Women of Harry Potter: Parvati Patil with Proma Khosla

(Theme music begins)

Ariana: I’m Ariana Nedelman and this is The Women of Harry Potter. Today we are lucky enough to be joined by Proma Khosla who is an entertainment reporter for Mashable and worked many years with Leaky Con as a big Harry Potter enthusiast, writer, dancer, producer extraordinaire; thank you so much Promo for joining us.

(Theme music fades)

Proma: Thank you so much for having me, my pleasure.

Ariana: I actually heard about you through, your rather popular Twitter post about the pronunciation off two specific characters in the Harry Potter text. Would you say them for us please?

Proma: Sure I would be happy to, but I will say for the listeners that, up until now, you’ve been saying them perfectly. She’s getting scared right now, but she has it.

Ariana: I know I got shy.

Proma: So we have the two Indian characters in Harry Potter who...I’m Indian American so I latched onto that at a very young age. But their names, as written, and as I read them for many years are Parvati and Padma; which is like, there’s a soft consonant sound which everyone can’t say, which is fine, but the vowel sounds have always been botched. People say, this is going to hurt me to say, people say “Parvati” and “Padma” but its “Parvati” and “Padma” and it’s putting the emphasis on a different syllable. Which is something people, especially English speakers, do a lot with Indian names, not for any fault of their own but that’s the language patterns that you grew up with, which is totally fine, but from my end - a lot of my friends and I we don’t correct people right away so then it becomes engrained and it took me like fifteen years of being a Harry Potter fan to finally just tweet something and pin it and say this is how you pronounce it. And if you click on the Tweet there is a whole thread where I just went off and was like, here’s a whole bunch of other things that we need to pronounce differently and reclaim and fight for a little bit, so yeah that’s my big claim to fame is that tweet.

Ariana: Sometimes maybe someone would argue that names get Anglicized, some people might say, “well we don’t know a lot about Parvati and Padma’s history in England, it could be pronounced either way, we don’t know actually how it would sound. But I think there’s an argument to say that one should pronounce it with the Indian pronunciation even if there is some ambiguity. And I’m wondering if you have anything to say about why you think it’s important to say them that way?
Proma: Yeah there are names that get Anglicized or evolve over time. I do have something to say, knowing what I do about the culture, the most likely outcome is that Parvati and Padma are first or second generation British Indian girls so that their parents or grandparents came over, like emigrated from India, and so the likely thing is that at home, their parents or grandparents would be saying their names this way and these girls are in school repeatedly having their name read off of a piece of paper and said wrong and they’re too tired to correct it. By the time they got to Hogwarts they’ve probably been to grade school or been homeschooled or something, and if they’ve been in school with other students, with other English students, they’ve probably already been through this whole thing and just been fine with it. And also I think when you’re a little kid, maybe it doesn’t matter to you in the same way, maybe it doesn’t matter to you what is happening, maybe you grow up hearing another version of your name and then that also becomes your name? I do, like in some cases, default...like I meet other Indian people who pronounce their name differently with different groups of people and I’ll ask them, “What do you prefer? Do you feel like this is also your name? Or is this the version of your name that you say to white people to make it easier?” And the answers vary, they do.

Ariana: I will say that recently a friend said to me, and I’m trying to take it to heart, that we learn to say a lot of really challenging names in Western culture, we learn to say Tchaikovsky, we learn to say Foucault and Derrida, and it’s just a question of exposure and practice...

Proma: Totally.

Ariana: And as you practice you get better at recognizing pronunciation and being respectful of people’s names.

Proma: Yeah my favorite new thing to say whenever anyone struggles with, truly any word, but in my case it happens often to be Indian names is that, “y’all learned to say Daenerys Targaryen...” We’re capable of anything as a species, we’re so great and smart, we can do this.

Ariana: Well, beyond her name there are so many wonderful things about Parvati. She’s one of my favorite characters, in fact I’ve done an episode blessing her on gossiping because I think it is underappreciated. And I’m wondering what particular thing you are blessing her for this episode?

Proma: Yeah I mean that’s a really good jumping off point. I think I would praise her; this is kind of broadly speaking, but for being an individual. We don’t get to see...she’s not like a primary character, we spend most of our time with Harry, Ron, and Hermione; and so Parvati is this secondary or side character, who you see consistently throughout the books, but who we don’t know very well and a lot of the time it’s through Harry’s eyes or through Hermione’s eyes. So she’s painted as a gossip but not necessarily in a good light...

