

INTERSECTIONS RADIO

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TRANSCRIPT

SARIKA MEHTA: You're listening to Intersections Radio, the podcast where we geek out on all things intersectionality. I'm your host, Sarika Mehta. Welcome, and thanks for tuning in.

Nidhi Chanani is an artist, a graphic artist and illustrator, specifically, and the force behind the website Everyday Love Art. This was inspired by her desire to produce an illustration every day which celebrates beautiful and lovely moments.

She just released her debut graphic novel, Pashmina, which is about an adolescent Indian American girl, Priyanka, who finds a magical pashmina shawl in her mother's luggage. When she puts it on, she's transported to a fantastical version of India, something from the Incredible India Tourism Company. And this motivates her to learn more about her family and her heritage.

This graphic novel also tells the adventures of other women who work to empower themselves, and achieve new successes upon finding this magical pashmina.

Nidhi has survived a difficult childhood and the loss of her baby during her first pregnancy. These experiences in part motivated her life in illustration and art. Nidhi joined me on Skype, and we talked about South Asian women in the arts, her new project, and the unexpected journey that led to Pashmina. This is Intersections Radio.

Well, welcome to Intersections Radio.

NIDHI CHANANI: Thank you.

SARIKA MEHTA: First of all, again, congratulations on your debut graphic novel, and for being sold out on Amazon, that's pretty excellent.

NIDHI CHANANI: Yeah, it's all good, I mean, it's just two months out, so, everything is very new and very exciting, so it's just, it's been a really amazing ride.

SARIKA MEHTA: Let's talk about Pashmina. What is the, what was the inspiration of the development for the story?

NIDHI CHANANI: So, the inspiration for the story actually is rooted in kind of finding my parents' -- or opening my parents' suitcase when I

was, I don't know, a tween, is that what they're called now? And, my parents went to visit India, and when they came back, I remember opening my parents' suitcase and seeing all these things inside that were familiar but also unfamiliar, and kind of the smells and the colors, and these objects that all felt really other worldly, but at the same time, part of my world.

And I remember that experience and that feeling of wanting to go to this place, and wanting to learn more about it, and it really, it left an impression on my mind, and I think because of that strong response to their suitcase, I kept that kind of experience in -- in my memory, it made such a strong impact that I thought it would be the good basis of a story.

And so the root of it is very much that experience from when I was younger, and so, in the book, Priyanka Das, the lead character, finds a suitcase and inside of it is a magic pashmina. And so, I think the root of it came from that, and then how it developed over the course of time was very much just writing and writing and writing and rewriting, to get to a place where I felt like I had a start of a story.

SARIKA MEHTA: Sure, and, one of the things that I really loved about this, about the plot, is that it's not just that she finds this magical pashmina and it transports her, it's that it, it's that for the other women who find this, it transports them in an empowering way. It's not just a fantasy, it's like, it's these women empowering themselves, and seeing possibility, and working to achieve it.

NIDHI CHANANI: Yes, so, the, the root of the story really is an, I mean, I try to figure out what the theme or the, not message, I hate that word, but, really what the theme of it, the thematic element in Pashmina is women's choice and women's power. And so, and having power over their own lives.

And so the pashmina doesn't just stay with Priyanka, we see, the book centers around her, but we also see it go, and I won't, you know, no spoilers or anything, but it does go from Priyanka to another character, and again, it doesn't necessarily make the choice for you, but it allows you to see that there are actions, and what you decide to do after you see, you can visually see and experience your life in that different choice, what you do with that knowledge is obviously up to you, because it's your choice, but it's really, this shawl, or this pashmina, needs to be there for, for these women to be able to really envision themselves having different kind of lives.

SARIKA MEHTA: Right. Something has to give them the opportunity for possibility. Another really powerful character is Priyanka's mom. She's a single immigrant mother, and that too, from India. Talk about her, talk about developing her character.

NIDHI CHANANI: Well, a lot of her character in no short way is based off my mom. But also, in Priyanka herself is also based off me, so that relationship dynamic, of course, I drew upon my own experiences in my own life, but I did a lot of work as well after using the base of the characters, and this is how I like to kind of approach my writing and my character bases, even in my new graphic novel, I'm doing the same thing where I have the base is either somebody I know really well, or somebody in my life, and then doing the work in my writing, in my prewriting, to make the character unique.

