur prayers of gratitude. This was a miracle from Allah.

Ahmadiyyat is a religious movement within Islam, founded in 1889 by Mirza Ghulam Ahmad in Qadian, British India. Central to Ahmadi beliefs is the interpretation of the Quranic concept of *Khatam an-Nabiyyin*, or the "Seal of the Prophets." Ahmadis understand this to signify the end of book-bearing prophets and affirm that no prophet can surpass Prophet Muhammad. However, they believe that non-book-bearing prophets can arise as divinely guided reformers if Islam, in its modern practice, strays from its original teachings.

Mirza Ghulam Ahmad claimed to be the Promised Messiah and Mahdi, the reformer prophesied in Islamic scripture to appear in the latter days. His mission, as Ahmadis believe, was to revive the true spirit of Islam, counter widespread misinterpretations, and guide Muslims back to the core principles of their faith.

Most mainstream Muslims, however, interpret *Khatam an-Nabiyyin* as indicating the absolute finality of Prophet Muhammad, with no exceptions. They hold that Jesus will return as the Messiah, and a distinct figure, the Mahdi, will emerge before this return to guide the Muslim community. This difference is the key theological distinction between Ahmadis and the broader Muslim community.

Pakistan's 1956 constitution guarantees religious freedom for all. Groups like *Majlis-e-Ahrar-e-Islam* and *Jama'at-i-Islami* rally against Ahmadis, demanding their exclusion from the Muslim community. These groups are vocal, but only a small minority of the population agrees with them. While Ahmadiyyat persecution is not yet institutionalized, the groundwork is being laid for the systemic discrimination that will emerge in the decades to come. Rabwah, the only majority-Ahmadi town in Pakistan, stands as a symbol of both the community's faith and its growing resilience.

For Ali, the first in his family and village to attend college, Rabwah is both exciting and unfamiliar. The streets buzz with the sounds of bicycles, motorcycles, and rickshaws, their horns blending with the chatter of its 40,000 residents. The town is framed by the mountains, their rugged peaks contrasting with the vibrant energy below. The tall walls of the buildings reflect a segregation—men in one school, women in the other. Ali sees women walking freely up and down the streets, dressed in black burqas. Their attire is more conservative than in other parts of Pakistan, but they are also more educated than he's ever seen.

As a bright and ambitious student, Ali embraces the opportunities Rabwah offers. He enrolls at *Talim-ul-Islam College*, pursuing a Bachelor of Science Honors in both Mathematics and Physics. Ali initially clings to Punjabi, the tongue of Mehdipur, but it is seen as the language of villages, rural and uneducated. While Punjabi is still the mother tongue of everyone in

Rabwah, the emphasis on Urdu as the language of upward mobility begins to shape his thinking. Urdu is not entirely foreign to him—it shares much of its vocabulary with Punjabi and has filtered into his village life through radio broadcasts and newspapers—but it has always been peripheral and not part of intimate conversations. In college, Urdu becomes the medium for his studies in Mathematics and Physics, found in his textbooks, lectures, and academic discussions. Speaking Punjabi feels out of place now, even shameful (Naqvi).

After earning his degree, Ali takes a job teaching high school science, a role where he can share his passion for learning while continuing his own academic pursuits. He hopes to earn a master's degree in Mathematics. But Rabwah offers more than academic growth—it is the spiritual heart of the Ahmadiyya community. Surrounded by voices filled with conviction, Ali often hears fellow Ahmadis speak of living in the latter days, a time when humanity needs guidance to return to true Islam. Ali's academic ambitions begin to feel incomplete and superficial without a spiritual purpose. He decides that his love for teaching and his faith can intersect. Ali enrolls in *Jamia Ahmadiyya*, the missionary school. Most of the students there enroll immediately after middle school. Ali, in his twenties, is almost a decade older than his classmates.

