

Challenging Perspectives

Why is it that given the same visual and aural information, we perceive things differently? What skews my viewpoint from yours? Culture? Education? Experience and achievement in life? Would disability or religion make a difference?



When you look at this picture, do you see what I see? Does it make sense to you?

The artist is Rubbena Aurangzeb -Tariq. She is a profoundly deaf, Asian woman. Her painting is called Co-ordination.

So? What can you see now?

Does it make any difference if you know she is a Muslim?

Do you believe that the people we meet are part of a plan, accidental or just a coincidence? What are the chances of a Muslim woman, brought up in what is now rural Pakistan, meeting and becoming friends with a Christian woman, who grew up in Britain, approximately four thousand miles away? Why did they meet? Was there a purpose? Are you prepared to change your perspective?

There are people, who are ashamed that they have produced a child, who is different, who cannot hear. Others think it is a punishment from God. In

England, the term 'deaf and dumb' was used for years. It was assumed that as the deaf could not hear, and they could not speak, then they definitely could not achieve the same things as hearing people. In some countries, they might be rejected by their family, hidden away, or worse, used as some sort of slave. What is your point of view?

I can tell you before we start that Rehmat is the name of the woman from Pakistan, who is not embarrassed that her daughter, Rubbena, is deaf. Marian is the British woman, who is a Teacher of the Deaf. So why do they think this encounter was part of their destiny? They both believe in a Creator God and thought that Rubbena could succeed in life with their help. Would all three of their lives have had different perspectives, if they had not met?

Let me begin, and then you decide.

An amazing carpet made from wild flowers, which changed colour with the seasons, stretched for miles and miles as far as the eye could see. Yellow mustard was followed by pale pink chick peas and then by the white flowers with black blotches of the black-eyed beans. This was the view from the garden of the light blue semi-detached bungalow, where Rehmat was born in the 1942.

Directly in front of the bungalow was a park, crisscrossed with paths worn by the tramp of many feet as the people walked to the fields to do their work. In the morning, Rehmat could hear their footsteps along with the tinkling of bells around the

necks of the bulls accompanying the folk as they ambled along to work. The farm animals were kept inside the houses. They were a part of the family! Men and women worked side by side to cultivate the soil and tend the plants. They had no machines, like tractors and ploughs to help them. For transport, they harnessed bulls, donkeys or horses to carts.

Life was simple. The farmers were self-sufficient. They did not need money.

The weather was very hot in the summer and very cold in the winter. In the village, there were none of the modern conveniences of gas or electricity in any of the houses. Water had to be collected daily from the well for cooking and washing only, so there were no toilets. If you needed to relieve yourself, you went in the field when it was dark. There were no doctors at hand, instead you might call in the barber, because he had all kinds of equipment for cutting and shaving and could also extract long, sharp thorns with tweezers. Everyone in the village was a Muslim, so that religion was just another part of the culture.

Schooling was available but not compulsory.

'There was a school in the next village for the girls. They taught us how to sew. I went for two days and then I had enough. I didn't like the teachers telling me what to do! It is the same now; I still don't like being told what to do! So strict learning was not for me,' Rehmat remembered, laughing.

Consequently, she had no formal education. In actual fact, Rehmat belonged to the Choudhury or landowners. They were the employers of the barbers, carpenters, tailors, potters, and blacksmiths. These workers made sure their children attended school regularly, so that they gained academic qualifications. When they grew up, these students went into the army as officers and gained the power in the country. The Choudhury's children did not want to be in the same class as the working class children so they did not go, thinking they could live off the fat of the land. In the long term, they could not compete with those graduating from school.

In another bungalow, where the waves lapped gently on the shore of a rather stony beach in Dorset, England, Marian was born in 1950. She began life, smelling the salty sea air; watching the boats and paddling on the water's edge. She was brought up in a family of evangelical Christians with very fixed, firm beliefs. Her father changed his job and moved to Newport, Gwent, in South Wales, when she was about seven years old, and there she grew up. Failing her 'A' Levels, prevented her from going to university, but she went back to Dorset to a College of Education to train as a primary teacher in 1968. Then in 1972, she qualified as a Teacher of the Deaf at Oxford. She explained her interest in deafness.

'I had three cousins in Australia, who were born profoundly deaf. The oldest one was killed when he climbed over a fence and ran under a lorry. I remember my mother telling me, even though I was only five years old that he died because he did not hear the lorry. Then when I was fourteen years old at a career lesson at school, I heard a voice telling me to teach the deaf. As I am a Christian, I believed this was God speaking to me.'

