



YA Café Podcast
Episode 17: *Mariam Sharma
Hits the Road*
14 June 2018

- Danielle: [00:02](#) Welcome to the YA Cafe where we share conversations about books for teachers, readers, and caffeine addicts everywhere. On today's episode, we'll be talking about "Mariam Sharma Hits the Road" by Sheba Karim. Grab a mug of your favorite beverage, friends, and let's talk books.
- Ad: [00:17](#) This podcast is made possible by Nouvelle ELA teaching resources. Find Secondary ELA resources to engage and inspire like Creative Reading Task Cards. Nouvelle ELA, something new.
- Danielle: [00:31](#) Welcome, welcome, welcome! As always our first segment will be spoiler free and so you can stick around even if you haven't checked out the new novel yet. I'm Danielle Hall an 8th and 9th grade English teacher and I blog at Teachnouvelle. com. I'm joined by Leila Hobbs, our esteemed producer and bookish friend. Hi Leila!
- Leila: [00:31](#) Hi Danielle!
- Danielle: [00:51](#) I'm so excited to have you here.
- Leila: [00:52](#) I'm so excited to be here, again.
- Danielle: [00:56](#) *laughter* Leila was with us in our episode about "Someday Somewhere" by Lindsay Champion and she's back to talk about this book. "Mariam Sharma Hits the Road", follows a trio of friends on a summer road trip. Mariam, Ghaz, and Umar travel from New Jersey to New Orleans and have a flurry of that ventures and detours along the way. It's a Pakistani-American spin on an old trope and a great addition to your summer reading list. Leila, what were your first impressions of the novel?
- Leila: [01:22](#) I loved it. I read it all in a couple of hours. It was a pretty quick read, but, uh, I don't mean that in a negative way. It was very, very fun. Um, I loved her writing style. I loved a lot of little details that she put in there and there's a lot of really good character development, you really felt like you got to know all of the characters. And then her descriptions of the cities, and the scenes, and the food that they ate were also really great. Uh, what about you Danielle?
- Danielle: [01:47](#) I really liked this book. I'm a sucker for a road trip books and there's this quote that really lampshades the whole road trip trope ...
- Leila: [01:47](#) "Road trip trope", say that three times fast.

- Danielle: [02:06](#) Road trip, ahhhh *laughter* But Ghaz says, "Think of every road trip book you've read or movie you've seen. All the main characters had some sort of personal journey, discover something about themselves, or undergo some reckoning, experience some life changing event" and I just, I love that, I'm a sucker for that. These kids are like freshmen in college and that's the perfect time for self discovery. I love it.
- Leila: [02:06](#) Me too.
- Danielle: [02:32](#) So this book is all from Mariam's perspective, even though we have three characters here, it is not a split perspective book. So we get Marian and her two friends Umar and Ghaz. Ghaz is basically the catalyst for this road trip because she goes to an audition for a modeling job and she gets it, and she ends up on a billboard in Time Square, and she is in what some in her community consider a compromising position. It becomes a huge scandal and she just wants to get out of town for awhile. Umar wants to go to this conference in New Orleans, which is a Muslim conference and he is very religious and he really wants to go hear the panels and hang out with his community and so Ghaz is like, "Yeah, we're going to totally go with you so that I can get out of town", and Mariam needs a fun time and so they get in the car and they go.
- Leila: [03:37](#) Okay, but like it was way more bad ass than that. They literally like Mission Impossible style, like, snuck Ghaz out of her parents' house. Like, it was great. She like, made a rope out of her bed-sheets. It was awesome.
- Danielle: [03:50](#) I thought that that was awesome. I love that we have these three very different characters and it does go into, like, how they became friends and what they love about each other even though they're, like, totally different. And one of the things that we get in this novel is that Mariam has a pretty liberal mom. So her mom, you know, is the sort of mom that when Mariam's like, "Mom, I tried pot in high school". Her mom was like, "Okay, well don't make a habit of it". And a lot less conservative than Ghaz and Umar's parents are in this novel.
- Leila: [03:50](#) And also not religious.
- Danielle: [04:28](#) That's right. So, Mariam's mom is an atheist, Mariam was raised without a lot of Islam in her home, or a lot of Pakistani culture and so part of this book is Ghaz and Umar making references to movies and music that Mariam's never heard and I, I really liked their relationship in that regard, that they were like teaching her and she was getting to live this whole other life through them.
- Leila: [04:57](#) Yeah. And all of the characters, like, had well developed individual relationships with each other. It wasn't just Mariam and her friends, but you know, you really felt like you got to know all of them, like nobody was neglected or kind of passed over. All three of them are really well developed.
- Danielle: [05:14](#) Yeah. Without the split perspective thing, which is cool. And Leila, before we started recording, you were talking about the characterization through details that Sheba Karim pulls off?

