

Dressing in Clothing from Another Culture

A student named Maureen has approached you about a conflict she's just had with another student named Sheena. Sheena, who is Indian, and Maureen, who is Irish, live together in an off-campus apartment near the college and usually get along great. In fact, because of this and the fact that they wear the same size, they even have an understanding that they can borrow each other's clothing whenever they want without asking, if they keep it in good condition and return it promptly.

This past weekend while Sheena was out, Maureen borrowed a decorative shawl from among Sheena's clothing items in their closet. It was an item she'd once seen Sheena wear to attend an event with her family at the Indian cultural center they're members of. Maureen found it pretty and figured she'd borrow it to dress up her casual jeans and top while keeping her warm, too. However, when Sheena later saw Maureen had worn it out, she became very upset.

"That isn't a *shawl*, it's a *dupatta* and it goes with a couple of my lehengas — my Indian clothing. Why would you think it's OK for *you* to wear it, and with jeans and a shirt?" Sheena said to Maureen angrily before walking away in frustration.

As she passed by, Maureen heard Sheena say something about cultural appropriation under her breath, a term she wasn't familiar with. Maureen Googled it after changing her outfit and was saddened to learn what it meant and that she had hurt Sheena. Maureen hadn't intended anything like this and wasn't sure what to do next.

For Discussion:

- Do you think this is in fact an example of cultural appropriation? Why or why not?
- What do you think of Maureen's decision to borrow the dupatta?
- Would your opinion be any different if Maureen hadn't realized that the garment was cultural in nature, or would you feel she should have been more aware of its cultural significance?
- What if Maureen had worn the dupatta with a full Indian outfit despite not being Indian herself, as opposed to the jeans and shirt she had on — is the main problem *how* it was worn, or by *who* — or both equally? Explain your thinking.
- How do you feel about Sheena's reaction?
- How would you advise Maureen?