Ariana: Right.

Proma: So she likes Divination, which is portrayed in a certain way because Harry, Ron, and Hermione don’t really care for Divination. And there’s a really good, I love the web series
“Hermione Granger and the Quarter Life Crisis,” in which, I think the creator of that I spoke with her a couple years ago, and she was just like, “no you have to respect Parvati and Lavender for being themselves, doing their thing, and loving what they love and doing it un-ironically. They studied it, they were good at it, they actually saw stuff and got further in the subject than Harry, Ron, or Hermione; it wasn’t just like an idle hobby. And for my part, also, being an Indian American growing up that way, I love that she does, like there are moments where maybe this is J.K. Rowling just trying to get that little bit of culture in there, but I loved reading about this girl with a long black braid who was wearing bangles to the Yule Ball because that was very much what I did when I was a teenager is try to add little touches of it, I had really long hair my whole life, and if anything I’ve just continued and gone even more in that as an adult. So I love that she was able to do that at her small school full of a lot of English wizards. Like go girl!

Ariana: Yeah I think my favorite thing about Parvati is that she is always raising her hand. Like not as much as Hermione is, we see Hermione raise her hand a lot in these books, but if you track her across the series, she’s often the first person to speak up and ask a question. And the first time we really actually get to meet her and talk to her is when she’s defending Neville from Draco when they’re getting their first broom lesson. And to me, in that way she’s like…first of all just an excellent Gryffindor. She’s clearly brave, she’s clearly standing up for her values, but also is like not afraid to make a little bit of room for herself and for what she likes and what she’s interested in, to ask questions during lessons and to be unashamed of the things that she’s interested in, like unicorns, like Divination, these things which we often write off as feminine and therefore not worthy of our time, but she is all in on and unapologetically in and skilled and talented at.

Proma: Yes absolutely and I think especially juxtaposed because Hermione rejects a lot of that traditionally feminine stuff, it is good to have another example, even if she’s not a primary character, in there somewhere. And it takes some time, it takes some growing up and maybe growing out of seeing the books just through the main trio’s perspective and seeing that and appreciating that. And like you said she’s a great Gryffindor, she’s loyal to her house, she’s loyal to her friends, she knows her values, she joined the D.A. there right up front on the first day. This was recently pointed out to me and I got teary about it, yeah she’s very much there for her house, and her friends, and her values.

Ariana: You mention seeing yourself in her, and I know that you’re a culture critic, and you’ll correct me on this maybe if I’m wrong, and one who is interested in Bollywood and Indian portrayals in literature and in cinema, and I’m wondering if you could tell me a little bit more about that.

Proma: Yeah you are correct, I care very much about the things that you’ve mentioned, that representation and growing up with Bollywood is interesting because that’s from India so representation means something different. Everyone in those movie’s is Indian so then it becomes there are different types of nuance about what social class is being portrayed, what skin types are being portrayed, there’s a whole…I can critique Bollywood with a fine tooth comb as well. But in the West it’s always been about visibility, for a long time it was just that and any portrayal that I, personally, saw I was like, “yay, brown people we are here and we
exist,” and for a long time I didn’t question what way we exist or what type of character it was: if it was stereotypical, or offensive, or entirely fabricated even. And in the past ten years or so, it’s been more about actually now that we’re here, what are we showing? More about representation than visibility so I loved reading Harry Potter and getting the visibility from Parvati and Padma and I think that’s still a pretty good representation as well. They’re not big characters, but I didn’t read Harry Potter because I thought an Indian girl was going to go on these adventures in wizarding school. It’s cool, but also, that happened on the side. So I read it for the story and for Harry’s journey and all that and got to sometimes picture someone who looked like me wave a wand, and that was such a cool thing from when they made the movies to have that representation as well.

Ariana: As you get older is there anyway that you wish they had been represented differently or feel particularly good about they way that they were represented?

Proma: I do. We talk about this at Leaky Con at least every year I’m on some panel where I’m like, you know what I feel, maybe because I’m also a smaller minority, particularly in the United States, where I’m still just glad to be at the party. And I do think it was a good representation. It’s not negative in terms of anything cultural, except if we get into the movies and we talk about the really horrible, horrific outfits that they put them in; that is offensive to me personally. Yeah if I could change the portrayal it would be in the movies to let Parvati and Padma be separate people and being their proper houses and have more of an identity than just flirting with Harry and wearing those actually abhorrent outfits to the ball. I cannot stress this enough they were awful.