- Leila: [05:27](#) Yeah. So, like for instance, Mariam is a vegetarian and when they're, like, going through the south, she's struggling to find food that she can eat.
- Danielle: [05:35](#) I can relate. *laughter*
- Leila: [05:37](#) Yeah! So Danielle is a vegetarian, my fiance is a vegetarian, uh, I am not, but I, I can understand the struggle. Like, at one point she orders a salad and it has bacon bits on it and was like the mac and cheese as bacon bits.
- Danielle: [05:49](#) "Can't you just pick them out?"
- Leila: [05:54](#) *laughter* Right? Uh, at one point they're in Nashville and I think they're going to go get, like, fried chicken and she's like, "STOP! Enough!" and like, makes them go to, like, a Greek restaurant.
- Danielle: [06:03](#) *laughter* Yeah, I loved that moment. I love this moment, I really connected with Mariam on a deep level when they're in the car and NPR comes on and it's Car Talk and Mariam is like, "Yeah, I love this show." And I'm like, "I love this show!" so I feel like we were able to connect with these characters. Like, they were all real and, you know, like they're not real real, like they're not mapped one-to-one with friends of Sheba Karim's. But she has said like, "Yeah, these are totally conversations that are inspired by the stuff that my friends that I talk about" and I'm like, "Ah, I feel like I'm your friend now after having read this"
- Leila: [06:41](#) Yeah, I want to go on a road trip with them.
- Danielle: [06:42](#) Yeah, they're fun! And there's like, a lot of humor in this book.
- Leila: [06:47](#) Yeah. So for me, the funniest part was they're eating (actually at the restaurant where there was bacon in everything) *laughter* they're eating at this restaurant and the call to prayer goes off on Umar's phone and, you know, dead silence. Everyone turns around and looks at them like, kinda like Invasion of the Body Snatchers style, like, I just imagined them all like pointing their fingers and, like, screaming. Uh, and that, that scene was great, it was genius.
- Danielle: [07:15](#) And he was, like, mortified, but also like, "I kind of need to pray." Right? Like *laughter*
- Leila: [07:19](#) Yeah, and the waitress comes over and she's like, "I'd turn that off if I were you", or something and it's just like "Ughhhhh, get it together, y'all. "Y'all" being the South, not the characters, the characters are perfect.
- Danielle: [07:29](#) *laughter* I also wanted to shout out Sheba Karim's, sense of place, it was so good in this novel. Like, when they were in Philadelphia and she was describing the corner of Twelfth & Locust, I could tell that she had, like, been to the corner of Twelfth & Locust. And the same goes for Nashville, and New Orleans. She just had such a vibrant sense of place and she really transmitted that to the reader. Other than that, we're gonna duck out of this spoiler free section pretty quick because once they hit the road, stuff starts happening and we don't want to spoil it for y'all, so we are going to take our first break and when we come back

we'll share about Things We Like A Latte, then we'll return to our discussion of "Mariam Sharma Hits the Road" and dig a little deeper.

- New Speaker: [07:29](#) *musical interlude*
- Ad: [08:32](#) Support for this podcast comes from Audible. Audible is offering listeners of the YA Cafe a free 30 day trial and a free audio book to get you started. Y'all, I love audio books. I listen to them all the time, whether I'm grocery shopping, or in the car, or on a walk with PadFoot. It's just one more way to get more books in my day. Check us out Audibletrial.com/yacafe Happy reading!
- Danielle: [08:59](#) Welcome back, y'all! It's time for Things We Like A Latte. Leila, what's your brew of choice this week?
- Leila: [09:08](#) So my Thing that I Like A Latte, uh, and this is something that I had to convince myself to talk about, but my Thing that I Like A Latte this week is going to therapy. Uh, I think everyone needs to go to therapy, maybe not everyone, but if it's something that you've been considering I highly recommend it. The hardest part for me was honestly just making the call, well making like eight calls to find someone who accepted my insurance, but making the call driving there, like, meeting her for the first time was really difficult, but then once I sat down and started talking, um, I feel like I got really lucky and find someone who's like very easy to talk to, um, but like, once I got there it became a thousand percent less terrifying. And I'm excited, I think it's going to be really positive experience for me.
- Danielle: [09:50](#) Thank you for sharing.
- Leila: [09:50](#) So Danielle, what's your brew of choice?
- Danielle: [09:55](#) Well, this may come as a shock to you because we literally just saw this movie together
- Leila: [09:55](#) *laughter* Is it Ocean's 8?
- Danielle: [09:55](#) It's Ocean' s 8!
- Leila: [09:55](#) Yes!
- Danielle: [10:05](#) So, I have been waiting for this movie in my heart, and then literally since like, January, I've been waiting. And I've seen it twice already, y'all, it's only Sunday. I will see it again. If you haven't seen this movie and you want to go, like, take me, I'll go with you. Um, it has a stellar cast. I love how women focused it is. And I walked out of that movie like, "Yeah! Okay, I'm ready for Ocean's 9, and Ocean's 10!" And then my second thing - Leila doesn't like it when we talk about two things, but I'm going to talk about two things anyway - my second thing, the reason why I'm super-hyper right now is because I made homemade ice cream. It was blackberry basil ...
- Leila: [10:05](#) It was amazing!