I wonder if my Dada-jan truly wanted to be a missionary or if he chose that path because he believed it was the ideal way of doing good. Often, it feels like people oversimplify the idea of following one's passions. They encourage me to chase my interests, whether that be philosophy, writing, or game design, because those are areas that fascinate me. But for me, the desire to do good feels stronger than the desire to chase my curiosity. That's why, even though medicine doesn't fascinate me in the same way as those other fields, I still feel drawn to it. Medicine feels like the most meaningful way I can help others and most effectively contribute to

the world. At the same time, I know my parents and Dado-jani strongly pushed me toward this path, which makes me wonder if that taints it. Should it still be my choice if others have influenced my decision?

I suspect Dada-jan faced a similar dilemma. He studied physics and math, fields that seem tied to his intellectual curiosity and personal interest. But then he became a missionary, a decision that feels driven by a broader sense of purpose. Did he truly want to be a missionary, or did he believe it was the most meaningful path and the way he could make the most impact? Was it a decision based on a personal drive, or was it a choice informed by the religious people around him? The parallel between his life and mine makes me wonder: what kind of "wanting" should justify a career? Wanting to follow your passion? Wanting to serve others? Wanting to be useful, to be good? Maybe that's why I relate to Dada-jan's choices, even as I question their impact. I wonder if he struggled with the same question I face now: how do you decide which kind of wanting matters most?

At *Jamia Ahmadiyya*, Ali dissects his faith, taking it apart piece by piece. He immerses himself in the Quran, parsing its verses in Arabic and studying their interpretations. Classes on Hadith and Islamic jurisprudence hone his understanding of Sharia, while lessons in comparative religion prepare him to engage with diverse beliefs. The students are trained not only in theology but also in public speaking, learning to deliver sermons that can inspire and persuade. He also learns English in order to preach beyond the local region. Through this learning, Ali's faith develops beyond the boundaries of automation. It is no longer just about repetition or tradition; his faith begins to take shape as something he owns himself.

Like Dada-jan at my age, before he entered *Jamia Ahmadiyya*, my faith has long felt automated (Avashia 89). My parents etched the rhythms of the Quran and prayers into my mind

and muscle. I know the sounds and motions: the azaan, the sajda, the "*Ameen*." But in perfecting this automation, I fear I gave up control over my submission and my resistance to it. I remember how much I loved Allah as a child, how certain I was of that love and its reciprocation. Allah was the parent who never laid a hand on me, so I misunderstood our relationship to be unconditional.

This misunderstanding is no longer accidental though. I admire Dada-jan for taking action to own his faith, for stripping it down to its parts and rebuilding it with conviction. But if I tried to dissect my faith the way he did, I fear I would find answers I'm not ready to face. Instead, I cling to my connection through letters to Allah in my Notes app. Inside are confessions, pleas, questions like "Do You still love me? People say You wouldn't but i need to hear it from You." I tell Allah about my girlfriend, my pre-marital, interfaith, interracial homosexual relations, who represents my prayers answered and a sin committed at once. I tell Him I would rather be damned than deny the truth of my heart, which I only say because I know that He knows I'm bluffing and afraid. I write: "i am haram, but You made me this. How do i love You for that?"

I think about Dada-jan's convinction, or at least the way I've written it for him here. He believes Allah's love exists, external and constant. But I'm always wondering if the hints of love I find from Him—whether in dreams or in a line of the Quran—are just my own delusions wrapped in Arabic. I hear, "I love you as you are," and the words undo me completely. And when the morning comes and the words fade, I dig my forehead into the janamaz, pleading, "Was that You? Say it once more!" Will Dada-jan ask himself these same questions, also pleading for Allah's reassurance? Did he ever write his prayers in the margins of his physics notes, hoping they might bring him answers on his destiny? In his future, watching the destruction caused by

war and the persecution targetting Ahmadis, does he feel abandoned by Allah's love? Or perhaps he never questions it at all. Perhaps he remains certain, as he seems to be about everything: faith, purpose, love. I envy that certainty.

