**What it means to be a brown girl on a bike**

back in 2016 when i started to tell people i was going to quit my job, leave london and cycle somewhere for a year, i think most people didn’t believe me.

when in 2018, i actually left my job, left my house, serviced my bicycle and started making movements, most people began to ask one question: why?

my casual answer: why not?

this was a lie.

when explaining the adventure to one friend, she leaned into me, wide-eyed, and confidentially spoke, ‘you know, you don’t have to do this.’

the thing is i do.

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on thursday 5th july, i’m going to start cycling from east london to south Africa, on a bike made by a friend (i’m the trusting sort). i will take a tent, sleeping bag, some clothes, lots of padded underwear and a lifetime supply of mosquito repellant. you can find the current projected route here. but i must warn you, it might all change. a week ago - the plan was to cycle the silk road in central asia. who knows what the plan will be in three days when i actually leave. i’ve talked about it for about 2 years but it’s all come together in the last two weeks. it was going to be a 3 month jolly. it’s become a 30 month adventure. it’s all slightly surreal.

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this decision is definitely rooted in privilege and luxury. but at the same time, it was one borne out of necessity.

all my life I have had a series of labels allocated to me by other people. some labels applied at different times, in different sets. some overlapped.

brown, woman, muslim, immigrant, bme, working class, asian, paki, graduate, colonised, backward, inferior, oppressed, poc, minority, oppressed woman, oppressed muslim, oppressed muslim woman… you get the idea.

so few words to describe the entirety of me.

and for a really long time, these words from foreign tongues contained me. enabled me to function in this white unequal unjust society, albeit only as the other. my spirit regurgitated and categorised within the confines of an occupier language by people who didn’t look like me and some people who did. At times, the labels offended and put me in my place. at other times, they were badges of pride, reclaimed.

I studied and did well at school. i consumed the culture, identifying with ‘babysitter club’ books and ‘my so called life’ episodes. because I didn’t feel intelligent in dominant white spaces i began to speak a certain way, a way that my sisters and brothers would say ‘it’s farha being fa-fa-fa’, a kind way of telling me I was being a patronising \*\*\*\*. because I didn’t feel pretty enough against the white beauty standard, i allowed myself to be exoticised, engaging with my culture as performance to entertain masses, replicating the colonial exhibitions where the spoils of the ‘empire’ were put on display. the colonised only seeing their worth through the coloniser’s prism. and they call it history. because i didn’t understand for too long, i let\* the inferiority and the imbalances take deep root, disturbing the rhythms of my body, the way i thought, the way i moved, the way i talked as i self-censored and tried to take up as little space as possible.

the realisation is heavy. it starts off slow and cautious. you stop ignoring that feeling you usually try and push down. you start to question. then something triggers and it comes thick and fast like smoke. like the moment a spark of fire takes hold of something and consumes it, ravaging it until its an empty burnt out shell. or perhaps it is better likened to a snake bite where the venom spreads through the blood until every limb, muscle and ligament is infected and paralysed.

the realisation that it is not reversible is painful. you see, these wounds run deep, weaved into the fabric of our skins and the muscles of our heart. interwoven with the synapses of our brain. It requires a lifetime of learning, unlearning and careful extraction. It is heavy work. more labour on our brown backs.

but I tried. I sought solace in new labels - diaspora, intersectionality, activist, decolonial

i met people thinking what i was thinking. recognition. oh my gosh, i did not realise how important it was to have validation for these thoughts in my head. the conversations have been important. alternative. a rejection of dominant culture. creating art and drawing from our souls to express our complicated experiences. quite simply, it has been a lifeline. and as I reflected, read and critiqued, i began to understand what happened to me, my parents, grandparents, my communities at home here, at home in kashmir, at home in south asia, at home in the ‘colonies,’ at home with any people who had been subjugated like us. in the rage i felt hope. hope that these spaces of creative discourse existed. that we had some space. finally. maybe we could catch our breath in these pressure cookers we are confined in. and do the work needed so the next generation can be freer. do the work our parents and grandparents had no space to do. being brown became paramount. culture as survival.

fairytales make us believe in happy endings. that once we hit the crescendo of conflict in the story, it all comes together, neatly packaged. and we wish for this to be true. so it’s always disappointing when life doesn’t turn out that way. whilst i have found solace and comfort in these spaces, i’ve also struggled within them. with their narrowing of the narrative. a reduction that replicates the constraints of a colonised mind. i’ve begun questioning their rejection of the mainstream - is it really because you didn’t want them or because they didn’t want us? have you started using words and labels as rhetoric to lassoo your way into the exclusive spheres of establishment? when i see increased programming of this discourse in mainstream complicit institutions, our creative radical thought being consumed by increasingly white ‘woke’ audiences, occupying the seats i am full of questions. why don’t i belong in spaces i am supposed to belong in? they took our bodies and minds - are they now taking our souls? are we complicit? I am full of questions but no energy to find the answers. so here i am. tired, burdened and heavy with a lot of pain. unsure what’s next but sure that i can’t work through this in this geography anymore. at the scene of the crimes.

