

# Roshnara Mustafa

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Islam, immigration, India, Sufism, Muslim pluralism, Kerala, Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement, Yousuf Ali, community, mosque, Hindu, diversity and inclusivity, community

## SPEAKERS

Shadia Ingram, Roshnara Mustafa



Shadia Ingram 00:01

It is April 25 2019. This is Shadia Ingram and I'm interviewing Roshnara Mustafa for the Muslim Voices project. So, Roshi, can you tell me something about your life, your story which could include elements of your childhood, your family, the place you've lived, education, work?



Roshnara Mustafa 00:40

I'm 43 years old. I was born in Kasaragod, which is in Kerala in India. It's the very northern tip of Kerala. Much of my childhood was spent away from my parents because my father used to work in Saudi Arabia and Medina, he was an electrical engineer there. I would spend a lot of time with my grandparents. My mother's father was a scientist in an agricultural institute. So, I went to the school run by the central government. It was a very mixed classroom with kids from various parts of India, many Keralites too. I used to be taken to Medina for my vacations. My mother would spend her time partly in India - partly because there were no schools, no English medium schools. I have a sister and a brother - Kerala is a very diverse place with a lot of Muslims, around 25% days and similar amount of Christians, and the rest [are] Hindus. So, I grew up with lots of friends from other faiths and growing up in India, I was exposed to a lot of Hindu mythology and of course, the popular culture there, which is movies, basically. My community is you are called Marbella - that's what the community of Muslims is called in Kerala - it's spelled in various ways, you would see it spelled as moplah also mopla.

R

Roshnara Mustafa 03:24

I think Islam came to Kerala from the time of the Prophet through merchants. Initially, it was basically the merchant class, but it changed after the arrival of the colonial powers. Suddenly, the trade was taken over by Europeans and the land in Kerala was owned by the upper caste, Brahmins. So, [the] Muslim community was left without their actual occupation, which was trade and they didn't have the land to do agriculture. I think that brought down the community status and the power within the region. I heard that they became peddlers - of course, there were people who own[ed] land too. Maybe there were small municipalities that were owned by Muslims too, but generally, they were downgraded from their status because of colonial influence that came by.

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Roshnara Mustafa 05:02

I grew up in my parents, - my mother's side were landowners, so I grew up in a pretty good life. But my father's own life was very different from mine, he didn't have his father was a small businessman. As soon as he got educated he had to find a job and then go for higher studies. So, my childhood was a good one with good education, and later on, my father returned from Medina, and we settled down in another part of Kerala, which is towards the south. I was exposed to a totally different culture, it took me some time to get adjusted to the new culture, even though it is still Kerala, the culture and language and everything was totally different there. But because I was in the central government school, they were the same kind of schools there. So that was not a difficult transition.

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Roshnara Mustafa 06:26

After my schooling, I was really confused what to do, I didn't really know what to pursue, and architecture had come up in my conversation with my dad. So, we have to write entrance exam - and I was really coached for the medical entrance, but then later on I changed my mind. Somehow, there were some seats opened, there were free seats, but then there were management seats - where you pay a little money and then you get admitted. So, I got that kind of admission into an architecture college and I got married when I was doing architecture. It was not my idea, but I didn't oppose it because that's what people do so, and my sister wanted to get married too, even though she was younger, that's what my father told me. I was told older than her and there was another girl in my department who got married, another Muslim girl who got married in her third year. My father heard about it and - that became the idea - I got engaged in my second year and married in my third year. I think I slacked a bit my studies. There were a lot of other things going on. I was totally confused.

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Roshnara Mustafa 08:20

At one point, the stress got too intense and one day I just left college. That was before my marriage, actually. I got home and I told my dad, "I'm going to get married, I don't want to do this course," [laughs]. He counseled me, took me to a psychiatrist, and then he got me back to college once again. Then I got married after that. I had difficulties with my marriage initially because of the cultural difference between my family surroundings and my husband's surroundings - where his dad lived all alone, his mom had passed away and it was just him. He was working in Dubai at the time. I was studying in column, which is further south from I told you when my father moved to a different town called palaka. This was further south, it's closer to the capital, city town of Kerala cola. So, I was there and my husband was working in Dubai. I had trouble adjusting to the expectations that marriage brought in, but again, my father kept counseling me. I think I didn't have the, the courage to think and take decisions on my own - maybe it was a good thing, maybe it was not, I don't know - but anyway, that is how I was.