Dada-jan owes his entire existence and triumphs to the miracles of Allah's love—love he repaid with absolute devotion. I once had that certainty too, but I doubt there's any version of me that could do the same sacrifice he did. Instead I repay Allah with the opposite, fantasizing about love outside of Him: the sin I am told not to pursue, dangling like Hawwa's (Eve's) provocative, provoking apple. Through His sanctions, He has created a monopoly on love and I'm greedy for calling it out. I doubt Dada-jan or anyone in my lineage ever had urges to look outside of halal love and claim it injustice.

Later, I attend a cousin's wedding, watching her marry a man she barely knows. I see her shaky hands, her henna-stained palms pressed together in prayer during the ceremony. My mother leans close, with a smile: "Next it may be your turn." She sees these arranged marriages as beautiful honors. Did Dada-jan see his duty for Ahmadiyyat as a beautiful honor? Should I see the encouraged sacrifice of my curiosity, passions, and sexuality as a beautiful honor?

It would be simpler if I could stop believing in Allah. But belief is not something I can let go because it has been etched into me. I recite Arabic I cannot translate, hoping it means seeking guidance or even just acknowledgment. I write to Allah in English on technology that He may resent: "i wish i could become a disbeliever, because i can't live and still be Yours." Can someone who writes these words claim to have actually rejected Ahmadiyyat? I tell other people that I have, but perhaps that claim was less a declaration of truth and more an act of defiance. To reject Ahmadiyyat was to claim agency, to push back against the weight of duty, even if it wasn't the full story. Between the rituals I still perform and the questions I still ask, my faith is still alive

in some deformed way. Between Allah and myself, belief and doubt, worship and lust, I hold on for better answers to my pleas.

Ali's and my own journey through faith and identity can be understood in relation to the experience described in the memoir by Neema Avashia, "Hindu Hillbilly Elegy." In the memoir, Avashia, an Indian-American born to immigrant parents in a predominantly white area of West Virginia, reflects on the challenges of defending her Hindu beliefs. She writes,

> Again, I failed to know how to explain. So much of culture and faith had been automated for me, much as they had been for my Christian peers, that I couldn't provide reasoned responses to their questions. It never occurred to me to turn the microscope on them, on their faith, on their culture. Such is the curse of being the minority during childhood, I suppose. It never quite feels safe to challenge dominance in that way. Instead, their shaming questions pricked tiny holes in my nascent faith, tapping any reserves built up at home and at puja. (Avashia 89)

Avashia, Ali, and I encounter faith as something we must grapple with rather than simply inherit. Avashia wrestles with external challenges to her faith from peers, describing a feeling of inadequacy when asked to explain her beliefs—like she was caught off guard, unable to offer reasoned responses. As a child in a diasporic minority position, she lacked a secure foundation for her faith, relying instead on an automation passed down by her parents. Ali, by contrast, grew up in a homogenous Ahmadi environment where his faith was fully reinforced and unquestioned during his formative years. Like Avashia, his faith initially took the form of automation from his parents. However, he later chose to analyze and deconstruct it, not in response to external pressures but through his own voluntary interrogation. The contrast highlights how external and internal disruptions to automation shape one's ability to claim their belief as their own. My

experience feels like a blend of the two. Like Avashia, I was a minority raised in America, surrounded by conflicting ideas and values. Yet, unlike her, my automation wasn't broken by external shame. Instead, like Ali, I was drawn to explore my faith for internal reasons.

Ali's parents, however, faced profound external crises that may have intensified their faith. In his life, Ali will not escape such external disruptions either.

Ali was six years old during the Partition of the Indian subcontinent in 1947. He does not remember the violence suffered by Muslims and Hindus -- people of different faiths. His mother did her best to ensure that. However, he does remember the grief in everyone surrounding him. Now, at twenty-four, tensions between India and Pakistan remain high. Ali, taking a break from his studies in Rabwah, travels to visit his family in Medhipur.

In August 1965, the Pakistan Army carried out Operation Gibraltar, an incursion into the Jammu and Kashmir region meant to provoke an uprising against the Hindu ruling official by the Muslim-majority population. The operation name was specifically chosen by Pakistan's leadership to make a comparison to the Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, which began in Gibraltar. By early September, India had crossed the International Border, and war was officially declared (Indo-Pakistani).

