

## Podcast Transcript & References

**Podcast title:** What does it mean to live our truth?

*Host:* Sahar Allen (she/hers)

*Guest:*

Kawa Ada (Afghan heritage, Afghan Canadian actor, writer and producer & Residence Life Manager at UBC)

*Summary:*

In this podcast submission, Sahar interviews an Afghan Canadian, Kawa Ada, and his experiences of acculturation in the Canadian society. Their conversations and experiences shine light on the challenges that West Asian diaspora face and the dark truth of racism and discrimination becomes more evident as they describe their interactions with their communities and the barriers that they have faced in accessing opportunities for growth. In their discussions, they also touch upon how their wellbeing has been impacted as the result of such experiences and also talk about their experiences of speaking up against racism and the negative impacts of model minority myth.

*Reference System:* external sources in transcript is **highlighted** and numbered in **bold** in chronological order throughout the transcript. At the very end of this transcript, you can find a list of references in APA format in a chronological manner which will directly correspond to the references cited.

*Transcript:*

**Sahar (00:09):** What does it mean to be a human? What does it mean to live our truth?

**Sahar (00:20):** I attended a virtual conference last year and one of the speakers said something that really stuck with me to this day. He said: “your truth is your armor, but you can’t wear it all the time.” This is a beautiful way of putting our shared human experience into a perspective. It can be exhausting to constantly have to explain ourselves to other people, to prove who we are and where we are from. Especially for those who belong to one or more minority groups, it is an unfortunate reality of our world today that we are often forced to pick between two sides: either choose to be silent and take off that heavy armor of our truth for the sake of our own wellbeing or choose to be an advocate, a voice, and speak our truth in order to fight against the ongoing acts of racism and discrimination in our society today.

**Sahar (1:12):** My name is Sahar Allen and I will be your host. In this podcast episode, I will be interviewing a very VERY special guest. His name is Kawa and he is currently a manager at UBC Residence Life. He is an Afghan Canadian actor, writer and producer and also an avid advocate for the ongoing issues of racism and discrimination and experiences of queer immigrants and refugees in Canada. I was able to arrange a chat with him to learn more about how his identity and heritage has shaped his experiences in the Canadian society. But first, let’s get to know him a bit more...

**Sahar (1:47):** Okay, so tell me about how you came to Canada and how you ended up here at UBC?

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**Kawa (1:56):** Sure, I was born in Afghanistan, in Kabul, and I fled the war there with my parents as a baby and moved as a war refugee to various countries and then finally gained access to come to Canada when I was still a young boy. Then I grew up in Toronto, went to school in the States and after my undergrad, I started as a residence life manager which was my first professional position and since then I've traversed between a career in the arts and in student affairs and recently I left the arts again and I was invited to come to UBC as a residence life manager.

**Sahar (2:55):** That's awesome! Thanks for sharing that with me. My next question is about acculturation and your experience of adjusting to a Canadian westernized society. In class, we actually read an interesting article on the experience of LGBTQ+ immigrants in Canada (#1 & #2) and how when they are trying to acculturate to a new culture, they not only have to adapt to a westernized culture but also the queer culture so I'm just wondering how was your experience doing that especially knowing that you identify as a queer individual?

**Kawa (3:35):** That's a great question. I will say to be perfectly candid, I still...don't feel like I belong in the queer community... even though I identify as a queer person. I think that stems from partly because I grew up in so many different countries and once we moved to Canada, there has been since childhood this need to find my place in the world and I think that has been a double edged sword because on one level it has given me a great deal of drive and insight into displacement and into those others who might feel, um, the othering that so many people go through but even within the queer community in Toronto which is where I was first an adult and where I first started to feel self-actualized around my queerness, even there because there is so much...still... racism and discrimination even within the queer community that I did feel like an outsider even within that community and still to a certain extent do...um, so I haven't fully reconciled with that part of my experience here in Canada. I do know others who have, I think certainly being born here perhaps as part of the diasporic community and again I can only speak anecdotally from those whom I know, I think that tends to be a bit easier of a transition whereas for me because my parents grew up somewhere else and we were, as you alluded to, trying to get acquainted with western culture that was really the first focus for so long... so I'm still trying to work that out...

**Sahar (6:14):** Okay, thank you for sharing that... I know it's not easy to talk about these things so I just want to make sure...also I should have said if you're not feeling comfortable about answering a certain question just...just tell me...

**Kawa (6:28):** thank you ... I appreciate that, I am more than comfortable with sharing any of this I'm more concerned that I might not be giving you the depth or perhaps the insight you want here...

**Sahar (6:40):** No, I am getting everything that I want here so no worries on that! It is interesting because listening to your experience and a few of the research articles that we read, they actually found that queer individuals had to give up their own ethnic identity (#1) in order to feel a sense of belonging to the queer culture so would you say that you're more identifying with your

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ethnicity and your background or would you be willing to let go of that in order to feel a sense of belonging in that queer culture?

**Kawa (7:21):** I can understand why that is something that you read about or you've been grappling with because.... Yes, I did feel whether it was implied or sometimes quite explicit within the queer community that you had to kind of choose...you know what comes first? And for me that was never a question. Internally, I have always chosen my heritage as an Afghan first, I think partly because it shaped so much of who I was growing up and in my formative years watching my parents especially as a young boy go through losing their home and their culture to a certain extent and giving up so much, sacrificing so much... I think I owed it to myself and to them and their sacrifice to get to know my own ethnic culture and heritage well enough to pay homage to it and to honor that. I think, within the queer community there is also this...um...feeling that you make your own family and I think there is something very beautiful about that. I feel that perhaps there is an added privilege that I may not be as aware of that just now I'm starting to think about as I answer this question is that I had a certain privilege in that even though I couldn't properly come out to my parents, which is a whole other story, I still I always had their support and there was always so much love in my house that I didn't need for or want for...the you know trying to make another family for myself which I know a lot of queer identifying people do, either because they were disowned quote-un-quote or because perhaps they never had that and I do have the privilege of having had a great deal of love and support in my home...um, so perhaps that also had something to do with it.

**Sahar (9:51):** That sounds great ...I love that at least you were able to receive that love from your family and that makes a lot of sense because you're such a loving and kind person yourself and I see that translating into your own life as who you are.... Yeah, my voice is cracking up I'm sorry!! OK, my next question for you is around racism and discrimination. You kind of talked about racism that you have faced, like racist attitudes that you have faced in the queer community but I'm just wondering in the general community at large, have you had any experiences of like overt racism and discrimination against you or any kind of like microaggression level that you felt like you were not able to achieve what you wanted because of your ethnic identity?

**Kawa (10:47):** Oh, absolutely. I think...um...Since moving to Canada, I mean, I'm old enough that the terms microaggression and implicit bias were not actually, you know, used perhaps they had been coined in some academic circles at that point but certainly not used in a ubiquitous manner as they are now. In terms of explicit overt racism that has also been part of my experience growing up and again it has shaped who I am and so I have this desire that I will help and believe in my past, I have helped in combating overt racism, micro inequities, but I also appreciate how much it has shaped my character and my understanding and worldview...but even within the queer community, I'll give you an example...you know, recently when I moved to Vancouver from Toronto, I was on a dating app and this one person asked if I would be comfortable wearing a mask the first time we met because he was not used to being around people of Middle Eastern or Central Asian descent and he felt that he would be much more comfortable in a sexual manner if I were to wear a mask the first time. And of course, my response was...um...no, but I didn't say it in that way, it was far more elaborate of a response because it was a perfect teachable moment but that is probably one example of many within the

queer community. I mean, you will still see on dating apps and in person just the “you know this is my preference” that’s often is the go-to statement of when you say to someone why won't you date someone who is a person of colour and the response will inevitably be: “well, it's just a preference, just like you might want a blonde or brunette,” but of course, that's an excuse, that's not really the case.... Um, and then in other circumstances or dealing with other aspects of my life, like so many others I have had racist comments made to me by those whom I know and strangers. I have been spit on, I have had people yell things as they drive by and then to answer the ultimate part of your question or what I think you were getting at is that... it has hindered my success, um, I believe, and though I have always tried to meet that challenge and surmount it. It has added a great many barriers as an actor. For instance, there were so many roles that I was never considered for and even those roles that I would audition for that they would do simply to meet a quota but I was never in real content...I was never a real contender because inevitably would go to a white cisgender male, um but over the years as I gained more notoriety in clout as an actor I was able to call a few more of the shots and I was able to say no, even though this role is written for a white person it doesn't mean I can't play it and so I was able to, but that took a lot of time....and took a lot of barrier's needing to be up kicked down for lack of a better phrase.

**Sahar (15:12):** Thank you for sharing that...I don't usually know what to say when people tell me about their interactions with racism because I can't be like oh thank you but at the same time it's not something to thank them for because it's unfortunate that these things happen...and to kind of you know, in a way to be open with you as well, because you are sharing so much with me, I do think that even though I am very young, I wouldn't have had the opportunities that I have if it wasn't for my last name. My last name is not a Persian last name as you have noticed already, my legal name actually is a Canadian name. I remember in grade 12, my dad wanted to do a last name change and he also suggested to change our first name because he was really worried that we would not have the opportunities that we want to have because of our name. At the time, I didn't really care to be honest; I was like oh sure like let's just go with it but now looking back at it, I can see how unfortunate and sad that was for our family to go through and I'm hoping that one day I can change my name back because I don't feel comfortable to be honest with the name that I have today... yeah, so I hope that that was something that I could share with you in return of what you have shared with me.

**Kawa (16:51):** I appreciate you sharing that a lot...Do you feel in retrospect that your dad did what he had to do in order to open up as many opportunities for you as possible given the realities of our world?

**Sahar (17:08):** Yeah, I am grateful to him for doing that because I don't think I would have the opportunities that I have today if it wasn't for him. The fact that I can submit an application without worrying that someone is going to think my name twice...is such a blessing and a curse because I feel like I'm hiding behind a name that is not mine but at the same time because my appearance is not really obvious that I'm Persian but also my last name is not Persian... most people think that I am Italian for some reason... and I'm like...I'm not Italian!! I'm actually Persian... so it's just being able to get by without getting noticed, I feel like I'm just hiding behind something that it's not mine.

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**Kawa(17:55):** I understand and can appreciate why you feel that way...and I can also, you know, empathize with that push-pull that you must have around that because on one level as you say, it has offered up many open doors but again as you say, that there are those feelings of am I hiding behind a facade or a different identity... I mean knowing you that is far from the truth because you are so authentically you that no name could possibly veil that. Um, I'll tell you a quick thing, I did an experiment once where I sent out resumes under my own name, I had no responses. And then I sent out resumes under the name "Jack Adams" and about 75% of the companies that I received no responses from then responded and I told them that in fact you have the exact same resume but I used a different name, and so it was an experiment because at that time I was a keynote and workshop facilitator on issues of diversity and inclusion and I would at that time, I would go around and do these speeches and workshops at various colleges and institutions. So, I wanted to use this as an opportunity to experiment with this and then talk about it in one of my upcoming speeches and even I was alarmed and surprised by what difference...I didn't change anything else for the resume, I simply changed my name and suddenly I was receiving responses and it is so telling. I mean this was not that long ago. So you know, I admire that your dad because it must not have been very easy for him to do but I admire that he did that because sometimes it can be quite easy to go, well that's not how the world should work... but unfortunately that's... that's the reality of it is that that's not where we are yet, we're still...we're still far behind where we might think we are and certainly far behind where we are aspiring to be.

**Sahar (20:39):** Have you heard about something called model minority?

**Kawa (20:44):** I have not...but I have a feeling you are about to tell me?

**Sahar (20:48):** Well, yes! So, actually this was like my favorite thing we learned in class and I'm just glancing over just to see my notes and make sure I'm describing it properly...so, model minority myth (#3 & #4) has two main components and it has one component which is achievement which basically says that Asians, so West Asians, East Asians, South Asians: they are smart, they work really hard and that's why they will achieve anything that they want in their life because they have the work ethic and they have the brains for it. And then there's this side of unrestricted mobility that says because they work so hard, they should not face any barriers in their achievement, in where they want to be in life. And for me personally this is very familiar because my parents would always tell me, like oh you are Persian, so you should get good grades and you should work hard because you're Persian and you can do whatever you want in life because you are Persian. And kind of, internalizing this model minority myth leads to these false beliefs in a just world: believing that punishments and rewards are given fairly to everybody and the belief that everybody has the same opportunities regardless of their ethnicity and background. So, I'm just wondering have you experienced anything like this in your own culture and anything that has similar messaging to model minority myth in your culture?

**Kawa (22:32):** Yes, in fact I think... that's very insightful. Thank you for sharing that. I think there's something else that's implicit within that framework and it is and I don't think that it just exists within the culture such as the Persian culture or Afghan culture, I think, there's also an implicit expectation from society at large that not only should you be a model but in fact you should work twice as hard as everyone around you and I think that is been an expectation

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connected very closely to what you were talking about that my parents always had for us, myself and my siblings, that given the opportunities we've received in you know, fleeing a war, moving to Canada finally that there is an expectation... of course, that we're not going to take any of that for granted but that we're actually going to work twice as hard and there's that implicit expectation has also existed with others in positions of power that I have come across where there is a given that you know, I mean I've had artistic directors or supervisors who have alluded to the fact that "oh, well you know, you work very hard and therefore you should have no problems," but the implication in that is... if you worked as hard as your white counterpart then perhaps you wouldn't be noticed as much but since you do work twice as hard as your white counterpart, well then you've evened out the playing field yourself and you know, what does that tell us? And what does that tell other people in the same position... that in fact, if we want to get anywhere, we're already starting far behind and that we should expect it and we should be okay with that... so yeah, I've dealt with that not just within my family but with the culture at large...

**Sahar(25:01):** And, something else that comes with that model is the anti-blackness attitudes (#4) because even in our Persian or the Middle Eastern culture, unfortunately, they perceive black people as being in the lower kind of socioeconomic status compared to rest of the population and I've heard some people from my culture saying things like: "oh, black people just need to work harder, they just need to be smarter, they just need to look at us and learn how we work hard and just do the same in order to get the same opportunities." Um...and it's sometimes when I find myself in those situations, I find it hard to speak up even though I know I should, especially as someone who knows about this but at the same time trying to explain these things to people who are so close-minded it can be challenging and difficult especially if they are family. So, I'm just wondering have you had any experiences, similar experiences to this, and did you have the opportunity to speak up when these things happened in front of you?

**Kawa (26:15):** You know, over the years...yeah, there have been lots of opportunities like that that have come up and I agree with you there is so much... um, racism and discrimination that happens even within...um, specific cultures or ethnicities when it comes to skin colour and you know, I mean, many cultures where when the baby is born they look to see how light skinned that baby is that the lighter skin they are but the more advantageous... now, I think part of that is because there is a recognition that they might have it easier in life and the other part of it is this internalized racism of like we are dark people by nature compared relative to our area counterparts and so the lighter we can be, the closer we can be to that type of privilege.

**Kawa (27:26):** Um, yes, I have experience that and I have seen it but there have been opportunities where I've had that I could speak up and you know, if I've been afforded a position of power and privilege relative to others around me, I have to be very careful about how I address it, because you know there's so many complexities as you know, as you know very well Sahar, around how we address things like that, right...like because it's so fraught with shame and guilt and ignorance that I don't want to inadvertently shut someone down to the point that they will never be receptive again to future learning or future expansion of their own beliefs and the way they operate... um, but the question that I tend to ask myself as I've gained more experience and years as I get older is threefold: I tend to now ask myself about intention, impact and capacity. And so, before I take any kind of action around that, I ask about what is the person's perceived intention? Do I have the opportunity to ask about that intention? If I don't, then what is

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my perception of their intention? Then, do I have enough knowledge of them or the situation to know about the impact, possibly in the moment or in the future? And then finally, and I think this is the most important related to what you're asking about is capacity. Do I...and that on some level it's a bit of an arrogant question because who am I to say whether or not someone else has capacity for these questions or to be quote-unquote called to action or to be called to awareness around this stuff, but if I do have the wherewithal or the connection to that person to know about their capacity and often we do around our parents or family members...does my grandparent or does my cousin who said this statement, do they have the capacity to be able to receive me questioning this or putting to them what they have said and what kind of impact they can make with their statement ? And, if I find that perhaps at this time, at this moment, they don't have the capacity then I will refrain until I'm able to find a way to address it... but if I do find that they have the capacity then I will address it in the moment, if that makes sense?

**Sahar (30:37):** That sounds great!! I love the framework and I am going to memorize it for rest of my life ahahah... Those are all of my questions! Thank you for providing your responses. And just curious, how did it feel for you to reflect on these topics? And, I hope that didn't make you uncomfortable but I'm just curious to see how this discussion went for you?

**Kawa (31:06):** I am so honored and touched that you would ask me to speak to you about this. In terms of my feelings around it I am, um... I'm passionate about this stuff and I relish in the opportunity to be able to express my thoughts around this. Of course, I recognize the parts of myself when I do answer certain questions you know, what that brings up for me around past trauma or micro-inequities, that I am still grappling with but by no means would it hinder me or deter me from continuing to talk about it because in an essence it is still helpful to me to continue to unpack how I feel and where I'm at right now so it's offered...and I appreciate this, thank you, it's offered a really lovely opportunity for me to be able to check in... so, thank you!

**Sahar (32:17):** Oh, thank YOU for being here and thank you to our audience for listening in! I hope this discussion was insightful and shined light on some of the more systemic issues of our society today.

Based on what Kawa has shared with us and some anecdotal experiences of my own, I have realized how much more work is needed around raising awareness against racism and discrimination within our own cultures but also at the society at large. I truly enjoyed learning about the framework that Kawa mentioned, about how important it is to consider intention, impact and capacity at the times when we are offered an opportunity to speak up about such issues.

And, I hope that through these conversations we are able to spread some goodness and humaneness into the world and to show that at the end of the day, we are all human beings and equal in status regardless of our skin colour, heritage, culture and background. I am not sure if a world like that will ever come true but at least as a young person, I want to be hopeful that our generation would do better than the one before.

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And, I mean taking a class like this and learning about Asian diaspora and their experiences in Canada is the first step for us but I'm looking forward to more learning opportunities in the future for us to discuss such systemic issues and to take action towards resolving them.

Alright, it's been a pleasure, please take a good care of yourselves and I will be signing off now!!

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