So I have a base of kind of information, and quirks, and character from real life, and then certain things that I definitely develop and work on to make it more appropriate for the story, and more my own.

SARIKA MEHTA: Obviously there are other characters in the story, like the mom's sister, and the auntie and uncle who are family friends, and I really was kind of drawn, like, I wanted to know more of the histories, or the lives of these characters, and the mom's history, especially. The maid. I was wondering, are there -- are we going to get to experience any sequels or prequels, because I was like, we want more. Or are you kind of putting this to bed?

NIDHI CHANANI: I am moving on. There are probably about, at least three to four stories that I kind of bounce around in my brain, and do some writing about, and so I'm never really not -- I don't want to say never. I at this point am not thinking about anything in a series.

SARIKA MEHTA: Okeh.

NIDHI CHANANI: I have one book that I'd like to explore as a series, but that's way down the line, and I think it's very high concept, and I'd have to partner with the right publisher who would see my vision. So, and I need to get there. I feel as though I learned a lot through making Pashmina, I learned a lot through going on the road and promoting Pashmina.

And I still have a lot to learn, but I also know that the stories that I am bouncing around, I know what makes sense to do next, and what makes sense to do next is actually this book that I'm working on with my husband called Jukebox. It was just announced, and it's about two cousins who find a jukebox that takes them back in time.

So no, Pashmina will not have a sequel, but, there is more to come, so it's going to be a different story.

SARIKA MEHTA: Sure. I was just going to ask you about your next project.

NIDHI CHANANI: It's two Muslim American cousins who find a magical

jukebox that takes them back in time, and, you know, just like I talked about the theme for Pashmina, for me, a lot of the inspiration of this book, and I'm writing it, co-writing it with my husband, although I'm going to do all the drawing, because he -- this is our running joke, is he can't even draw a circle. So, he's an audiophile. Our living room is probably, I would say, 25 percent vinyl records.

SARIKA MEHTA: Wow.

NIDHI CHANANI: So, so we listen to a lot of vinyl. Music has been this theme of conversation within our relationship, and prior to our relationship, within our friendship, forever. We've been together for fifteen years, and so, it almost made sense that we would end up doing something around music together.

And so, the story is about these cousins who find a jukebox that takes them in back in time, and there's a mystery involved, they're searching for somebody, and the characters are tweens, again, I'm not really sure if I'm using that term correctly, but, they're, you know, they're pre-puberty, and they're really trying to find this person, but beyond that, they're also learning about the intersections of music and history, and how impactful music has been within history. And so that's kind of the theme that I wanted to explore through working on this book.

SARIKA MEHTA: As a music nerd myself, I thoroughly look forward to this. When can we expect it to be published and out for all of us?

NIDHI CHANANI: It is slated for 2020, which seems, I think, to people who hear that, as very far away, but it's due at the beginning of 2019, so for me, I'm already in the kind of panic stage of oh my god, how am I going to do all this work by that time.

SARIKA MEHTA: What is it like to work with your husband, especially producing another graphic novel?

NIDHI CHANANI: Well, I mean, we work together on a lot of different things, but, we, actually there was a -- there was a period of time in between jobs, so, I was, not to get into it too much, but, I was pregnant with my first child, and we unfortunately lost the baby.

SARIKA MEHTA: I'm sorry to hear that.

NIDHI CHANANI: And after that, we both basically decided that we needed, you know, time to recoup from that, and he ended up leaving his job, and he came to work for Everyday Love Art, and during that time, we realized that it's really great to be around each other all the time, but also very challenging, because I have very specific ideas of what I want to do and how I want to do them, and it was, I think, mostly me being in a situation where I have been working on my

own independently for a long time, and then there was, you know, Nick.

I think that we work really, really well together on ideas and concepts, and stories, and those kinds of things we've been bouncing around together for a long, long time, but in the day to day of actually business stuff, it wasn't working out so well, so he ended up going back to work, which is good.

Also, at that, you know, our income kind of halved, so, that was also really rough. But, we work really well together as long as -- and I think this is key for any relationship, really, as long as we're maintaining a certain amount of respect for each other. You know? And each other's ideas.