Ariana: Yeah I mean they have a really interesting little moment at the Yule Ball, we had a voicemail recently on our other podcast Harry Potter and the Sacred Text where a woman very generously called in and said I was disappointed that you didn’t talk more about the way in which Padma and Parvati were tokenized and brought into the Ball and then ignored and I really had struggled with that as a reader and wished that you had talked about it, and that was part of our excitement about getting you on Women of Harry Potter to talk about Parvati, because I think there are things that I just don’t see because I wasn’t actively projecting myself into those characters. But once you start to do that work, you start to see the ways in which you get pushed to the side a little bit.

Proma: Yeah they’re definitely super diluted in the movie; it almost doesn’t register sometimes because I think of the book so much. But in the book it is a whole date night with Parvati, Padma, Harry, and Ron – they’re mentioned in every scene, they get annoyed, and you see it from their perspective too a little bit more, and they both are built up better as having their own personality and identity so it feels very real. And in the movie, yeah it is just kind of...first of all they appear out of nowhere because Warner Brothers did not bother casting them, or they cast them in the third movie and then recast them. So they appear out of nowhere, they’re suddenly very interested in Harry. And in the books, Parvati and Padma are the ones being sought after. They’re explicitly the prettiest girls in the year, which I loved, which was just so random and cool and a fun, flattering thing. Seamus and Dean are jealous that Harry
and Ron somehow managed to reach up and land dates with these girls. Parvati and Padma are the ones settling, that is very clear from the book.

Ariana: And they make it clear during the Ball as well. They’re like, “oh you’re not going to pay attention to us? Great we have new boyfriends over at Durmstrang now.”

Proma: Yeah they have that whole circle of Durmstrang and Beauxbatons boys too because there are boys in that school in the book.

Ariana: Oh yeah.

Proma: So they are just holding court at the Yule Ball and I would have actually loved that scene as a great flex. As far as tokenism also, the Yule Ball decision to dress every person of color in like ethnic ware is...

Ariana: mmhmm.

Proma: ...a fascinating one, because speaking of the ball at Leaky Con or at Harry Potter Convention, so I started – I would say from like 2007-2009 – I wore explicitly fully Indian formal ware and the first year I dressed up, my friend Rushmi, she was also there at the Con, this was at Prophesy in 2007 and she also wore, we both wore lehengas which is a long skirt, it’s a style that Parvati and Padma wore in the movie, it’s just that we didn’t wore ugly ones, we wore our own stuff that we had. And they weren’t matchy in color or anything, kind of similar style, and we walked in – and we also look very different – and everyone at the ball was like, “oh you’re dressed as the twins.” And that was never...

Ariana: Oh my...

Proma: That was never our intention. We were like, no we’ll wear this because they wore that and because it’s these characters made it cool for us to wear Indian formal ware to a dance with a bunch of people who aren’t also wearing it and repeatedly it happened. And eventually, I don’t feel good about this, but we entered a costume contest and we won, wearing our own formal ware that we wear to weddings and events and normal things with our friends and family and that was a weird thing. So after that, the following conventions where we wore formal wear I was the only one so that was much less likely to happen. Maybe one or two people were like, “oh is that a?” Or, “oh are you dressed up as?” And I was like nope different person, different color, not a thing. But that was a weird thing that happened the first time and it was around, I felt weird about it because I remember in middle school there were Indian girls in my grade who would wear their formal ware on Halloween and I really hated that. I called them out on it, I was like, “this is our culture, this isn’t a costume,” before that was a trendy phrase, and I was like oh no I did that at this convention and I didn’t even mean to, I didn’t know I was doing that.

Ariana: I mean people did that to you at the convention.
Proma: Yeah, and then maybe this is that example of me being tired and I didn’t fight it.

Ariana: Exactly.

Proma: Or it was fun, I didn’t feel like a bad thing. No one was being malicious but Rushmi and me were both like, “oh did we? We didn’t mean to. Also we’re not identical twins, but thanks I guess. Have a good night.” I think for a lot of people also, who where there, I mean I don’t know their particular story, but this might have been their first time seeing an Indian woman in formal ware to be quite honest.

Ariana: Exactly, and maybe the only association they really had with that was the movies and the books.

Proma: Yeah, I don’t think… that’s very unlikely that it would happen now. I don’t think at a convention would do that if I and another woman showed up in Indian ware, but I haven’t tested it. Maybe I will.