Danielle: [10:46](#) Thank you. So, in episode 12 we talked about Siobahn Vivian's book "Stay Sweet" and ever since then I have just wanted to make homemade ice cream, and I finally did it. It was great and we ate it right before the podcast, which is why I'm hyper.

Leila: [10:59](#) So basically everyone in the world should go to therapy, see Ocean's 8, and make homemade ice.

Danielle: [10:59](#) Yes!

Leila: [10:59](#) It'll improve your life.

Danielle: [11:07](#) *laughter* So, so good.

Danielle: [11:09](#) We're going to take a quick break and when we come back we'll return to our discussion on "Mariam Sharma Hits the Road". The rest of the show may contain spoilers, so if you're leaving us here, keep in touch on Instagram and twitter @yacafepodcast. We'll be back after this quick break.

Danielle: [11:47](#) Welcome back, y'all, to the YA Cafe. We're continuing our discussion on "Mariam Sharma Hits the Road" by Sheba Karim. If you haven't read this yet, we want to warn you again that this segment will contain spoilers.

Leila: [11:47](#) Spoilers!

Danielle: [11:55](#) Thank you! I feel seen.

Leila: [11:55](#) *laughter*

Danielle: [12:00](#) So, we said we were jumping into the spoiler-informed section pretty quickly in this episode, that is because a lot of stuff starts to happen. Pretty much the first thing that happens, right after they get Ghaz out of town, they start to learn, like, how suffocating and conflicted her relationship with her mother is.

Leila: [12:25](#) Yeah, her whole family life. I mean they basically locked her in her room after they heard about the billboard. And it was like, before they rescued her, uh, Mariam was making jokes, or I thought she was making jokes about like, "Oh, we gotta get Ghaz out", like, "I hope they're not beating her up too bad." And then it took an embarrassingly long time for me to realize that no, they were literally concerned that her family was going to be actually beating her, or like, sending her back to Pakistan.

Danielle: [12:53](#) Yeah, and at one point when they're on the road trip there was this heartbreaking moment when she got a text or an email or something from her little sister. I thought when she opened it and she's like, "Yeah, it's from my sister." I'm like, "Oh, your sister will support you". But no, her sister basically told her that she was a shame on their entire family and not to come back.

Leila: [13:14](#) Yeah. Her sister seemed more concerned with, like, what Ghaz's actions, uh, how like, how they would negatively impact her sister's life. She was like, "Oh, I hope I can still find a husband."

Danielle: [13:25](#) Yeah, definitely. And so her sister is like, 14 I think?

Leila: [13:25](#) Yeah.

Danielle: [13:30](#) And so definitely young enough to kind of be indoctrinated by like kind of a, a negative ethos from the family, but like also old enough where you hope that she's, like, making her own decisions, and it's just heartbreaking.

Leila: [13:43](#) Yeah. That and then Umar's struggle with his parents, who on the surface I feel like he has a good relationship with his parents in terms of like, they're nice to him and they love him, but they also, they would shun him if he were to come out to them. So it's like he has a quote unquote "normal" relationship with them as long as he is keeping the secret.

Danielle: [14:05](#) Right. And I, I think he totally anticipates this future in which he gets married to a woman. I don't know. The thing about Umar is so hard and so complex because I think a lot of people, young people in particular, feel stuck.

Leila: [14:05](#) Yeah.