And so we try to keep aware of that, and make sure that, you know, we're giving each other the space to listen to each other, even though we might not agree all the time.

SARIKA MEHTA: Let's talk about representation in literature. There are so few graphic novels that illustrate the experiences of our South Asian communities, particularly that are created by South Asian American women. I can think of, including yourself, I can think of like two or three, off the top of my head. What do you think is the reason?

NIDHI CHANANI: You know, one of the things that I thought was really interesting, when I first started pursuing my career as an illustrator, you know, it was about a year before I felt like I really got good and started having people request prints. One of the things that I drew a lot is I drew a lot of, you know, Indian illustrations, or Indian themes, Indian clothing, and a lot of mixed race couples, and I started to get a lot of messages from both people who were in mixed race marriages, and people with a South Asian background, and they were just thanking me for representing our lives, our imagery, in art in a way that they hadn't seen before.

And so, I think that the other thing that I started to notice is that all these, a lot of women and men, and parents, would contact me and say, you know, I liked to draw, and I really liked art, but I ended up pursuing, you know, biotech or, you know, law, and they think, and in conversation, before, this was before I became a parent, in conversation with some parents, they said, you know, by seeing you do this work, I really want to encourage my budding artist, you know, and put them into art classes, and those kinds of things.

But I think a lot of it is based off of both a history of opportunity, a history of a focus on education, and a focus on achievable success, right? And kind of like understandable success, and so, I mean, a lot of folks, and I don't know how far back your family goes, but, I think by definition first generation, even though I was born in India, but I

came here when I was four months old.

And so, our history doesn't, you know, we're very close to that, having come here with nothing, and then needing to achieve something, and so, I think that when you talk about the arts, the arts is such a gamble, and it's -- it's not something that's very easily understood as a pathway to success, as a pathway to financial comfort.

And so I think within the community it's just not supported as a result of those things, as a result of a lot of factors that could shift the tide in any way, and then, you know, you've landed in this stereotypical place of being a starving artist.

And so, I think it's really challenging our community to understand that yes, it is possible that you end up in a, you know, a financially insecure place, but that can happen really in any industry.

SARIKA MEHTA: Exactly.

NIDHI CHANANI: So, you know, I think that it, it really is a community awareness problem, and I think that's probably why we don't see as many South Asians going into the arts, because it is such an unfamiliar pathway to success. It doesn't mean that it's not there, it just means that it's not seen.

SARIKA MEHTA: Yeah, I agree with you. I can't blame immigrant families for saying I want my children to not struggle how I did, and I want them to have a stable income, but I agree, you know, nowadays, there's -- nothing is terribly stable, there's a lot of gamble in no matter what we -- no matter what we go into.

NIDHI CHANANI: Yeah, and that's exactly how I feel, you know, I can't blame my family or any family coming from poverty into a, you know, into a system, into education system and the situation where they feel like there is a lot of opportunity, and no matter what people say there is a lot more opportunity here, to push their children to do something that they feel like is a sure bet. You know?

SARIKA MEHTA: Well, giving some very specific examples of this, what were some of the challenges and barriers you experienced in trying to get Pashmina published? What made it worth it?

NIDHI CHANANI: Well, part of the challenge with it, actually, you know, initially, I had tried to pursue, which I'm very happy to not have done, was a memoir.

SARIKA MEHTA: Oh, okeh.

NIDHI CHANANI: I had written a memoir called Hinglish, which I've just started to talk about actually a lot, because it, it will never see

the light of day, it was not very good, but, I put it out to agents, actually, so I wanted to land a literary agent, and that was how I landed my agent, because she saw something in it. I still don't know what she saw in it, but she saw something.

But I had sat through a, post art school, an -- thumbnailed out, over 200 page memoir. And so I think that, at the very least, she saw that I was able to start and finish something, and tell a story. And I had a pretty, I had really traumatic childhood, and so a lot of that was in that memoir, and, you know, there was still a lot of work that needed to be done, and at the point that I had presented it to her, and I signed on with my agent, and I had a couple other agents who were interested in representing me, so it did its job.

For all intents and purposes, I will never publish it, and it will be never a path that I pursue, but it landed me my agent, and also showed me that there was a lot of work to be done within the book, but I didn't -- wasn't willing to do it, because it was reliving and rehashing a lot of stuff, and I didn't really want to live in that permanently.