Ali wakes to the sound of distant rumbling. It grows louder, shaking the earth and the walls of the small house he shares with his parents. Through the windows, he watches Indian tanks cut through Mehdipur's fields like enormous steel plows. Instead of sowing seeds, they leave the earth gashed and bleeding. What had once been orderly rows of chickpeas and rice, was now churned into deep ruts. The tanks move on, leaving the village behind, but the damage lingers.

When the rumbling subsides, Ali steps outside. The air smells of dust and oil. He joins his father in inspecting the fields, their silence heavy with resignation. Together the villagers begin the slow work of repairing what they can, planting crops in the shallow soil that remains. But the rows never quite line up as they once did. Ali cannot reconcile the sight of violence carried out in the name of nations and religions, the very things meant to unify people. Violence, whether in Partition or in this war, always seems to bloom wherever faith and power meet. But as a missionary, maybe he can offer a different path, one that spreads the message of unity and compassion without the force of arms. Above him, Pakistani Sabres and Indian Gnats race through the skies, trails of smoke following their metallic bodies. The villagers crane their necks upward, their faces a mixture of awe and dread. When the planes veer away, they leave behind the scent of burnt fuel, an invisible residue.

When the war ended, the ceasefire was met with anger and confusion. Misinformation and controlled press reports had led many to believe that Pakistan had won, fueling widespread protests across the country. Once the truth came out that Pakistan had actually lost ground and failed to achieve its military objectives, the sense of betrayal deepens. While the press lies contributed to the unrest, much of the anger stems from the frustration over the outcome of the war, particularly the loss of disputed territories like Kashmir. Despite the turmoil, September 6th became known as Defence Day, commemorating Lahore's resistance against Indian forces and serving as a reminder of the nation’s resilience (Indo-Pakistani).

Later, Ali marries Sameen from Gojra. Their marriage is arranged by both their families, and the couple moves into her father’s vacant house in Rabwah. Ali, still a student at *Jamia Ahmadiyya*, coud not have afforded a house on his own.

Sameen pours chai from a steel pot into two chipped cups, the steam wavering between them. “I was born in East Punjab. In Gurdaspur, near Qadian.” Qadian was where the Promised Messiah had lived.

“I was two during Partition,” she says, setting the pot down and wrapping her hands around her cup. “I don’t remember it all, but Amma always said I was a quiet baby on that journey. Too quiet. Like even at that age, I understood something terrible was happening.” Her voice catches for a moment, but she presses on. “We left everything behind—our house, our neighbors, even our fields. Abba said it wasn’t safe anymore. Hindu and Sikh mobs... they were slaughtering Muslims in the streets. Entire caravans wiped out.”

Ali stays silent.

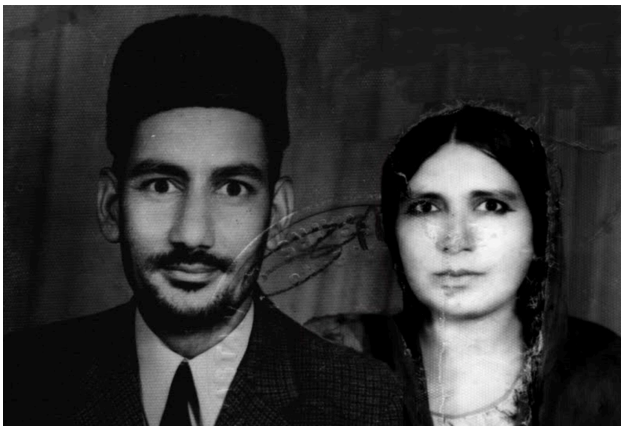
“But we were lucky,” Sameen continues. “Abba said it was because of the Jamaat, the way they organized everything. They had trucks, real caravans, and sometimes even police protection. The Khalifa made sure we all moved together, stayed safe. That’s how we made it to Lahore.”

