

Title: Mahtab Hussain | You Get Me?

Contributors: Mahtab Hussain and Curator Louise Pearson

Transcript

Louise Pearson

You Get Me? was photographer Mahtab Hussain's first body of work. Inspired by his own experiences of growing up in Glasgow and then Birmingham as a young Muslim man, the series is an intimate portrait on negotiating masculinity, self-esteem, social identity and religion in a multicultural society faced with high unemployment and racism.

I'm Louise Pearson, a curator. In this interview I speak to Mahtab about the project and two works from the series which have entered the National Galleries of Scotland collection.

Mahtab, the series *You Get Me?* considers the challenges young, working-class Asian men face in establishing their own identity. I wondered if you could talk about what particular pressures they face.

Mahtab Hussain

The pressure that young, working-class Asian men face is the pressure that any young boy and man faces. With regards to working-class men it's very much this idea of being a tough man, being a breadwinner, having to provide for the family and if they have sisters, there's that added pressure of looking after them, too. When I was talking to these men, they would constantly feel very responsible for their family in terms of either getting them out of poverty or making their lives more comfortable. So there was this pressure of providing at a very early age and the narrative that you get told as young boys is that you are the man of the house if dad leaves. So there is automatically this responsibility that daughters don't tend to experience as much. And I wanted to talk about that initially.

Then, growing up, the pressure is in navigating who they are. Do they want to take on that kind of responsibility, do they want to go into education? A lot of the young men I interviewed, as soon as they left school they were working in restaurants or family businesses and a lot of them felt that that was the only way they could navigate the wider world. And then the idea of being this big man outside of the home was a big pressure and it's questioning their sense of femininity and really trying to figure out who they are in a world that actively tells you that you don't belong as well.

In a way you are not able to start to navigate your own identity and I think that is why when the men reach their 20s they do have this crisis of masculinity and this is something I have been talking about for the last 20 years. I know there are a lot of podcasts out there talking about masculinity and the pressures of young men trying to define themselves in a very masculine way and they don't celebrate their vulnerability, they are not able to talk about their feelings. But when I was interviewing them they were incredibly articulate about their feelings and also about how difficult it is for them to find a voice.

You see men hanging around with each other but I don't think there is that level of vulnerability that these young men are able to articulate. I think that women have a much stronger sense of community and sisterhood and a lot of this is down to ideas of isolation and loneliness. And then young men navigating how they see masculinity through other men. It tends to be male bravado and body building which is huge in the community especially in Birmingham and that is reflected through Bollywood but also through the 1980s Hollywood when you have incredible super action hero men like Arnold Schwarzenegger, Sylvester Stallone and Jean-Claude Van Damme. These are the kind of men I grew up watching on screen so it was very obvious to me that South Asian men were mimicking these types of men who were celebrated for their power and sexuality. And their desire, which I think was a big thing.

I think the conversation is definitely changing and has changed, but for a very long time we were so invisible. We weren't able to see ourselves reflected in popular culture on the television screens, we never saw ourselves on billboards, and we started to perform this sense of western masculinity. I talk about the idea of being the big man, this hyper-masculinity and the narrative of being tough and not wanting to be weak but what's interesting is if you go back to Pakistan or India or Afghanistan, a lot of the men there are very gentle. There is a real sense of femininity there. If I had a best friend in Pakistan, I would hold his hand walking down the street. He would literally sit on my lap. This is a big difference to what has happened here in the UK. I think the reason that has happened is these young men, or let's talk about my grandparents or my father, when they came over to the UK they were seen as weak and passive men and I think through racism, through indifference, through violence on the streets, these men have to hold themselves in a very different way. The masculinity that men my age and younger are performing is actually a form of western masculinity. They have rejected the feminine side of our masculine experience.

Louise Pearson

That's a really interesting evolution within the context of what's going on in the country we are living in. I think one of the other main themes of the series as I understood it was that many of the men you interviewed were frustrated by the constant flow of negative media representation in their lives and you have spoken about the frustration when you were growing up of not seeing yourself positively represented in the media or in galleries. I wondered if you wanted to speak a bit more about why you felt that the representation mattered in this context.

Mahtab Hussain

I started this series purely for my own exploration, you know. Because I wanted my work to be seen in museum and gallery spaces and to be collected in collections so we can be positioned in the art historical canon. That is important to me but the first thing I was trying to do was navigate my own identity and question where I belonged in the UK, a country that I call home, that I've given 40 years of my life to. So that was the first thing I was trying to figure out. I was very fortunate.