Ariana: But I think the implication of that, the personal expression vs. a costume expression needs to be pulled apart. I think that’s true in terms of wearing clothing appropriate for your culture, that people will interpret that as a costume, even outside of a con setting, like in daily life. But I also think that’s true of clothing of different genders, that we need to expand our understanding of how to interpret what people are wearing as expressions of themselves. Rather than…like that line between expression and costume is really interesting, there’s something about the idea of costume that’s patronizing, right? It’s derogatory, like you’re trying something on rather than being who you are.

Proma: We should never underestimate the value of just shutting up a little, not to be rude, but sometimes it’s okay to tell someone – and this goes for gendered clothing as well as cultural clothing – to be like, “I love that outfit.” End of sentence, end of that interaction; you don’t have to project what it is or where it came from or if you have those thoughts, ask. Make it a question and not a statement. I guess people did ask us if we were dressed up as Parvati and Padma and put that sentiment out there. But in a lot of cases it’s like, “I love that, what made you want to wear that.” I don’t know something like that.

Ariana: Yeah and I think that’s also the line between appreciation and fetiziation right?

Proma: Right.

Ariana: Is there somewhere else in the text that you want to point us to in thinking about Parvati’s individuality and what you love about her?

Proma: I was recently on the Jilted Indian Podcast and they came to Leaky Con. At their panel they discussed the fact that Parvati and Padma were among the first to sign up for Dumbledore’s Army. And I knew that but I think recognizing it and internalizing it really affected me.
Ariana: Mmhmm.

Proma: In book five you hear about their parents wanting to take them out of school and all of that. In book six they eventually do leave. I always got the impression that they wanted to stay and that was more pressure from the family out of their safety. And I know that she’s present, they’re present at the end of *Half Blood Prince*; they’re present, particularly at the battle of Hogwarts. Like we don’t give enough credit, because it’s every character we know, but to these children, these teenagers fighting actual life or death, good or evil. And I think any character that was present there, whatever their contribution, that’s huge and we should recognize that.

Ariana: And I think that’s a testament to her critical mind, that when she was in Professor Binn’s class she was saying, “well doesn’t someone have to use dark magic to open the Chamber of Secrets?”

Proma: Yes, sorry, that was the moment I was thinking when you brought up class earlier and she asking questions. The questions she asked, and I’m so glad you mentioned it, in Professor Binn’s class about the Chamber of Secrets juxtaposed with Hermione, juxtaposed with everyone else because everyone’s bringing different layers of fear and concern to this and so I do like that one a lot. And then year with Umbridge, same thing, it’s like the Gryffindors band together. Harry as a character should be so much tighter with his whole house. I go on about this a lot, he should be close with his house, he should be so close with his Quidditch team and he just stays with his two friends because it’s a tighter narrative.

Ariana: Right.

Proma: But he would totally, like Parvati is someone he’s going to be friends with, or I don’t I feel like based on my experience with school and all we would know somewhere in his capacity for his entire life. There are very few people who know you when you’re like a kid or a teenager in those formative years who you see every day in school or in class and whether or not you stay best friends or stay in touch, that’s something you will never unshared.

Ariana: Yeah and she’s clearly his type of person because she’s like justice oriented and like curious and good at her school work, like they could have been very close except he’s so internally focused. He’s so focused on Ron and Hermione that like he can’t widen his friend group to the people who might actually be valuable to him

Proma: And, crucially, she was his first date.

Ariana: Right!

Proma: Yeah.

Ariana: Yeah! His first ever date.
Proma: Yeah, I think my coworker actually tweeted about this. Before we were coworkers, I started following her on Twitter I’m pretty sure because she tweeted, “until Ginny, Harry Potter canonically only dates women of color.”

Ariana: So interesting, yeah.

Proma: I love that, I mean he went on two dates, but still.

Ariana: Yeah I hadn’t thought about that, and I don’t know what to make of that. Do you have anything to make of that?

Proma: I mean I think it’s pretty cool, but I mean it’s two dates with two girls and I’m pretty sure if you would have asked either girl they would have been like, “yeah that was the worst date of my life.”

Ariana: Well I wanted to bring it back to Professor Binns because it just occurred to me, and I’m so dumb for not thinking of it earlier, but because of our conversation about names, he calls her Ms. Penny Feather. And I always thought, “Oh that’s because he’s old, and a ghost, and doesn’t really care about his students.” But like it could easily also be because he struggles with her name and is like not willing to put the energy into learning her name properly.