“And then?” Ali reaches for his cup.

She smiles faintly. “And then, nothing. We had nothing. The government said we could claim the properties the Hindus and Sikhs had left behind, but the Khalifa told us not to. He said Allah would return us to Qadian one day. So, we started over completely. Amma and Abba worked day and night to give us a chance.”

Her fingers tighten slightly around the cup as she leans back. “When Abba finally bought a little house in Gojra, it felt like the first time we could breathe. My sisters and I shared a room. Abba used to say that when he retired, we’d all move to the land he bought here in Rabwah, to be near the new headquarters.”

She gestures vaguely at the walls of the house. “And now look. His plan worked in a way. Now we’re here. This is our home.”



Ali and Sameen.

Ali is stationed in Narowal, four hours away from Rabwah, while Sameen awaits the arrival of their first child. The physical distance weighs heavily on him, but his devotion to Allah and the Ahmadiyyat mission drives him forward. Sameen continues working as a schoolteacher at the girls' school in Rabwah—something Ali finds deeply humiliating. Though he loves her, it is difficult for him to reconcile the idea of his wife working outside the home. Yet, he accepts this arrangement, not out of indifference or support, but because enduring this personal shame is a testament to his devotion to Allah. To support her during this time, Sameen’s parents stay by her side, ensuring she is cared for in his absence.

One afternoon, a letter arrives. Recognizing Sameen’s handwriting, Ali opens it eagerly, though he knows it is too soon for the baby to be born.

Sameen explains how her father has written to the Khalifa, requesting a name for the newborn. Traditionally, Ali should have been the one to send it, but Sameen understands the circumstances. A postcard has arrived with the Khalifa’s reply. Ali pictures Sameen holding the

postcard, reading the words aloud, her voice filled with the reverence she always has for the Khalifa's blessings.

Sameen has written in the letter: Our son's name will be Muhammed Nasir.

"Muhammed Nasir," Ali repeats quietly. Nasir is "supporter" in Arabic.

Not long after, another letter arrives, this one from Ali's own parents. It is about his younger brother, Akbar, an Air Force pilot whose recent engagement has been a source of joy for the family. As Ali reads, the words feel heavier with each line. Akbar has flown into Bangladesh on an operation and gone missing. There is no communication, no confirmed location, no wreckage. Just silence.

In his rented room, Ali sits alone, the dim light of a single bulb casting shadows on the walls. The two letters lie on the small wooden desk before him. The one from his parents has its edges worn from being unfolded and refolded. The other, from Sameen, is still smooth.

When the time comes, Ali boards a bus to return to Rabwah. Its exterior is covered in a riot of swirled color, with Urdu calligraphy and talismanic symbols. The roof is crowned with an assortment of luggage—bundles wrapped in cloth, woven baskets, and a rooster peeking out of a cage—secured under a metal frame adorned with jingling chains and small bells (a description inspired from a Pakistani bus I once saw years ago in the Museum of History in Quebec).

Inside the bus, it is crowded, filled with the buzz of conversation and the clatter of belongings. Ali wedges himself into a seat near the window, clutching his bag tightly. Through the grimy glass, the world seems to rush by: sunlit fields, grazing cattle, and roadside stalls where vendors wave as the bus passes.

In 1970, Mashallah: Nasir was born.

Though Ali was fortunately able to be home for this moment, much of Nasir's growth happened beyond his sight, creating a sense of separation in their relationship. This mirrors the emotional distance experienced by Mr. Pirzada in Jhumpa Lahiri's short story *Interpreter of Maladies*. As an international graduate student from Bangladesh studying in America, he is separated from his family during the turbulent 1971 Revolution in Dacca, when Bangladesh fought for liberation from Pakistan. The story is narrated by an Indian-American girl in whose house Mr. Pirzada dines. She describes:

> Before eating Mr. Pirzada always did a curious thing. He took out a plain silver watch without a band, which he kept in his breast pocket, held it briefly to one of his tufted ears, and wound it with three swift flicks of his thumb and forefinger. Unlike the watch on his wrist, the pocket watch, he had explained to me, was set to the local time in Dacca, eleven hours ahead. For the duration of the meal the watch rested on his folded paper napkin on the coffee table. He never seemed to consult it. Now that I had learned Mr. Pirzada was not an Indian, I began to study him with extra care, to try to figure out what made him different. I decided that the pocket watch was one of those things. When I saw it that night, as he wound it and arranged it on the coffee table, an uneasiness possessed me; life, I realized, was being lived in Dacca first. (Lahiri 30)

Mr. Pirzada's pocket watch, set to Dacca's time, symbolizes his deep connection to his family and homeland. The fact he doesn't consult it during dinner may show that he believes checking the watch would be a futile gesture. He is painfully aware of the ongoing war and the risks his seven daughters face, yet he is powerless to help or even confirm their safety. It serves as a quiet reminder of his constant concern and love, even as he carries on in America. The

realization that “life was being lived in Dacca first” underscores an awareness of Mr. Pirzada’s displacement. The narrator seems to see that Mr. Pirzada's family and homeland are living through events that Mr. Pirzada can only follow secondhand through the television.

This resonates with Ali’s experiences. Like Mr. Pirzada, Ali is deeply tied to his family but finds himself separated from them due to circumstances tied to work. While Ali travels for missionary work, his family’s life continues without him, marked by moments like the naming of his son—events that should involve him but don’t. As turmoil began to unfold in Ali’s homeland, his separation from his spouse and child (like Mr. Pirzada’s from his) would reach a height of terror.

In May 1974, tensions came to a boiling point at Rabwah’s railway station. A train bound for Peshawar pulled into the station, carrying a group of students from the *Islami Jamiat-e-Talaba*. As the train slowed to a halt, the students leaned out of the windows, their voices rising in hateful jeers. They cursed the Ahmadiyyat Promised Messiah and hurled slurs at the gathered crowd. And their taunts were not limited to words. Some students made lewd gestures, grabbing at themselves in vulgar mockery. A few went further, pulling down their trousers and exposing themselves to the Ahmadi women, their crude laughter echoing through the station (1974).

For the men from Rabwah, the students’ actions were too much to bear. Outrage swept through the small crowd, and a few surged forward in anger, clambering onto the train. Fists and shouts erupted in a chaotic clash until the train pulled away. At the next stop of the train, preparations had already been made to welcome the students as “heroes” who had suffered grievous harm at the hands of the Ahmadi community (1974).

This violent clash at Rabwah's station became the catalyst for a nationwide wave of attacks on the Ahmadiyya community. On May 30th, Sameen's parents anxiously told her of their mosque being attacked by mobs in Gojra. On June 5th, milk suppliers ceased deliveries to the residents of Rabwah. Ahmadi-owned shops were forcibly shut down, with some even set on fire. Meanwhile, many other Muslim-owned shops refused to serve Ahmadis (1974).

In September of 1974, the Pakistani Constitution officially declared Ahmadis non-Muslims. This was followed by Ordinance XX in 1984 which criminalized Ahmadiyyat religious practices completely (1974).

The terror quietly endured by Ali and his family during these attacks echoes the experience of the Japanese-American boy in Julie Otsuka's novel, *When The Emperor Was Divine*. In the novel, the boy's home becomes unsafe, and his family is treated like criminals despite their innocence. Set during World War II, the story focuses on the family's experience in Japanese-American internment camps. These camps, created under the pretext of curbing Japanese espionage, stripped families of their freedoms and cultural identity. One example of the boy's reaction to the oppressive rules is his response to the ban on worshipping the Japanese emperor: "Whenever the boy walked past the shadow of a guard tower, he pulled his cap low over his head and tried not to say the word. But sometimes it slipped out anyway. Hirohito, Hirohito, Hirohito. He said it quietly. Quickly. He whispered it" (Otsuka 52).

