

Podcast Transcript for Stories of
Making and Migration with Haleema Bibi

Haleema:

So this is a picture of me and it's down my mother in law's house, probably on Eid. And this is a suit that we had delivered from Pakistan. So they did like lots of beautiful embroidery and gemstones. Unfortunately my scarf is hiding it.

But if you see on the chiffon scarf, similar colour to this one. Can you see the crochet? That's done. So it's done all the way round, and here it is, it frames my face here. And this is just one of the designs which I have done.

When we first started doing these very elaborate designs, it might have taken like maybe 2 weeks but then honestly at the end of it we were just whizzing past it. As I told you, there was this beautiful healthy competition between us sister in laws and my mother in law joined in as well.

You know, we tried to do it as fast as we could. It was especially enjoyable to get the suit ready and then wear it on Fridays or Eid like I said, or a wedding. And just wear it and just sort of admire each other's work.

It was always like, almost like a pat on the shoulder of, you know, each other, like oh, well done you. Oh well done look, look, you've matched it perfectly to that flower or you've matched it perfectly to that colour. Or oh, this design really goes with the material, you know?

And I remember one relative once, she didn't say it in like an angry way, but she said "Oh all you 3 or 4 do is just wear clothes and then you sort of show around each other like, like a peacock, then you get happy looking at each other." And we thought, but that's a good thing! We're happy for one another. There's no enviousness here and it gives us joy.

And it takes our mind off the mundane of cooking, cleaning, looking after the babies. You know, we loved our babies to bits, we loved them so much, but at the same time when they were asleep, this was our little time.

Hayley:

Alongside our current exhibition Made in the Middle, Craftspace have been collecting stories of making and migration.

Today I had a wonderful chat with Haleema who told me all about her work using crochet, mostly to embellish and adorn chiffon scarfs that she would then wear on special occasions or would gift to treasured friends and family. Thank you so much to Haleema for sharing such a special story and all of her memories with us at Craftspace. I'll let her take it from here.

[Music]

Haleema:

So my name is Haleema, I was born in Pakistan and I came here with my mum and dad when I was 4.

So my mum was from Pakistan, you know, she grew up there. She actually had various talents which girls in Pakistan learn. Because, you know, in those days they didn't have any TVs, they certainly didn't have any mobile phones or anything. And this is how the girls of the villages kept themselves occupied.

So I learned a bit of embroidery, like write Arabic. You know, *Allah*, God's name, *Allah* in Arabic. And then filled that all up with sequences. And then my parents framed it and they put it on the wall and they thought, oh wow, that looks really nice. So my mum did another one for me and she said, I think you should do that one. Because the first one I did in gold sequences and she said, I think you should do that in silver sequences.

So she always gave me a project. It was her way of sort of, she was basically doing what she was taught, you know?

But my favourite thing that she taught me was crochet. It became my favourite. So when I got married, in the Asian culture, like when a girl is getting married, she's sort of like, the mother gives her like loads of clothes, ready-made, you know which she could have tailored made or she can buy ready-made. And then with those scarves, my mum said it would be nice if I did like a little border. It's like a lovely chiffon scarf. It's very, very light. So she taught me some little crochet designs and in there I incorporated some beads and things.

And then my sister-in-law, she also, her mum also would do little crochet borders on hers. But because her mum knew other people, she could pick up other designs from them, whereas I was restricted to just what my mum had taught me. And as I said, it wasn't very elaborate.

So I said to my mother-in-law, oh I like what she's wearing and I wish I could do that on my scarves. And my mother-in-law said, oh, that's not a big thing. She said, I will look at the design and I will figure it out and I will show you. And she did. She would just look at the design and she would say. And then she would start me off on my chiffon scarf, she would show me for a bit. Sometimes if it was very elaborate, she would have to show me a few times. But then eventually, because I already knew the basic stitches, I would just pick it up.

And then it just started, this sort of beautiful hobby started. I would do it when my baby was asleep. I would sit upstairs when I'd be doing it on my chiffon scarf. I would wear it and people would comment on it. And then, I don't know, my mother-in-law just started to show me more and more complicated designs and I just took to it. I loved it. It was, it was just, it just came naturally to me, you know, it just came naturally to me.

The other members of the family, my sister-in-laws and, they thought, well, you know, if she can do it and she can have any pattern that she desires, you know, we could. So my sister-in-law said to my mother-in-law, you know, teach me as well.

And then we would go out, we would choose our suits and then we would choose our scarf to match with it, our chiffon scarf. And then my mother-in-law, poor thing, would go to the shops and then she would match the threads that we wanted, you know, oh, I want yellow, I want green, I want blue. And she, poor thing, would get all those. And then we would sit there and think, what design do I want to do with this?

And it lasted for years and years, but not once did we get bored of it. It seemed the more we did, the more, you know, we enjoyed it and the more designs that we came up with. Or we happened to somehow, maybe some person by chance had it done somewhere, you know, in Pakistan or something, and they came over, and then it was like, oh, you know, look at that, that's so different. And sometimes my poor mother-in-law would like stay up unpicking the design to see, like, how is it done, how is it done? And she was extremely good at crochet. So for her to actually sit there and do that showed how complicated that was, that even she had to sit there and unpluck it bit by bit to figure out, oh, this is what they've done, this is what they've done, this is what they've done. And then put it all together and redo it, you know.