Back in Pakistan, Rehmat married her cousin to whom she had been promised at birth. She was about eighteen years old and they decided to move to Surrey, England, in 1968, in search of employment. Rubbena, her third child, was born there in 1971. She was a happy little girl and not noticeably different from her siblings. Although her speech was not so clear, Rehmat thought it was a baby-thing and she would grow out of it. She and her husband took the family back to Pakistan so their older children could go to school there. They observed Rubbena, a toddler, copying the actions of adults. For example, one night they saw her acting out making the roti, the Pakistani bread, just like her aunt. Consequently, they thought she was clever.

Unable to get the schools that they wanted, the family returned to England. Rubbena started school in Surrey. She went very happily the first day, but after that clung to Rehmat and did not want to go in. That was not unusual in itself. However, when Rehmat went to Parents' Evening, the teacher wanted to know why Rubbena did not answer any questions. So Rehmat decided to go and see for herself. She arrived early one afternoon and peered through the window. Rubbena was sitting obediently on the mat like all the other children, but she was not participating and clearly not listening. Her friend saw her observing the class and asked if she was spying on the teacher.

'No,' Rehmat laughed, 'I am watching Rubbena. I think there is something wrong with her. She is not joining in like the other children. She is just sitting there in her own little world,' Rehmat said worriedly.

'Do you think she might be deaf?' the friend responded, 'I've noticed that when she runs ahead on the way home, she doesn't turn round when you call her name.'

Rehmat made an appointment with the head teacher and told her of their concerns. Immediately, an appointment was made with the school doctor and Rubbena was referred to the Ear, Nose and Throat Department (ENT) of the hospital. She was finally diagnosed as deaf when she was seven years old.

Rubbena commented,

'When I started school, before I was diagnosed deaf, I cannot remember much except the teachers were accusing me of ignoring them in class, not listening to instructions, and I was sent to the back of the room. I was afraid, feared what they would do next. I did not understand why I was attending school. I remembered the playground was the loneliest place to be, I was rejected by others, and I had no one to play with. I had no idea what was happening when children bullied me. It felt like I was left to deal with it, because there were no Asian children there, I was a minority that was an easy target to be bullied, as I had no language to explain what was happening to the teachers. The deafness was left for too long. Almost neglected.'

As a result of the diagnosis of deafness, Rehmat was visited by a peripatetic Teacher of the Deaf. She instructed Rehmat to learn English. This was so Rubbena would not get confused learning one language at school and another one at home. She helped Rehmat to understand the importance of hearing aids and how to get Rubbena to use them effectively. Most importantly, she informed Rehmat that there was a specialist unit, some distance away, where Rubbena could be taught by Teachers of the Deaf, who understood the challenges that were presented to the

children. Unfortunately, this meant travelling in a taxi every day, but the benefits were being with other children with the same disability and being educated at her level of achievement. Rehmat and her husband discussed the issues and decided that there was only one option and that was to send her to the Hearing Impaired Unit attached to the Infant School.

Rubbena cannot remember very much about attending there, especially as it was only for a few months before she transferred to the Junior School. This then was to be the first meeting of the people in my story. Rehmat nervously brought her daughter to meet her new teacher.

So the three main characters in the story meet. How did these the three women interact and influence each other? More to the point, what has Rubbena achieved by attending school in England? What difference did a teacher like Marian make?

When Marian started teaching in Surrey, her aunt, who lived nearby, had a good talk to her.

‘Remember that you are creating the children’s memories. If they have fun and feel cared for, then they will have a solid foundation on which they can build the rest of their lives.’

Although this was a tough responsibility, Marian adopted this philosophy and also looked on her work as being similar to that of a detective like the famous Sherlock Holmes!

'I examined the pupil's achievements as if through a magnifying glass to find out what was missing so that skills could be taught and the gaps filled in. I wanted deaf children to achieve and be able to contribute to a hearing world.'

She had trained as a Teacher of the Deaf at a time when the methods were auditory/oral, which meant that she talked and expected the children to listen through their hearing aids and lip read. She used technical equipment with the pupils, which amplified the sound through headphones. Rubbena was one of a group of six deaf children and spent most of her time in a sound-treated classroom and only integrated with the mainstream children for lessons like Physical Education (P.E.), assemblies and playtimes. In collaboration with the Speech and Language Therapist, the pupils were taught to speak clearly so they could make themselves understood. They gained confidence by being given work that was within their capabilities. When Marian assessed her new pupil, she realised that Rubbena had very little language and so was far behind the level of her hearing peers. In later years, Rubbena often introduced her to people as 'the teacher who taught me to speak'.

