

Universität Trier

Seminar: LIT 301 Raising Awareness in/through Children's Fiction (WS
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Creative Group Project:

"Layla's World: Discovering Cultures in My Neighbourhood"

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This is Layla's World: Discovering Cultures in My Neighbourhood

Hi everyone! My name is Layla, and I'm 11 years old. I live in a cosy house in a quiet neighbourhood with my family. My momma is from Britain, my pa from India, and together we make a colourful mix of cultures! I also have an older sister, Maya, who's 15 years old. She's super smart, but also a bit bossy sometimes.

Not far from our house, my uncle and auntie live, and I visit them a lot after school. Auntie and I love cooking together. She teaches me all sorts of recipes, and we always end up making a mess in the kitchen. My favourite food is my Nani's and auntie's special Indian food—it's so flavourful and reminds me of our family gatherings in India once a year. When I'm not cooking or eating, I enjoy dancing or drawing. My sketchbook is filled with doodles, some inspired by the people and places around me.

My mornings usually start with the smell of freshly brewed chai. My pa makes it every day, and it's the perfect way to wake up. On Sundays, he'll even toast some parathas for breakfast, which are delicious with butter or yogurt. After breakfast, my momma takes over to help me get ready for school. She always insists that I pack a healthy second breakfast, though I like sneaking in a little bag of my favourite masala chips—don't tell her! At school, my day is filled with classes and playing with my friends. After school, I usually spend the afternoons at my uncle's and auntie's flat. Auntie and uncle often help me with my homework or school projects. When I'm back home, dinner is always special because it is a competition between momma and pa who cooks today! Sometimes, on special days, it's a big roast dinner that my momma makes, complete with potatoes, gravy, and Yorkshire pudding. Other times, it's a spicy curry that pa cooks, served with basmati rice and naan. My sister and I love both, though I think I enjoy the curries a little more — especially when pa lets me help him cook. In the evenings, we usually spend time together as a family. Sometimes we watch a British drama that my pa loves, and other times, we listen to momma's Bollywood music and dance around the living room. Before bed, momma usually reads to me. Lately, it's been one of her favourite fairy tales, and then pa says a night prayer in Hindi, wishing us all a peaceful night. Every part of my day feels special to me. It's like I get the best of both worlds every single day!

Recently, something really exciting happened at school - it is actually the reason why I wanted to start this blog. We were asked to draw our family tree for an art project. Our teacher told us to think about the origins of our families. She said that our neighbourhood is a multi-cultural place. It sounded simple at first, but as my friends and I started drawing and talking about our families, I realized how various all our families are. It made me think about all the different cultures in my life—and not just in my family but in my whole neighbourhood. As we showed our family trees, none of them looked the same. Some had

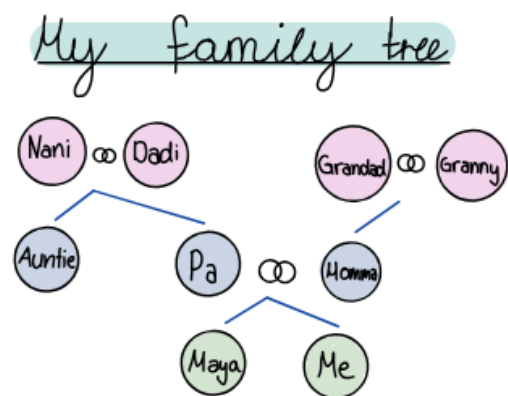
more branches than others, some were more colourful. Before that day, I didn't realise how many different cultures were living in my area. I'm so excited to learn more about this, how people live differently from my own family and what we share in common. It feels like everyone has its own flavour, and I'd love to discover more about everyone's traditions. Without even leaving my hometown, I'm lucky to explore many different ways of living and traditions. Who knows, maybe one day I'll travel to all these places to experience them for myself. But before that, I hope you're just as curious as I am about how other people live, because there's so much to discover! Every time I learn something new, it feels like I'm stepping into a whole new world, and it makes me want to know even more and share it with others. So, come along and let's experience it all together.

Thanks for reading my blog! I'd love to hear about the cultures in your neighbourhood, too. Let me know in the comments.

Love, Layla



That's me!



Blog Entry: A Patchwork of Stories – Maya's Story

Today, I have a rather personal story for you. It deals with a serious topic and some issues my sister Maya had to face at school the other day.