Proma: Yeah I will say though, because of your first point, that he is obviously not willing to put that energy into learning anyone’s name and it’s so funny because he takes it from a five letter last name to a twelve letter last name, and makes it harder. And that happens a lot with south Asian names is people see it and it’s confusing and then they make it a lot harder as it’s coming out of their mouth. Also to truly blow your mind, it’s actually not Patil either.

Ariana: hmmmm?

Proma: The actual last name P-A-T-I-L is pronounced Pah-til. And it’s from a specific state in North India, so it Patel, Patel with an e is from the Gujarat and Patil with an i is from Maharashtra which is where Bombay Mumbai is located, so yeah it gets even more complicated.

Ariana: Thank you, I’m learning so much. So we end every episode with a quiz.

Proma: Oh boy.

Ariana: And this week’s quiz is about something called Twins Day, which is held annually on the first full weekend of August in Twinsburg, Ohio to celebrate biological twins and other multiples. It’s the largest annual gathering of twins in the world. My first question for you is, what is the Twins Day parade called?

(a) The Double Trouble Parade
(b) The Double Take Parade
(c) The Better Together Parade
(d) The Two is Better Than One Parade

Proma: Oh man, I hope it’s the Double Trouble Parade, I think that’s fun.

Ariana: You’re close; it’s the Double Take Parade.

Proma: Okay.

Ariana: My second question for you is Twinsburg, Ohio is named such because

(a) It is sister-cities with Twinsburg, Germany
(b) It looks identical on both sides of the river that runs through it
(c) Twin brothers demanded it be renamed because in return for their philanthropy
(d) The old fabric company that had it’s mill there was for a company called Twinning’s

Proma: The middle two options sound like the most fun, but you know I’m going to go with Twinning’s; I’m going to shake it up a little.

Ariana: It is one of the middle two options; it’s the twin brothers who demanded it.

Proma: Oh good!

Ariana: I know it’s so lovely.

Proma: Okay, I’m glad.

Ariana: Moses and Aaron Wilcox, they bought the land in 1819 and donated 6 acres of it for a town square and in return they renamed the city, Millsville to Twinsburg.

Proma: That’s fun.

Ariana: And because of them, now there’s this annual event that happens there.

Proma: Good for them.

Ariana: I know, I wish I knew more about the Wilcox’s. I feel like they seem like Fred and George type of twins more than Padma and Parvati.

Proma: Yeah instead of naming the town after each other or after their last name they name it Twinsburg.

Ariana: Yeah it could have been Wilcoxville but they wanted it to be about them and their relationship, I think there’s something beautiful about that.
Proma: Yeah I agree.

Ariana: Okay, our last question: There are voluntary twin studies that happen in Twinsburg. Twin studies have been going on in all of recorded history, what is not one of the things we have learned from twin students?

(a) Life expectancy has more to do with life choices than genetics
(b) Astrology has important scientific patterns assigned to birth times
(c) Height is entirely genetic
(d) Parental choices can lead to the onset of mental health issues.

Proma: Oh my gosh, my parents are scientists and I can feel the pressure from hundreds of miles away. The second one, the astrology one, that’s not something we learned.

Ariana: Yeah that’s true, I think Parvati and Lavender would be really disappointed to here that. What’s interesting is that’s something that’s routinely tested, they often test astrology in twin studies but it never comes out as true. Proma thank you so much for coming on and blessing Parvati with us, I feel like I learned a lot and also just grew in my appreciation for her. She’s definitely in the top three of my favorite characters, I love her so much and it’s just such a joy spending time thinking about her with you. And I’m going to work really hard to say their names correctly in the future.

Proma: You have, at least for the thirty minutes that we’ve been talking, you’ve done great and I’m very impressed. And I love that she’s one of your favorite characters that makes me so happy.

Ariana: Where can our listeners go and find you and follow you if they want to get you in their feeds and hear all of your hot takes?

Proma: Ooo so actually just made my own website, so that’s fun. So if you just do promakosla.com and then I’m on social media, I’m on Twitter and Instagram as @promawhatup. And I tweet weird stuff about Harry Potter all the time, so yeah come hang.

Ariana: Great thank you so much.

Proma: Yeah thank you for having me.

(Outro music begins)

Ariana: This has been Women of Harry Potter. We are executive produced by me, Ariana Nedelman, and Vanessa Zoltan, and produced and edited by Chelsea Ursin. We are a Not Sorry Production, and our music is by Nick Bohl. We’ll see you here again in two weeks time.

(Outro music fades)