If you remember, Rehmat had never been to school, but when Marian visited her at home, she discovered that due to their incredibly hard work, the family now owned a shop and a restaurant. Rehmat had established herself working behind the till, and

she was becoming integrated into the community, because she was now able to communicate in English. Certain of her customers would ring up and ask for her help and support. She did all this whilst looking after the needs of four growing children. Perhaps her major achievement, however, was teaching herself to read and write in English. She used some of the first easy-reading books to do this. Although, this was astonishing in itself, it was even more remarkable when Rehmat found out, only recently, that she suffered from dyslexia. Once she was literate in English, she felt able to assist Rubbena with her school work and encourage her to persevere.

At school, Rubbena got on well with Marian. It was clear that she was a very bright child, because she learnt quickly, but she was only at the very beginning of her long, tortuous path.

'I remember when we changed schools, there were a lot of tests happening, I saw a lot of faces that looked guilty and they wanted to help suddenly. I could not understand why but I was feeling safer. When I saw the picture of me with the box hearing aid, they were big but they made me feel safe, I could hear noise. Then I learnt to develop speech I remembered my siblings would tease me about the way the sound of the words came out. I felt angry because they ganged up together and I was alone. I had mum and dad to protect me, if they were not there for me, my confidence to continue learning would not have grown.'

Rubbena went on to say,

'I enjoyed being alone, doing things at home, cooking, cleaning and riding along my bike. The fun of exploring new areas, working out how to do the cooking and moving

things around the house allowed me to become creative with my thoughts and ideas. This led me to enjoy art more, drawing objects in a very detailed manner. It felt happier producing artworks as I felt I was doing something useful.'

So Rehmat and her husband supported their daughter at home, and Marian and the other staff worked with her at school, consequently Rubbena made outstanding progress. She proceeded to the specialist unit in the secondary school. There she met many more teachers who helped and inspired her to go on to college and finally to university. During this time, she learnt how to communicate through British Sign Language (BSL), so she became bi-lingual. She maintained contact with Marian and even asked her for help with one of her assignments.

So what was so different about that? Lots of people go into higher education and get a degree. Wasn't she just like everyone else? Why would that change perspectives about deafness, disability and ethnic origins?

Well, Rubbena not only acquired just one degree; she achieved four! They were MA (Art Psychotherapy), MA (Psychodynamics), MA (Fine Art), BA (Hons) Fine Art. As a consequence, she was able to work as an art psychotherapist and obviously honing her skills enabled her to become a professional abstract artist in her own right. She worked part-time for a charity, which aims to transform the lives of the deaf. In this role, she traveled the length and breadth of England teaching deaf students about Personal, Social and Health Education. At one time, Marian was

employed by the same charity and so they became work colleagues for four years. Rubbena also worked for other charities. She is involved with one which offers small grants to deaf children overseas to enable them to set up a small business of their own. Another one is for deaf women from other ethnic backgrounds, who have come to Britain for one reason or another. She represented them on B.B.C. TV in 2014, when discussing a shocking case of a deaf Asian girl, with no language, who was brought over to England, imprisoned in a cellar and used as slave labour. She managed all this whilst being married and bringing up her own two children.

If Rehmat and her husband had been able to get their other children into school in Pakistan, what would have happened to Rubbena? There were no facilities for deaf children. She would probably have rejected school, just like her mother! Would she have been able to achieve without hearing aids or education?

It is their firm conviction that these three women were brought together for a purpose - for Rubenna to develop her abilities - and they have remained firm friends ever since.

Rehmat was determined to learn and master English, so that she could support and encourage her daughter. She provided an excellent role model of someone who persevered to get what they wanted. She made a home in a country with a way of life completely different from her own. She protected and nurtured her children. From

the Muslim point of view, she trusted Allah to guide her through the map of her destiny. She made many friends, some of whom were Christians, and tried to understand their point of view.

Marian was able to use her talents to see the potential that was in Rubbena; she gave her work that built her confidence and ensured she had good foundation for the future. Through her methods, Rubbena learnt how to speak and catch up on her education. From the Christian point of view, Marian believed that God gave her the skills and asked her to do the job. She learnt about Islam and found common ground to build the relationships.

Despite a difficult start in life, Rubbena has achieved far beyond their wildest dreams by not only obtaining academic qualifications, but also by influencing hundreds of young deaf people, enabling them to protect themselves and build their own positive identity. She has become an ambassador and spokesperson for deaf ethnic women. Above all, as an Asian woman, who is a Muslim, she has created and exhibited her art. She is extraordinary.

Finally, what about you? Have your perspectives been challenged?