Danielle: [14:22](#) Particularly if they do have a strong faith like he does. So he's really religious and he loves Islam, but he feels like he can't come out and so he really feel stuck.

Leila: [14:34](#) Yeah. And he's definitely, like, struggling with his feelings. He thinks that, um, you know, Allah it would not have created him wrong, you know, he must've been born this way and Allah will love him and accepted him for it. And then he goes to this dang panel, which was awful. They compared homosexuality being a pedophile, or to having Kleptomania like, "Oh Allah loves you as long as you don't act on these urges."

Danielle: [15:00](#) Right. And so it was really a "hate the sin, love the sinner" sort of doctrine. Which transcends across religions, right? It's not just Islam that says that, and this was an LGBTQ panel, but with no representation, you know, it was like a bunch of straight men.

Leila: [15:21](#) They make the comparison to like, Congressional panels on women's health where there are no women, like, who are these people to be speaking for anyone?

Danielle: [15:32](#) Right, absolutely. I just think it's, like, heartbreaking that we are in a place where people do want to be religious and enjoy that freedom of religion, but don't feel fully free to be themselves within that religion.

Leila: [15:48](#) Heartbreaking is definitely the right word, uh, there's a quote in the novel where Umar says, "I can't win. Some people don't like me because I'm gay."

Some people don't like me because I'm Muslim, and some Muslims don't like me because I'm gay." And the Mariam goes on to add that, "I bet some gays won't like you because you're Muslim." Uh, so it's just like he's getting it from all sides.

- Danielle: [16:09](#) Yeah. But we do discover in, as the road trip continues, that he is also becoming more secure in himself. Like, that is the thing that he's getting, that's transcendent from the road trip is, like, this appreciation of himself. He gets the opportunity to dress up in drag at one point which is really fun.
- Leila: [16:31](#) Yes, his drag name is Tabitha B. Generous.
- Danielle: [16:34](#) And he gets to express himself in this new way, and he has two totally awesome, totally supportive friends and I love that.
- Leila: [16:34](#) Me too.
- Danielle: [16:45](#) Mariam's transcendent, like, road trip experience is meeting her absent father
- Leila: [16:45](#) Who, spoiler alert, is a dirt bag.
- Danielle: [16:52](#) He's a dirt bag. She has not necessarily built up this idea in her head of him, but she's definitely hoped that he was more than he actually is. I can relate to that. And he isn't what she expected. He is not grounded at all, he's totally head in the clouds. Um, new wife, step-daughter, but not a good father to her either, so, basically a loser, and one of my favorite moments in the book is that Ghaz convinces Mariam that she needs to have a funeral for her hopes and dreams of a father.
- Leila: [16:52](#) Yeah, it was great.
- Danielle: [17:35](#) She writes an elegy. Like, it's impeccable advice, you know, like, put this thing to bed. He's never going to be a better father. He's a loser, sorry.
- Leila: [17:46](#) Right. He didn't apologize. He didn't offer her any sort of explanation. He didn't ask about her mom or her little brother. Yeah, it was a terrible experience for her. She didn't maybe know exactly what she wanted to get out of it, but that was not it.
- Danielle: [18:03](#) That wasn't it, and, you know, I really like seeing this sort of thing in fiction because I feel like I've read (I don't know what book it is, I feel like it's just, you know, a Book with a capital 'B' out there) that you know, the girl goes on a road trip and her father is perfect and how could her mother ever have, you know, not let her know this guy or whatever. And it's like, that's not reality for everyone. I don't know if that's reality for anyone. It definitely wasn't reality for me, and so I really like seeing on the page a loser father and a girl who just gets over it.
- Leila: [18:38](#) Yeah, absolutely.

Danielle: [18:39](#) There was another moment in this book that I thought was so real, and that was the moment in the restaurant with the waitress.

Leila: [18:50](#) Oh, "racist grandma", which is what they ended up calling this waitress named Sylvia who was so kind to them and she was kind of like your stereotypical southern diner waitress who like calls everybody "hun".

Danielle: [19:00](#) And they were super excited, they're like, "Yeah, she's treating us so well!" And then they, like, walk out into the parking lot and they see a terrible bumper sticker and then they're like, "Who could possibly have this bumper sticker on their car?" And it was Sylvia.

Leila: [19:19](#) Surprise, surprise. Like, they had attributed it to this kind of scary looking guy with, like, wearing a lot of cammo and had a big beard.

Danielle: [19:23](#) So they stereotyped.