And so, it was a few years before I started to think about a different kind of story, and the Pashmina idea, and the base of this story came back to me. And I started writing it, and pitching it, and the help of my agent, and I think that the challenge within making Pashmina wasn't so much in -- very surprising to me, was, it wasn't in selling it, we had interest in it from the get-go, and I was very fortunate in that my agent asked me what publisher I wanted to work with, and I said, I would love to work with First Second, because they had made some of the books that I loved and some of the books that I was looking to as examples of where I wanted to be and the kinds of stories I wanted to tell.

And so, when First Second made the offer, I was ecstatic, but, they made it with the stipulation that I would need to revise, and so, before I actually signed a contract, I was on I think my eighth draft of the manuscript, and so yeah, I think that the biggest challenge was really working the story and learning about all of these things that, you know, as a new writer, I felt kind of out of my depth and, you know, I felt -- there was a lot of internal struggle within that process of, you know, am I good enough to do this, you know, am I, am I able to understand it, and extrapolate the things that they want me to do with this story, and, you know, rewriting it for the eighth time, and can I really change it that much?

And one of the things that I actually needed to change, and so that process was pretty intense, but I'm really happy with how it turned out. And nothing about this story, from the very beginning, like, if you look at the first draft to the eighth draft, what it did is just kind of tweak it at each turn. And so the base of the story never

changed, it's just that the elements of it got stronger.

SARIKA MEHTA: That's a process, I didn't realize that this was initially a memoir of your life, and, so you, you know, you've mentioned a few times that this memoir will never be published, and you're fine with that.

NIDHI CHANANI: Yep.

SARIKA MEHTA: But now, you've, you know, kind of piqued my curiosity. I mean, you said that you had this traumatic childhood, and if you don't want to talk about it, I completely respect that, but

NIDHI CHANANI: Well, the, what I can say is that, some of the similarities with at least Priyanka in feeling like an outsider, very much were my experience, but beyond that, you know, I just had a really complicated family life, and that, I get, and I don't want to get into it. But, there was just a, you know, what I can say is that I suffered a variety of abuses within my family, and that became very difficult to kind of operate both in the two cultures that I was growing up in, and then to be in a situation where I was constantly holding onto secrets.

And so, the secrecy really, it kind of, I think, became really difficult, because it wasn't just one, it was multiple.

SARIKA MEHTA: I'm sorry you experienced all of that. It's amazing how this process works. I have one last, if you put on this magical pashmina, what would you see?

NIDHI CHANANI: I think I would see, I would see this. I would see my life as this. I remember some -- it's, it's very much tied to something, somebody asked me recently, I think it was on a panel, if you could tell your younger self one thing, what would you tell them? And it's that it gets better. And I think that that's, you know, we came from, like I said, a troubled -- I came from a troubled past, and we were very working class.

We always had issues around, like, money, and there were definite trust issues within the family, and so there was a part of me that never felt like, though my life would change, and it would be happy, and I definitely feel that growing up, there was definitely a part of me that really wanted so much to be happy, and to have a happy life, but I didn't have that, and that, because I didn't have that at a young age, I found it very difficult to think that that would be something that wasn't just an illusion on TV and in movies.

And now, I'm in a place where there are moments where I'm just sitting and I was just talking to a friend of mine about this, and there's this beautiful, beautiful banality of my life. It's very mundane, but

it's so beautiful. It's just, we're making a puzzle every evening. My daughter, she's obsessed with puzzles, and so, we sit and do the same puzzle sometimes three times in a night, and that's very mundane.

But there's something so beautiful about it, just to see a little child process this, in a space that's surrounded by love. And so if I put on the pashmina when I was younger, I would have liked to see this, you know, this life full of love that's just very ordinary, you know. We're pretty normal people, but we have a lot of love, and I feel like that makes it really special.

SARIKA MEHTA: Nidhi Chanani, thank you so much for joining me on Intersections Radio.

NIDHI CHANANI: Thank you for having me.

SARIKA MEHTA: That was my guest, Nidhi Chanani, the author and illustrator of the graphic novel Pashmina. Check out EverydayLoveArt.com to learn more.

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