I was born in 1981 in Glasgow, yes there was racism around but it was mainly racism that my dad spoke about and the politics of the time was charged as well. But I was lucky enough to grow up in a world where we didn't have such rhetoric around the Muslim community, about terrorism, about Jihad, about terrorist sympathisers. In 2001 when 9/11 happened, the world turned itself in on the Muslim community and there became this very strong gaze. So I was really questioning, well, if you are growing up in a world that actually tells you that you don't belong and says that you are a threat, says that you are the problem, what does that do to you as a person? I really wanted to interview these men to talk about their trauma. I really felt like I was a psychologist and that we were having a

counselling session. As soon as I opened up the question: 'how are you feeling under all this?' they were just pouring out their stories. I really talked about it in a sense that we are victims of abuse.

We are told to assimilate, to integrate, but we are also rejected at the same time. We are told through history that we are not bright enough, that we are a problem to education, that we are sexual predators, that we will rape white girls or that we want to kill our sisters in the name of honour. There is so much pressure that we are struggling with to just feel like we are humans. And to say to everyone else, 'we are just like you'.

It was really important to talk about those pressures and those lies and the fact we have been demonised by the powers of the press or that our politicians have failed us and I wanted to say that these men have every right to be angry because if you are told that you are not good enough and you are rejected by society and you don't see yourself reflected in the movies that you consume, television, even radio, and when you do see yourself you are placed under this kind of umbrella of the other, you're going to lots of things.

You are either going to shut down and not want to integrate, and you think 'forget this, I'm not even going to try' or you are going to desperately try and reject your own identity, and then you have this crisis because you're not being able to embrace all your identity formations or you're going to completely give up in another way and I really believe that these young men who do acts of terrorism, who are wearing vests to blow themselves up, it's because they have given up. They feel like they've got no voice left and they are frustrated and it is a sad thing. So it was really important in my work when I was being interviewed that I talked about representation and how important it is to see yourself reflected.

I remember as a little boy, walking from my home to school, there used to be these two big billboards. I used to look up at those and think 'why am I not seeing myself on these billboards?' It was always white bodies or white faces and I just used to think 'well, what about me?' And that is why my work ended up being landscape because I wanted to talk about the fact that we are not represented. I never used to see myself in adverts, ever, but since *You Get Me?* came out and it had the press that it did, it's really incredible what's happened. There are more South Asian people on TV and in the advertising world. So I feel like that conversation about representation is really important, you know, the idea that if you can't see yourself reflected, how do you feel like you belong in society?

Louise Pearson

The title that you chose for the series, *You Get Me?* Was very revealing for a lot of those ideas that you have just spoken about, people really wanting people to understand where they are coming from. I wondered if you wanted to talk about how you came to the title of the series?

Mahtab Hussain

I initially called it 'Building Desires' and the reason was the idea that these men are building this identity that is desired from the west but as I was interviewing the men and as I was transcribing them afterwards, the phrase I kept hearing was 'you get me? you get me?' and I thought that was a really interesting phrase because it can be seen as quite aggressive. You also have a layer of black, urban street language and a lot the men definitely did assimilate or see themselves reflected through the black experience. And I think that was because it was a marginalised community that had representation but also you had figures like Mohammed Ali and Malcolm X who were part of the

Nation of Islam movement which articulated injustices globally so I feel like these young men ended up latching on to the black male because they reflected their sense of resistance too.

But also the idea that the phrase is kind of saying 'do you actually get me, do you know where I am coming from?' And so there is an element of vulnerability there, so I felt that it embodied all of these beautiful nuances. And in a way the 'me' was definitely about me, too, this idea of, well, do you get me, because this is my community, this has been my experience. Yes, I have managed to navigate different worlds, by working in museums and then becoming an artist and having my work on museum and gallery walls, and playing around with different class sub-cultures but ultimately I really wanted to connect my worlds together so that is why I felt the phrase 'You Get Me?' was a beautiful title for the work because they were kind of talking to you and I was talking to you and it was really asking the question, who do you see when you are graced on a museum or gallery wall?

That is what I love about working in portraiture. When you position a portrait on a museum or gallery wall, you elevate the sitter, and the gaze in a lot of my portraits is very direct and it is really gazing back, it's judging back to the audience, to the spectator and it is asking that question, who do you see? And it's an internal conversation that takes place with the spectator and it's interesting because your biases come out at that very moment and they might not be yours as such but it's what you've been fed about the Muslim community or South Asian men and that question is, do you see them as threatening, or can you really see them the way that I see them as men who are noble and dignified and under this political pressure they are holding themselves so well and that is why I wanted them to grace museum and gallery walls, because I wanted to celebrate that.