The boy's quiet defiance whispering "Hirohito" under the shadow of a guard tower captures the tension between identity and survival. He knows that saying the emperor's name openly is forbidden but he is still compelled to say it. Perhaps it was a small, private act of maintaining his own sense of self in safety.

Within Rabwah, Ali's family may have felt relatively safe, insulated from immediate threats. However, as Ali ventures beyond its borders to other Pakistani cities, the environment shifts drastically. Ordinance XX criminalizes the very objective of his mission—preaching Ahmadiyyat, professing his faith, and even just using Islamic greetings—all of which could result in imprisonment or worse. Yet, like the boy in the internment camp, Ali persists. Every word he speaks of Ahmadiyyat to strangers in these cities is an act of faith and defiance, a refusal to let persecution dictate his beliefs or silence his mission. Ali might admire the boy's courage because it mirrors his own struggles.

Ali and Sameen had four more children after Nasir, with my father being the couple's youngest child. Growing up, he, along with his siblings, was immersed in a household where Islamic values and rituals were deeply instilled by Ali and Sameen. As the eldest son and interim man of the house during Ali's absences, Nasir was given particular responsibility for learning and upholding the family's religious practices. The younger children, including my father, followed these practices of faith and duty in their own way. This emphasis on religious observance sets the stage for a broader exploration of how individuals come to understand their religious roots. Avashia, in "Hindu Hillbilly Elegy", reflects on the disconnect between the rituals she practiced and the deeper spirituality they were supposed to evoke. She writes:

> When I sought to understand, instead of just parrot, and deliberately asked my mom to translate word for word, pushing her knowledge of Sanskrit vocabulary beyond its limits, I sometimes found the songs didn't resonate with me. Singing about Ganpati's curved trunk, round body, and brilliance of a hundred suns didn't fill me with a sense of spirituality. It was my mom's voice that convinced me all was right in the world, not the words she was singing. I remember wanting

> desperately to emulate her piety, but failing to understand the source of her devotion. (Avashia 89)

This passage reflects the dissonance Avashia is experiencing between her experience and her mother's. In the description of her mother's voice, Avashia places emphasis on the emotional and devotional power she hears rather than the doctrinal aspects of the faith. The implication is that, for Avashia, this sincerity and love was more important than the intellectual or symbolic content of the songs. Avashia's reflection highlights the tension between the emotional power of inherited faith and the intellectual search for meaning. Her struggle was less about rejecting faith outright and more about reconciling the emotional connection she felt with the doctrinal gaps she couldn't ignore.

This struggle mirrors the dynamic between Ali and his son, Nasir. Ali's commitment to his beliefs, similar to Avashia's mother's, is anchored in his devotion and belief, which he passes down to his children. For Nasir, however, this inherited faith raised more questions than answers. Like Avashia, he sought to understand rather than simply accept what was passed down to him. Nasir's questioning took him down a more critical path, leading to his eventual rejection of Ahmadiyyat.

In one light, Ali's reaction to Nasir's questioning might have been one of appreciation, seeing it as a sincere attempt to engage with the faith. But Nasir's departure from Ahmadiyyat, had Ali lived to see it, would have been a painful rupture in their shared connection to faith. Their parallel journeys both began with an academic focus—Ali in Math and Physics, and Nasir in Computer Science. Yet, both ultimately circled back to theology, reflecting a broader pattern of wrestling with the deeply rooted faith that shaped them. However, where Ali's return was driven by a desire to defend the faith, Nasir's was motivated by a need to critique it. Perhaps this

isn't coincidence but an inevitable result of a family where faith is woven so deeply into the fabric of daily life that neither could truly escape it.

As the years went by, the growing reality of religious persecution in Pakistan made it increasingly difficult to practice and especially to preach Ahmadiyyat. By the early 1980s, the situation had deteriorated to the point where the Jamaat decided to transfer Ali's position to Saskatchewan, Canada, for his safety. Saskatchewan was a place far removed from the conflicts of the homeland. Back in Pakistan, Nasir aspired to follow Ali to North America for his education. Thus, the entire family, including my father, moved to Canada, which offered a fresh start and a refuge from the constant threat of violence. But Sameen struggled. She hated Canada, disoriented by the stark difference from the life they had known. She returned to Pakistan alone for two weeks, only to realize she had nothing there anymore, and came back. Ali continued to work between both Africa and Canada, divided across continents, until his death in 1995.