The last weeks, Maya has been quieter. She came home from school and often stayed in her room the whole day. That is not unusual. As momma says, teenagers often do that and my sister sometimes spends whole weekends in her room Face Timing friends and trying new make-up routines - just teenager stuff, I guess. But this time it was different, as I heard her crying in her room. When I asked her, she always told me to go away or that she was alright, but I knew she was not.

A few days ago, I heard her having a phone call with our British cousin, Sam, who lives at the other end of the country. She and my sister are the same age and always tell each other everything. I did not mean to eavesdrop, but I overheard their words and I was just too curious and worried.

"It's not just the stares," Maya said. "It's the comments. The jokes. He even asked if I was adopted because I don't 'look British enough.'"

I was shocked and did not understand what she was talking about, but hearing more of what she told my cousin, I somehow got what her bad mood was all about. Our family seemed to be somehow different from the families of most kids at her school. But was that something bad? Isn't it cool to (have more diversity and) learn more about different cultures?

Apparently, some kids at her school think that being half Indian is a reason to treat my sister differently just because of how she looks.

Sadly, I couldn't hear what my cousin was answering, but it seemed to help Maya as she stopped crying. I felt bad for eavesdropping and even worse for her to face all of this almost alone... and that she did not tell me - her sister - about her struggles.

I did not know what to do, as I obviously had information, I should not have. I thought I should probably keep them to myself and not drop that I had overheard every single word. That night, I did not sleep very well. My thoughts circled around my sister's issues and I tried to think of a way to help her without finding an easy answer. But I knew that somehow, I had to do something.

The next day, when she picked me up from auntie's and we were on our way home, Maya was looking sad again, and I saw that she had red eyes. So, I walked quietly next to her and when I felt it was right I whispered "You know, sometimes I think other people's opinions just take in too much room in our lives, especially when you are different". She stopped walking, looking at me with one eyebrow raised and I thought, now she will start a fight. But instead, she nodded quietly and after a few more minutes of walking silently, she even began telling me her story.

It all started a few weeks ago. There has been a discussion about British history for which my sister prepared a presentation in front of her class. She gained a lot of positive feedback of both her classmates and her teacher. But one boy was giving her a hard time. He was not okay with other students gaining more attention, so he made some comment about Maya being "not permitted to tell anyone anything about Britain as she's not a *real* Britain". Maya knew, he was jealous but it still hurt her. As he saw that she was suffering from his comments, he kept going, saying lots of mean things about her. Maybe to shed a better light on himself, Maya said. And because people can be so cruel, his friends did not stop him but even laughed at his jokes and comments about Maya and her looks.

At first, I didn't know what to say and just listened to her. Then I became so angry that my cheeks were burning, which made Maya laugh a bit, but I was completely serious.

I asked her why she didn't tell me or momma or pa anything about it, but Maya told me she did not want me to feel unsure about myself and my own looks. She said, as my older sister, she did not want to put me through this, too. But isn't this what sisters are for? To share our worries, and talk about it. I just felt so bad. I mean being a little sister is sometimes hard as I have to go to bed earlier and I have to follow her orders at home when momma and pa are going out. But after hearing this, it seemed like being a big sister is even harder.

Back at home, I encouraged Maya to tell our parents about her issues and after a loooong discussion - she finally did so when we were having dinner.

Pa was more than furious. He talked about calling the teacher, wanted to know the name of the mean kids and started walking back and forth in our kitchen grumbling in Hindi. Momma, on the other hand, looked heartbroken, a deep line between her brows, but calm. "We'll handle this," she said softly, giving my sister warm glances. "But first, let's make sure *you're* okay."

After both of us went to bed, my parents had a conversation in the kitchen and I just had to hear what they were saying. Pa was upset because he wished things to be easier for us than they were for him when moving here. Again, I was so sad that he had never talked to us about these feelings.

Momma told him that she felt guilty for Maya trying to face those challenges alone because she did not want anyone to worry.

Their words opened my eyes a bit. My parents love each other so much but the world is sometimes different for each of them. While for Pa, being Indian is one of the biggest parts of his personality and he wants us to be proud of that too, Momma just wants us to feel safe and feels guilty that she cannot protect us from experiences she never had to face.

That weekend, my dad wanted to spend an evening just with me and my sister. Momma visited a friend and the three of us cooked Pa's favourite Indian dinner together - Biryani.

After that, he wanted to show us photo albums of his childhood to show us more about his life in India. I was thrilled by what I saw and even my sister smiled and listened attentively to Pa's stories. Later, Momma came home and sat next to us. She also shared her experiences about how she learned so much about herself by falling in love with someone from a different background. It was that day I really understood how special our family is. I mean - you know we are a mix of two cultures and sometimes that means we don't fit into one box or the other – some people might say we're just "too British to be Indian and too Indian to be British". As for me, this never was something bad, I never thought of it like that. But also, for Maya, I think it is less of a weakness after she understood something: In our family, we have two whole worlds of love, traditions and lots of aspects to explore.

I wanted to tell you this story because I realised a very important thing. I realised that being both Indian and British, or from another culture, is not the same experience for everyone. For me, it now means more than before - it means that I want to stand up for my family even when things get hard. It means talking about the different experiences, also the sad ones, each of us makes. And the most important thing: it means knowing that no matter what, I've got people who support me in every situation.

I think my sister also understood that she is not alone. Now she shares her experiences with us and my parents try to make sure she's okay. Maya still has some struggles at school, but she has a support team standing behind her. Not only are we there to help her, she also managed to tell her friends about her struggles, who stand with her at school. She has not cried ever since, but if she should, we are all there to help her. She said that she learned to ignore what some daft kids still say about our family as *she* now really knows how special we are.

I hope you could learn a bit from Maya's story!

Next time, I surely have something more fun to tell you guys :)

Layla



Blog Entry: A Patchwork of Stories - Rami and the Sugar Feast

Cotton Candy clouds, biscuit towers or chocolate fountains, ... – what was the first thing that came to your mind when you read this heading? If you thought about lollies and treats, you were not that far off, but there is another meaning to it, too. So, let me tell you about my latest adventure and what it has to do with Rami and the Sugar Feast.

Like most afternoons when Momma and Pa were still at work, Auntie picked me up from school. My Auntie lives in our neighbouring street. She has a flat that always smells of warm meals, where flowers fill up every corner, and soft rugs cover the floor. Most days, Uncle is there too, but that day he went out to play chess in the community centre.



When I stepped through the door, I knew exactly what Auntie had cooked for us. My favourite dish of all. Do you guys know jalebi? If you don't, you really missed out. You should ask somebody if they can help you make them, because they are the most delicious, sweet, fried and sticky treat, and they look like spirals. My tummy always aches just by smelling them. So, I quickly took off my shoes and ran towards the kitchen, but Auntie blocked the way.

"Laya, Laya", she said and clicked with her tongue. Laya is the name only Auntie calls me. She likes to say it because it has a beautiful meaning in Hindi, my Auntie's language. I think it is "rhythm" what Laya means, and I like it when she says it because I like dancing and music. "No jalebi before homework, dear. And look at you, you still got your jacket and bag on you." Auntie clicked her tongue again, but she softly smiled at me.

Homework. Oh no, I thought. Not just because of the English work-sheet or the three math tasks I still had to do before tasting some jalebi, no, there was another reason. Rami had been missing that day at school. And I was the one who had to bring him the homework since he lived close by. Rami is one of my classmates. Before my adventure, I didn't know much about him. His family moved here only a month ago. But one thing was very odd about him. He never ate. Not a single time he had brekkie during the big break and not once I had seen him at lunch time in the cafeteria. It seemed like he was starving. What if he had starved already and that was the reason he had been missing that day? I shivered.

"Homework is not that bad," Auntie told me and pushed me to a chair.

"I forgot that I need to bring Rami his homework, Auntie and..." – "And what about it?"

So, I told her about him and that I feared that he starved. Auntie made big eyes, as big as her painted saucers. I have never seen Auntie that serious before. It made me feel unwell.

"Laya, you and me, we are going to deliver that homework right away. Let me just fetch something while you put on your clothes."

While I buttoned up my jacket, I saw Auntie dragging her shopping trolley out of the closet and filling it up with bags of rice and lentils, jars of home-made chutneys and pickles and two family-size packages of her most beloved crisps. She fetched a box from the cupboard and dumped in all the jalebi in a go. When the box was also put in the trolley, Auntie took my hand, and we rushed down the three streets to Rami's home. My hand was sweaty in Auntie's when she rang the bell. What if Rami...? I tried not to think about it, but I was a little scared that something terrible had happened to him.

The door opened and Auntie sighed. Was it relief? I looked at her, her serious face was gone, then I looked back at the door.

"Eid Mubarak", a woman greeted and smiled brightly at us.

She had a lovely headscarf in the colour of ocean blue and a silver tray of biscuits in her hand. That was Rami's mum. I had seen her before when she had picked him up from school.

"Eid Mubarak", Auntie greeted back and I looked between the two of them. What did these words mean?

"Oh, aren't you Layla? Rami's friend from school?", asked Rami's mum.

I nodded.

"We bring Rami's homework," Auntie explained.

"Thank you very much. Please go on and try one. We made them." Rami's mum pointed at the moon and rectangle shaped biscuits. They looked very tasty. Auntie grabbed one from the tray. But what was going on with Rami? He should have some of those biscuits, I thought.

"Is Rami alright?", I asked her.

"Oh, it's a shame he got sick before the Sugar Feast- "

"Sugar Feast?"

"Yes, this is a special day for us. You might not know it, but as Muslims we fast for a whole month, that is called Ramadan, and then at the thirtieth day, we end our fast and celebrate with friends and many, many plates of delicious food. My children and other children like to call it Sugar Feast, because of the lots of biscuits and candy they all munch on."

"That is why Rami didn't eat at school, then... But is he sick because of the fasting?"

"No, no, my dear, you don't have to worry. We still eat during Ramadan, but only when it is dark outside. My dear boy only has a flu. Rami rests a little and next week he'll be back at school."

My cheeks felt hot. Before that day, I had never heard of Ramadan or the Sugar Feast, but I felt warmth sink into my tummy and a tingling in my fingers, when Rami's mum pointed at a moon-shaped biscuit. As soon as I tried it, delicious spices filled my mouth.



“Why don’t you two come inside and try some more? We absolutely love to have guests and share our food with you, especially on Sugar Feast.”

Auntie gave me a questioning look and I thought of the jalebi that we had brought with us. So, we joined the party for an hour or two, met Rami’s family and Rami who was tucked into a blanket on the sofa and smiled at me. That day I learned so much new.

Until next time, Layla :)

Blog Entry: A Patchwork of Stories – Visiting Mrs. Ivanova

Hi everyone! It's me, Layla, back with another story from my neighbourhood!

Yesterday, I visited my neighbour Mrs. Ivanova. She's lived next door since I was born, but we've only ever exchanged waves and smiles. Mum always said she was a private person, but when I mentioned my project of learning about everyone in our neighbourhood, Mrs. Ivanova warmly invited me over.



(Cottonbro studio)

Her flat smelled wonderful the moment she opened the door — like freshly baked bread and something sweet. “Come in, dear,” she said, her voice soft but strong.

Mrs. Ivanova is from Russia. She told me she moved here over thirty years ago, right before the fall of the Soviet Union. I had never heard about that before, but it was very interesting. She speaks English perfectly, but her accent gives her stories a musical rhythm I could listen to all day. Her small living room was cozy, with lace curtains and shelves filled with books and little painted wooden dolls called *matryoshkas*.

“It's almost Easter, Layla,” she said, gesturing to a table near the window. On it were a row of brightly coloured eggs, each one painted with intricate patterns of flowers, birds, and swirls. “In Russia, we have many traditions for this time of year. Have you heard of *Pysanka*?”

I shook my head, and she handed me one of the eggs to hold. “We paint these eggs to celebrate new life and spring. Each pattern has a meaning. See these flowers? They symbolize health and protection.”



(Gál, Dorottya)

She smiled as she placed the egg back carefully. “Would you like to try painting one?”

Of course, I said yes! She showed me how to use a small brush and melted beeswax to draw designs on a plain white egg. Then we dipped it into a pot of red dye. When we gently wiped the wax off, my egg had a beautiful pattern beneath—my very own *Pysanka*!

While we painted, Mrs. Ivanova told me about her childhood in Russia. She talked about snowy winters, long family dinners, and how they would go to church at midnight for Easter services. But she also shared how difficult it was to leave her home behind. “I was nervous to come to a new country,” she said. “I didn't know if people would accept me. But over time, I found friends who became like family.”



(Rusakova, Rufina)

Before I left, Mrs. Ivanova gave me a small loaf of sweet bread called *kulich*. It was round and tall, with white icing and colourful sprinkles on top. “Easter isn’t just about traditions,” she said. “It’s about sharing and welcoming others into your life.”

As I walked home, carrying my painted egg and the delicious-smelling bread, I thought about how lucky I was to live in such a diverse neighbourhood. Every story, like Mrs. Ivanova’s, adds another patch to our community quilt—a quilt full of vibrant colours, patterns, and shared traditions.

I hope you enjoyed this story! Next week, I’m visiting ..., who promised to teach me how to Stay tuned!

Until next time,
Layla



Picture Sources:

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