

To My Mother

BY IRSHAD MANJI

START UP

In a small group, brainstorm difficulties that newcomers to Canada could face.

Irshad Manji immigrated to Canada from Uganda when she was just four years old. Today, she is a well-known journalist, activist, and feminist. In this letter, Manji looks back on her childhood and the difficulties she experienced growing up as an immigrant child.

Ottawa, 1990

Dear Mum:

I am ashamed. I am an immigrant woman, like you. But because one of us is "more immigrant" than the other, one of us is more **oppressed** than the other. Thanks to me.

Since childhood, Mum, I have oppressed you. I have ridiculed your accent, told you not to cook curry, demanded that you speak English in public, called you "cute" when you made people chuckle, and thought you "stupid" when you made them uncomfortable.

Do you remember, Mum, the lunch my university held to honour its scholarship winners? You sat next to the university president. We were discussing languages; after pointing out the smallest accents can cause the biggest misunderstandings, you explained how most people interpret your pronunciation of "beach" as "bitch." Do you remember that our entire table fell silent? The president cleared his throat and my shocked 80-year-old neighbour whispered, "Oh my!"

oppressed: put down; humiliated



Author Irshad Manji

Why didn't Manji defend her mother?

In retrospect, your story was funny. I should have laughed with you. Instead, I felt like crawling under the table and shouting, "Forgive her — she knows not what she does. She is an immigrant!" Worse yet, Mum, one horribly racist and **patronizing** thought kept popping into my mind: "How many times have I warned my immigrant mother not to embarrass me like this?"

That, Mum, was one in a string of racist and patronizing thoughts about you. I can recall as a 10-year-old at a sleepover with the Brownies, sharing Rice Krispie treats that you — "my Mum," I proudly said — had made for "the gang."

But when the all-white gang examined the treats with scrunched-up noses, then spat out what they had just bitten into, my heart sank. Rather than defending you, I ridiculed you. "My mum has got to be the yuckiest cook in the world," I giggled to break the tension.

"She probably put curry in these!" someone screamed above our laughter. That's right, our laughter. Mine included. I decided not to explain to them that the treats looked and tasted a bit different because you had made them with coloured and not plain marshmallows. It was easier to simply laugh at your "dumb" and "gross" immigrant ways.

In retrospect: looking back
patronizing: snobbish; belittling

What does this sentence mean?
Restate it in your own words.

It was easier to let my “friends” oppress me. It was easier to let them let me oppress you.

And, Mum, if this behaviour is okay for a 10-year-old, it’s not okay for a 22-year-old. So why, just last week, did I lecture you like an overworked immigration officer would? Why did I react this way to a Muslim woman whose guts and brains allowed her to divorce an abusive husband, stand up to **manipulative** lawyers, fill out her own tax forms, and gather enough money to have a house built while dealing with contractors’ delays?

I reacted this way because lurking within me is the memory of you as an Avon Lady: baby in one arm, makeup bag in the other, able to sputter only a few English words, and missing home profoundly. Mine is the memory of an immigrant image that my friends and their friends consider shameful.

How could I run when I saw people gasp at your beauty in that sequined sari?

Occasionally, at least, Mum, I have taken pride in watching you **flaunt** our immigrant past. When you appeared at parent-teacher nights in a sari or brought samosas to my school parties, I didn’t run for cover. How could I run when I saw people gasp

manipulative: *controlling*
flaunt: *show off; display*

at your beauty in that sequined sari? How could I run when I heard them praising your samosas?

How could I oppress you when I sense approval, not oppression, from others?

Mum, please recognize — help all immigrant mothers to recognize that their raised-in-Canada kids can be just as oppressive as we can be oppressed. We will swallow the **intimidation** of others, then **regurgitate** it on those whom we believe, because others believe, least represent Canada, those who are most **vulnerable** yet most forgiving, our mothers.

That’s why I wish I could stand atop a mountain and yell to every immigrant woman below about their children: “Learn to separate your children’s constructive advice from your children’s destructive criticism. Take their advice. Don’t take their criticism!”

I opened this letter by confessing that I’m ashamed. Let me close, Mum, by saying I’m sorry.

Irshad

intimidation: *bullying*
regurgitate: *repeat*
vulnerable: *weak; defenceless*

⊕ ZOOM IN

- How did Irshad Manji’s desire to fit in with her friends affect her relationship with her mother?
 - Although the author, as a child, believed she was different from her mother, where might they have found common ground?
 - Discuss these questions with a partner.
 - Refer to specific parts of the letter to support your ideas.
- Reread the letter and note the incidents where there was tension between Manji and her mother.
 - In each instance, discuss how racism contributed to the tension. Were there any other reasons for Manji’s embarrassment?

⊖ ZOOM OUT

- In a small group, develop some strategies that immigrant children and their parents could use to keep a close family relationship despite the problems that they might face in a new country.
 - Share your strategies with another group and ask for feedback.
- With a partner, role-play a conversation between Manji and her mother.
 - How would her mother respond to her daughter’s apology at the end of the letter?
 - Select specific details in Manji’s letter to focus on in your dialogue.