My family's migration to escape persecution brought me to Pittsburgh, severing me from Dada-jan's Pakistani roots. For generations, my ancestors lived in South Asia, and perhaps for generations to come, my descendants will live in North America. This migration embodies the tension between preservation and adaptation, between holding on to heritage and embracing change. The distance between our worlds—of time, geography, and belief—feels unbridgeable. And yet, I wonder if the point of life is less about resolving these tensions and more about experiencing them fully. I wonder if life isn't about choosing between personal passion and collective good but about embracing their interplay. I think of Dada-jan, caught between his studies in physics and his missionary work, and I wonder if he he didn't see his work as a sacrifice but as a continuation of his curiosity, redirected toward people instead of equations.

Balancing personal fulfillment with collective responsibility is a tension I feel deeply, especially when considering the broader consequences of my choices. There's a certain beauty in pushing boundaries for creativity and brilliance, even when their impact feels intangible. My desire to explore through writing, philosophy, and self-expression is deeply rooted in who I am, yet I recognize how these pursuits can feel misaligned with the tangible ways of serving others, in comparison to the "honorable" fields like medicine or missionary work that directly touch lives. The arts, for all their power, are seen as disconnected, even indulgent. Even in fields like technology and engineering, which often promise practical solutions, there's a tendency to prioritize unnecessary convenience or superficial, profitable entertainment. The intelligence it takes is impressive, but not "noble." Pushing boundaries for brilliance, though alluring, often comes at a cost—like a star that burns brightly before collapsing into a supernova. This brilliance, fleeting as it is, demands a price: resources drained, ecosystems disrupted, inequalities amplified. The same is true for unchecked human progress, where advancement at all costs risks leaving the future impoverished. In contrast, sustainability offers a quieter, more enduring kind of fulfillment, one rooted in harmony with the Earth—nurturing rather than exploiting our resources. Yet without the drive to explore and innovate, do we risk losing the tinkering essence of what makes us human? Perhaps true advancement shouldn't come at the expense of the future; instead, it should nourish what comes next, combining brilliance with balance, ambition with care.

As for my Dada-jan, loving someone you've never met seems impossible, yet I think I feel it. Dada-jan and I love the same people, and somewhere in that overlap, a connection lives. He might not recognize the choices I've made—the woman I love, the immodest clothes I wear—but I hope he'd recognize the questions that drive me. Faith and culture shaped

Dada-jan's life, but I believe that they're not the only things that he left for me to inherit. I believe his true legacy is more subtle and enduring. Maybe I carry his smaller, lighter habits and mannerisms or his deeper, heavier driven introspection. What feels more important to me is how I understand his life and mine as two points on the same line. Like him, I'm searching for a way to bring meaning to my life, to navigate the tension between what I want for myself and what I owe to others. The connection between us isn't in the different answers we found but in the act of asking.

Works Cited

Avashia, Neema. *Another Appalachia: Coming Up Queer and Indian in a Mountain Place.* First edition., West Virginia University Press, 2022.

"Indo-Pakistani war of 1965." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.

Lahiri, Jhumpa. *Interpreter of Maladies*. Flamingo, 2000.

Lefebvre, Alain. *Kinship, Honour and Money in Rural Pakistan: Subsistence Economy and the Effects of International Migration. Routledge*, 2014, p. 85.

Naqvi, Syeda Sughra. "Urdu Imperialism in Pakistan: Reality or Myth." International E-Journal of Advances in Social Sciences, vol. 3, no. 8, Aug. 2017.

Otsuka, Julie. *When the Emperor Was Divin*e. New York, Knopf, 2002.

"1974 Anti-Ahmadiyya riots." Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia.