

My Red Lehenga

***Semifinalist, World Championship of Public Speaking® , 2017.
Toastmaster clubs are in over 140 countries which means a wide diversity
of ideas - and humor. This is a witty, fun-laced speech with a serious
message about a student from afar coming to study in the United States...***

A speech by Sameera Khan (August 20, 2017)

[Looking at different audience members]

"Your fashion sense is a disaster - seriously."

"You look old - you should start coloring your hair."

"And who allows such a young handsome man to run a country? -

He should be in the movies."

[A reference to PM Justin Trudeau, Canada, where Contest is being held]

Contest Chair and dear friends,

Have you come across people like these -

Who must have an opinion about everything?

My town which is more than 7,000 miles from here

Is filled with such kinds.

Forget Louisville - Nashville -

The name of my town is - Opinionville.

When my parents wanted to send me to the USA for higher studies,

All Hell broke loose in Opinionville.

"United States - it's not the place for young girls."

"What if she abandons her job?"

"What if she goes single and returns double?"

But I decided that I will go to a State
That is very dear to us Indians -
Indiana -
Where tall skyscrapers and great fashion -
Do not exist.
As I was packing
I was packed with a lot of opinions
On boys . . . clothes . . . alcohol . . . clubs -
Not Toastmaster clubs -
These clubs [body movement].
Just like Opinionville,
I had my opinions too -
about Americans.

It all started at their Embassy.
Did you know -
No one smiles there?
"Miss Khan, do you have friends of family in the US?"
[Yes, at the White House.]
"No."
"Who will pay for your education?"
[My friends at the White House.]
"My dad."
"After your studies, will you leave the country?"
[No way, I will stay back and run for President.]
"I will return."
And I flew across the Atlantic.
At New York Airport
The security officers were totally checking me out.
They came up to me smiling
"Miss Khan, you have been selected for random checking -
Please step aside."
Little did I know, he had his opinions too.

After graduating from Purdue School of Engineering
I kept my promise to the American Embassy
And returned to Opinionville.
While I was hunting for a job
I also decided to hunt for a husband.

I met my husband in a very old-fashioned way -
Matchmakers.com.
At first, no one liked him.
Now, ten years later -
I understand why.
[Talking into audience.]
"Honey, don't worry -
Nobody knows who you are."

So coming to my Big Day -
A million opinions
On the food, venue, guest list and -
Most important of all -
The bride's dress.
But, hello, I'm here -
What about my opinion?
Like every girl
Even I envisioned a dream wedding,
Wearing my gorgeous, flowing red dress -
The lehenga.
My dream lehenga has
Intricate bead work
Golden sequins
Colorful stones -
Very "Bollywood" -
Very bling, bling.
I felt beautiful.

But then came my husband's aunt -
"The lehenga? -
No way.
In my opinion,
You must wear the traditional wedding sari."

Where I come from, we don't marry just a guy -
But his entire village.
I had to switch to a sari -
And, boy, was I sorry!
Now a sari is a cloth that is nine yards long
Which is draped around with hundreds of pins.

I cannot tell you how uncomfortable I was.
On my wedding day
I stood next to my husband
Cameras flashing, well-wishers greeting.
I heard a voice
"Sameera, what's bothering you?"
"What's bothering me?"
What do I tell him?
It's the most important day of my life.
I'm standing with the man of my dreams -
But I don't feel beautiful
Because I'm not wearing my dream -
I'm wearing someone else's opinion.
Where was
My opinion?
My heart?
It was wrapped in my red lehenga
And kept in a dark place.

Ladies, I know you want to see my red lehenga - don't you?
[*Walks over to a chair with her red lehenga on it and starts to pick it up*]
No. I didn't get to wear it -
You don't get to see it.
Why do you even want to see mine
When you have your own red lehenga?

Friends, I still live in Opinionville.
So do you -
We are all permanent residents.
You will always be flooded
With a lot of ideas, advice, judgments.
Look at people.
Even your friends tell you -
"Your fashion sense is a disaster."
"You look old."
Opinions -
You cannot stop it -
But in the end what matters is
Your opinion -
Your red lehenga.

Friends, I'm here
Having traveled 7,000 miles to ask you -
Whose opinion are you wearing?
Are you pinned to someone else's passion?
Are you draped in someone else's dreams?
Or -
Are you wearing your red lehenga?

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Brian Woolf's comments: From Sameera's individualized, mind-grabbing, opening comments and questions through to her closing 4-question, wrap-up summation, she holds our attention by constantly talking to each of us. For example, the final 3 paragraphs (136 words) have a very high 19 (or 14%) of "you" or "your" high-powered connection words; focus is maintained throughout by her repeating the threaded word "opinion" (in various forms) 17 times; while relief and smiles are provided by well-placed Twists (my favorite was Match.com.) This speech is a personal favorite because it's simple message addresses, with seriousness, stories, and humor, an issue that confronts each of us.

And there's more where this came from...

**Visit Brian Woolf on the web for his complete collection of
articles, speeches, insights and practical advice, at**

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