



★ **Manboobs: A Memoir of Musicals, Visa, Hope, and Cake**

**Komail Aijazuddin**

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Variously hilarious and despairing, Komail Aijazuddin's memoir covers his struggles for self-acceptance.

As a child, Aijazuddin knew that he was different from other children and that he would suffer because of it. "Gay boys who are unable to hide our gayness from the world are told early and often that there is something inherently wrong with us that needs fixing," he writes. Indeed, a fellow gay student at the Pakistani Academy stood out like "a ballerina on a rugby pitch." Aijazuddin himself, with his exuberant love of American musicals and effeminacy, felt trapped in a body that was shaped like that of an ancient fertility goddess while other boys his age were sprouting facial hair and muscles. Having inherited gynecomastia (enlarged male breasts) only added to his embarrassment and isolation.

The book's descriptions are lively, showing how Aijazuddin took comfort in food and dreams of the United States, both of which later left him disillusioned: the truth about the American dream, he writes, is that "you have to be asleep to believe it." Abroad, he pursued interests in the visual arts and writing and learned to navigate the ecstasies and dangers of gay life. He experienced some culture shock upon arriving in the United States and wept the first time he walked into a Costco. But the social dissonance remained: once called out for not being "Pakistani enough" in Pakistan—where, Aijazuddin writes, restrictive religiosity is inhaled with a baby's first breath and where privilege, not merit, is the key to survival—Aijazuddin found that he was "too Pakistani" for gay life in the United States too, where the culture had its own rules of engagement.

The candid and sometimes uproarious memoir of a gay Pakistani, *Manboobs* is about the search for acceptance in two radically different, flawed countries—and within oneself.

KRISTINE MORRIS (July / August 2024)

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