for my survival, i have to leave. i’m not sure why, somewhere along the way, it has become necessary for this body to carry me. an act of defiance perhaps? but against who i’m unsure - maybe i’m waging war with my occupied self.

that brings us here. in a few days, i am going to start cycling to south africa. the destination may change, but i think the corny phrase ‘it’s all about the journey’ feels appropriate here. to allay family fears and provide an alloy to my steely determination, i decided to get a gps with an sos button to track me. as well as keeping me safer, i’m going to have some fun with this technology.

at the top of this page you can see a map that is sparkling brown, just like me. this is not any ordinary map. courtesy of coding magic that goes beyond my tech capabilities, this is a map that will be tracking my journeys. every step, stop and wee i make, you shall see, watching me like a sting song. let’s get intimate online.

you may have wandered here expecting a travel blog. you may feel this is too self indulgent. well, i want to be clear. this is not for you. this is for me.

*\*my friend commented on the choice to use the word let. she says I take too much responsibility for what happened. After all I had no power and that outcome was inevitable as a diaspora. you see,I can’t escape it. even in writing it.*

**Be part of the Journey - Come Visit**

it’s quite simple really. for a little while, the road will be home. you are invited to come visit my home. this is how:

-remember the map up there (up arrow)?

-have a little gander and get excited about lines & squiggles that denote my route

-decide which bit catches your eye and click

-a little box will pop up

-you will be invited to share all your dreams and ambitions. if this feels a little weird, the dates that you’d like to come visit a nook of the world will suffice

-click again

-electronic currents living in your computer will whisk your wee message away through invisible webs levitating in the wind, all the way to me wherever i may be, whispering your words directly into my ear.

-my legs & wheels will move in that direction to welcome you & commence wandering.

If this complex communication channel gets all tangled, just email me & I should still get the message.

much like a diversity tick box on a job application form, i particularly welcome visits from brown people

**Blog**

those who know me know that I love to talk. for all those who will miss my ramblings, tangents and long winded voicemails, this is for you.

**Supporters**

i’ve seen a few travel blogs that have a supporters page - i got jealous and wanted one too. but instead of making a list of logos and companies who give out freebies to market expensive and often inaccessible gear, i’ve decided to dedicate this one to the humans who have supported me in getting this far through their love, good vibes and time

coders extraordinaire: georgia & ben

i came to them with a vision based on aesthetics rather than functionality (remember my obsession with the avatar? coming soon!) they just nodded their heads, said yes to all my mad thoughts, went away and created this beauty. they also sat with me, explained stuff and showed me how things would work. and they did all this without patronising a tech-illiterate person like me. truly, thank you.

dragon squad: ilyass, zahbia and sean. for witnessing first hand my inability to change gears without drama and still encouraging me to take on this mad adventure. for not batting an eye-lid when i changed my route thousands of kilometres off-course 6 days before my departure date. for kitting me out with tracking devices, being my bike mechanics and offering general cheerleading services. may the squad spirit live on.

family: especially sisters sughra, saika, ghausia, adiba and suffiya who may roll their eyes when they hear about my latest scheme but who i know are proud of me and help me out anyway they can -whether it be borrowing stuff or chucking a few quid my way. baji, that poem still rings true so many years later - some sisters are very special indeed.

kayo: a builder of people. a constant friend. when you tell me i can do something, i always believe you. it’s why i think i can be a stand up comedian now. for getting me out of the crowd, and challenging me to be brave.

reluctant revolutionaries: ammi & aba - my parents, who may not realise it but everything i am is because of them. many years ago, they were forced to make difficult journeys travelling away from all that they knew. in the 50+ years on these atlantic shores, they have overcome challenges and made sacrifices that have given me the privilege to choose travel as an experience rather than having to flee due to economic hardships or physical conflict - a reality that so many continue to face today.

sarah: my bestie who bears the brunt of my extreme personality. consoles the doubt, caresses the fear and counsels in crisis.

the love is real

womenbuildboats: lindsay & safiyya. there are very few people in the world who would be up for building a boat in a south london garden but here are two of the finest. it’s been such a magical project, full of chats, warmth and tea. oh and so hammering and sawing. looking forward to the launch.