Leila: [19:24](#) Yeah, they stereotyped him and they were like, "Oh man, it's this guy." And Ghaz is the one who was like, "We gotta go in there and confront them!"

Danielle: [19:24](#) Fight them!

Leila: [19:24](#) Fight them!

Danielle: [19:24](#) She's a fighter.

Leila: [19:35](#) And they were all like, "Whoa, like, this guy's gonna shoot us." But, spoiler alert, that guy was really nice.

Danielle: [19:41](#) He helped them.

Leila: [19:46](#) Yeah, and he was like, "I'm sorry. I'm sorry everyone else in my town is garbage."

Danielle: [19:49](#) Yeah. And there was this moment when Sylvia, confronted with these, you know, real Muslims was like, "Oh, I didn't mean you. I just meant the other Muslims. Like, your religion."

Leila: [20:03](#) Yeah. "It's not you personally, just your whole faith that I take objection to."

Danielle: [20:09](#) And I loved how transparent her ignorance was. Like, it was so clear that she was so clueless, and so hateful and bigoted, with this facade of 'nice grandma'.

Leila: [20:24](#) Yeah. It made me think of when I was, like, 17, I took some dual-enrollment college classes and I took a Philosophy of Religion class, which was great. And we had to write this paper based on some theme from the Quran, and so after class I booked it to the library because I was like, "Oh man, there's like 40 other people in my class. I got to check out the Quran right now so that I can write my paper." And so, like, I booked it to the library, they have two translations of it and then, like, a scholarly interpretation. So I check all that out, and then I bump

into somebody else from my class and I'm like, "Oh man, if you're trying to check out the Quran I beat you to it. Ha ha, so sorry." And she was like, "Why did you check out the Quran?" And I was like, "Because we have to write a paper on it?" And she just looked at me like I had seven heads and I was like, "How are you to write a paper on Islam and not pick up a copy of the Quran?" Like, if you're Sylvia, that's how.

- Danielle: [21:14](#) Yeah, for sure. So one of the things that the interaction with Sylvia brings up, um, you mentioned in our conversations before the episode, like, Sylvia is just one instance in this book. Like, these are Pakistani-American kids who are Muslim, but they're American kids, and there's just layers of judgment on like, how American do you have to be to prove to other people that you are American?
- Leila: [21:41](#) Right. We were talking about the, the kind of like gatekeeping concept. Um, and there was a great example where Umar sings karaoke, and he like, secretly loves country music and Hank Williams Jr.
- Danielle: [21:52](#) But Ghaz puts his name on the karaoke list as Mohammed.
- Leila: [21:56](#) *laughter* Yes. And uh, yeah, he was very nervous and like, he was walking up to the stage and people are like booing
- Danielle: [22:01](#) Probably called him a terrorist.
- Leila: [22:05](#) Yeah, somebody definitely called him a "rag-head", which is just awful. But then like halfway through the song, everyone is like cheering and, like, clapping along, you know, raising their bottles high. And then when he got off-stage, one of the people, the man that called him a "rag-head" wanted to high-five him and it was just like, you know, nothing about Umar has changed in the past three minutes.
- Danielle: [22:25](#) Also, he like, he heard you do that.
- Leila: [22:27](#) Yeah, but he's still the same person. But now you have decided that he is "American enough"
- Danielle: [22:27](#) Good enough.
- Leila: [22:32](#) Good enough. He's allowed to be in the South and be in your bar, because he also likes Hank Williams Jr.
- Danielle: [22:32](#) Right.
- Leila: [22:39](#) And I think a lot of people, not just in the South, but I mean I've lived here my whole life, so I've definitely experienced or seen a lot of instances of this kind of gatekeeping and benevolent stereotyping. Like, you know, "I love Asians. They're so good at math, they're so smart", like, it's still a stereotype.
- Danielle: [22:39](#) Right.

Leila: [22:59](#) And we talked about this in the, in the last episode, um, but it's, it's very relevant to this book as well.

Danielle: [23:03](#) Right, that stereotyping is still, like, reductive and harmful even if it's hidden in something, quote unquote "good". Absolutely.

Danielle: [23:10](#) That's our show for today, friends. Thank you so much for joining me, Leila.

Leila: [23:14](#) Thanks for having me!

Danielle: [23:24](#) You're the best! You can find us on Instagram and Twitter @yacafepodcast, we'd love to hear from you! And if you're enjoying the show, please consider leaving us a review on iTunes, we really, really need them. Happy reading!