

# SEANKELLY

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## Los Angeles Times

### We need diverse influences: Artist Shahzia Sikander on her multicultural past and our future



*Artist Shahzia Sikander on her multicultural past and our future.*

Human identity is mercurial. Like a human being, it is alive and liable to shift, evolve, challenge and surprise.

I was born in Lahore, Pakistan, to a family of storytellers. My father was an enthusiastic narrator, with oratory prowess. My first memory is of him reading to me Korney Chukovsky's book "Unusual Tales" translated into Urdu. His creative freedom in customizing the tales as he read out loud was infectious and entertaining. It

signaled to me as a young child to be inventive. A couple of years later, encounters with Edgar Allan Poe, Lewis Carroll, Walter de la Mare alongside the stories of Miraj — the visionary night journey of Prophet Muhammad — felt like the Everest expedition in pursuit of wit, candor and irony. In high school the pendulum swung between Shakespeare and Salman Rushdie and a multitude of sources in between, allowing my imagination to inspect reality from different cultural consequences.

But growing up in Pakistan in the 1980s under a military regime that incessantly institutionalized religion was a deeply conflicting experience. The Hudood ordinances, which limited women's rights, loomed large. Art school was considered immoral. Co-education dissipated. Religious tolerance diminished.

The Muslim culture practiced within the private sector was varied, complex and dynamic. I grew up in a multifamily house with an intrinsic mix of secular, spiritual and religious Muslim-ness. By 9, I had read the Koran several times and learned much of it by heart in Arabic, a language I did not understand, and realized that rote was not my calling. Though I loved my Muslim religious celebratory rituals — of fasting, Eid, saying prayers and putting aside *zakat* (alms) — I also had enthusiasm for my concurrent Catholic schooling, choir practice and participating in the annual Christmas play. I had a probing mind, an independent nature, and a spunky imagination to compete with the boys.

My first visit to the U.S. was in 1992. I traveled courtesy of the Pakistani government to showcase my paintings at the Pakistani Embassy in Washington, D.C. In Pakistan, my art made headline news; in the show, not a single work sold.



"Portrait of the Artist Ayad Akhtar" (2016) by Shahzia Sikander.  
The title of the portrait of the Pakistani-American playwright references James Joyce's work.  
(Shahzia Sikander)

I was disappointed but decided to call up art schools and share my work in person. My father had given me a See America ticket available then only to tourists from Delta Airlines, which came in handy because it allowed me to fly from city to city on standby status as many times as possible. That mobility encouraged me to call on many art programs, and eventually I was accepted at Rhode Island School of Design's graduate program for fall 1993.

Despite my pluralistic upbringing, I was anxious about encountering my first Jewish family — the Fains, my assigned hosts in Providence. I imagined the inevitable discussion around our respective disparate faiths. As I settled into their home, I was taken aback at the uncanny similarities with my own tight-knit family system: lots of affection, a healthy attitude toward spirituality and an appreciation for communication and education.

I babysat their two young children, reading them stories about our different cultures and rituals. Exchanging ideas and understanding each other's Muslim and Jewish faiths were instrumental in building the bonds that still serve us.

My 6-year-old son goes to a secular Jewish school in New York where we live, and his godmother is a sculptor and Jewish. I am designing a ketubah for the global Jewish community. My son is fluent in Urdu and deeply connected to his Muslim roots while also speaking Spanish. More than half the children in his kindergarten class are multiracial and multi-religious.

Yet I am dumbfounded that in 2016, here in New York, one of the most diverse cities in the world, it is almost impossible to find a children's book that celebrates a Muslim child's heritage, family, culture and tradition. Why is it that we do not care to assimilate the Muslim American experience in the same effortless ways as we do for other cultural and religious groups?

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The onus to explain our Pakistani and Muslim heritage has always been on me as an artist as well as a parent. While generating a variety of cultural references for my son to express to his classmates over the past three years, I realized that therein lay an opportunity for us to create our own personal books. Luckily both of us love to draw and I have been able to tap into the lessons ingrained by my father's unwavering commitment to storytelling. Recently the Museum of Modern Art invited me to participate in its children's book line by reflecting from within my unique experience of cross-cultural observation. Movements like #weneeddiversebooks have also been instrumental in bringing to light underrepresented narratives and identities.

Luckily the complex plurality I experienced as a child in Pakistan allowed me to navigate a multitude of categories as I negotiated a sense of belonging. Pakistani, Muslim, woman, South Asian and Asian American all were lenses I encountered as the other. Using creativity as a tool and embracing the potential of multiplicity instead of rigidity or singularity, I evolved as a shape-shifter. Issues around identity are still as relevant now as when I moved to the U.S. in 1993.

Even then, I did not fit the average American's picture of a Muslim. It baffled many in the mid-'90s that as a practicing Muslim woman I did not wear a veil. My independent nature was also seen as an anomaly. Many assumed I left Pakistan to avoid a patriarchal culture and subjugation by a Muslim male. I was often left feeling that the complexities of being a Muslim in America were too nuanced for the majority to grasp.

In my experience, the American culture in the early '90s was wonderfully porous. The first Persian Gulf War had not yet invaded the imagination of many. And long gone are the days when one could travel on a Pakistani passport without raising security alarm and waiting in detention rooms.

Now, the incendiary anti-Muslim rhetoric spreading in certain parts of the U.S. is dangerous and suffocating. It robs all of us of our innate human empathy.

The Muslim tradition and Muslim cultural practices are intrinsic to our shared human history. American Muslim identity is one of the most palpable, elusive and intellectually challenging ideas of our time, and intellectual freedom, knowledge and imagination are essential in opening up the discourse. It is essential for the perception of Muslim Americans to gain depth and momentum through art and literature that is free to engage, explore, critique and expand its inherent Muslim-ness. Personal, communal and institutional support such that other religious and immigrant communities enjoy is necessary for multifaceted Muslim American voices to emerge in the 21st century. Where is my Muslim American Historical Society? Why is there no stand-alone Museum of Islamic Art, contemporary or otherwise, in the United States?

For me, cultivating imagination and fostering empathy started early in childhood. Learning how to co-exist begins with understanding and celebrating all our identities, pluralities and intersections. Art and literature have played significant roles in shaping my understanding of differences (and similarities). Creativity is essential for both young and adult, but it's adults who must address and correct the forces of ignorance, fear and misplaced rage.

*Sikander is an internationally recognized multi-media artist and a MacArthur fellow. She pioneered unorthodox use of Indo-Persian miniature painting in the late 1980s. Her work is included in the collections of The Museum of Modern Art, The Whitney Museum of American Art, The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, The Hammer Museum, The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, among others, and has been shown in places like Venice, Copenhagen, Seoul, Tokyo, Shanghai, Istanbul, Berlin, Sharjah, Bilbao, Dhaka, Sydney and Hong Kong. She has served as a Young Global Leader with the World Economic Forum and in 2013 received the inaugural Medal of Art from the U.S. State Department..*