[Music]

Our designs were unique because my mother-in-law would make them up, but some of them she would make up like a dress designer. When people did see it, they would say, oh, we've never seen this before.

The patta design is quite traditional to Pakistan. We did it on scarves and then other people copied that. But traditionally I think that it was actually done on the borders of bedspreads. The bed cover would have the most elaborate embroidery and then at the bottom people would do the crochet. I remember going to Pakistan and then people saying, oh, this is the patta. And this, we did this on that and I said, I know, I know, I've seen them, but we're doing it, we do it on.... And then they started doing it as well, and then they would tell us about their own designs, their own talents.

But yeah, yeah, we did that for a long time. I really enjoyed it. I really enjoyed wearing them and parading as peacocks. *[Laughter]*

And then other family members or friends who came, you know, we would teach them or if they just didn't want to learn and they wanted the easy route, they would say, can you do this design or can you...? And sometimes they were quite cheeky and they would ask for the hardest design.

And I would also do it for girls who are getting married. Their mother in laws or their mothers would say like, can you please do just two scarves for her? Would you, would you like to design for her for her scarves? Because I would like that to be in her showcase. You know, it's called Darge. So the mother would do her own Darge and she would. And then the mother-in-law would do her own and each would display because they showcase the girl's clothes and her jewellery and her shoes.

And I would say, yes, of course, you know, I would love to be a. Because in a way I was being a part of it then, wasn't I? And that felt, not like, oh look at me, look what I've done, but it just felt special to me.

And then we didn't just stop there, then we started doing like tablecloths. I had this minute table in, in my room when I lived with my mother-in-law and I did four crochet covers for that little table of mine.

And my mother-in-law used to say "I wish I was your table so I could wear different tablecloths all the time. I could be adorned." She was ever so funny.

As the children grew older, it became, obviously you had to concentrate more on the children, their schoolwork.

You know, they say mum forgets herself then we did, we did, we did or we certainly forgot about, you know, doing crochet.

Anyway, so then a lot of the scarves, when I gave my suits away as they got tighter or whatever as you get older, I gave the scarves away with the suits that to charity so that, you know, if they did, you know, people did buy them, they would have the scarf with it. That was nice. It was a nice feeling that somebody else was then going to wear it and then. But some of the scarves didn't have a suit or maybe I just couldn't let go of them, I don't know, I kept them.

And then over the years, like they were usually neutral colours, like maybe white or gold, silver and black. These are the ones I kept. If it was a wedding or something, the suit might have a bit of gold embroidery on there. Therefore I could wear that scarf with it.

So when I would wear them, like many, many years later, the new generation of girls, they were growing up and they would, they would see us as when they were little, doing them. And then they would say "oh Babi, I used to remember when you used to wear these and this Babi used to wear them. Babi means sister-in-law. And now you, you still got it?" And I said yes, I kept it for you.

The first time I gave it away, the young girl asked for it herself. She wanted me to do a gold one for her. She said, like the gold one you've got, I want one done like that, Babi, and I want the beads on the tip. So it was like a pyramid shape. The design was like a pyramid shape. And right on top of the pyramid would be a gold bead, little gold bead. And she wanted that. So I said to her, you can have that one. You're young and it'll look nice on you and you wear it.

And I gave my cousin, I went to my cousin's house, I wore my black one and she said to me, "Haleema, I really like your scarf." And I said to her, do you want it? Would you like to have it? And she said "yes!". And I said, all right, you can have it, but you have to give me a scarf because I got nothing to wear when I'm going home. So my auntie, she just gave me one of these scarves, not the chiffon ones, just to like cover my hair as I went home.

And yeah, and then it just happened like that. And now today I realise that I do not have a single one, nothing to show you, apart from the pictures actually.

[Music]

I really wanted to share this story with everyone because to me, that time and that, you know, hobby, if you want to call it, or craft or whatever you want to call it, was special to me, you know, it was really special.

The time was special and it bonded me to, to my mother-in-law, to my sister-in-law, I look back on it and I look back on it with a smile. I really do, I really do. You know, when I talk to you, and even today when I was coming and I was thinking to myself, I really want to tell my story because it's important to me.

I really want people to hear about us doing crochet on our chiffon scarves and making them pretty and making them, you know, and wearing them and enjoying them. I really want to tell people that, maybe because, because it brought me so much joy. And you think that something brought you so much joy, you should share it with people, shouldn't you?

Hayley:

This podcast was produced by Craftspace, for Stories of Making and Migration, a project sitting alongside our current touring exhibition Made in the Middle, funded by Arts Council England.

We met with makers across the Midlands. They are everyday makers who craft for themselves. This could be making at home in a local studio with a community group as a form of activism for their well being or much more.

You can view more stories from this project on the Craftspace website with podcasts, photos and short films. Visit <https://craftspace.co.uk/mitm-making-stories/>.

We're also on social media so let us know your own making stories and journeys through craft. We'd love to hear from you.