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Roshnara Mustafa 10:08

I remained married and then I came back. When my husband moved to Singapore, I visited for a short - I was still studying - and I just made a short visit - and then he moved to U.S. By the time I was done with my studies, he was working here in North Carolina - that's why that's where I arrived in 1999. I finished my course and that was another culture shock. I've always loved traveling so, I was excited about coming here. But then I had still not found a good relationship with my husband, I was anxious about that - it worked out well, but I was very introverted - I ended up staying at home. I didn't really have a social life or a public, outside life. There were a lot of limitations in that respect. Then we moved to Texas. Again, I was very excited about seeing Texas. But then it turned out not to be the kind of Texas I had in mind [laughs] - movies [laughs] - and western culture and all that. I missed NC for a long time when I was here because that was more beautiful - nature wise for me, we could travel to the mountains and to Washington - there were a lot of places that we could see. For a long time I wished we hadn't moved here.

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Shadia Ingram 12:14

What year did you move here to Texas?

R

Roshnara Mustafa 12:17

2000.

S Shadia Ingram 12:18  
So you were just in North Carolina for a year?

R Roshnara Mustafa 12:22  
Yeah.

S Shadia Ingram 12:26  
Directly to Austin?

R Roshnara Mustafa 12:29  
I was pregnant then. All my children were born here, in Austin. What else? [laughs]

S Shadia Ingram 12:42  
So once you got here and settled and your kids arrived. How did you fill your time?

R Roshnara Mustafa 12:54  
I had my first child in 2001. And then in 2003, I had my second one, which was not planned - it just happened. We were in an apartment and then we thought of moving to a house - like we compared the rent and the mortgage and then we thought it was financially smart to move to a house. We moved to a very 19-year old home - I think I have a lot of interests. So, those interests kept me busy. I was excited about having a yard and doing gardening and planting things and we did a lot of interior projects, remodeling bathrooms. My relationship with my husband thrived after coming here, being away from family. I'm grateful that he indulged me in those respects, like with all the house remodeling and all that he wouldn't have done otherwise.

R Roshnara Mustafa 14:20  
I would drop them at school and pick them up. I didn't drive for a long time. I had licensed from North Carolina, but when I moved here I highly licensed, but I didn't drive. I was nervous about driving. After I had my second one and he was around too, I started thinking that my personality as such would change if I stayed at home all the time and didn't drive and go out and do things on my own. So, I took the courage to take the car - do grocery shopping first. Then I became pregnant again and we bought another car -

that's how - I think driving is very important here because there's no other means of transportation. So, that was how I started stepping out.

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Shadia Ingram 15:33

So let's talk about your Muslim identity and what it means to you to be Muslim. If that identity has changed, or if the definition has changed from when you were in India, compared to when we were out here in Texas?

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Roshnara Mustafa 15:58

While growing up, I was not given that much of an Islamic education. I went to a secular school where I think I was more exposed to Hindu mythology than anything related to Islam and whatever religious education I got was from a teacher who would come - traditional - we call them Ustads - he would come and there were books that taught Islamic studies, like basically the five pillars of Islam and Iman and all that, and some stories and that was it. I learned to read the Quran - recite the Quran prayers. But whatever Muslim identity was there - was more of a pride than something that was based in any intellectual grounding, there was no - now when I look back on it, there was a pride that we are not idolater. Hindus, their whole religious life is based on - the temples have idols and the worship rituals are related to idols. So, that was cultivated in us - that Muslims are not isolated us and we are somehow better. There may have been an intellectual understanding, from a childish way - that those are not gods and God is something else, but I don't think I really understood anything about God. We would just listen to - sometimes there will be religious sermons. I have [a] faint memory of going to one or two and general discussions in the home, that's all.

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Roshnara Mustafa 18:16

But when I was in my college years, that's when I started - before I went to college that the Babri Masjid, demolition happened in India. That is a very old mosque from the Mughal era. It was in Ayodhya where Hindus think Rama was born and it became politicized. It was locked up for a long time, it was a disputed mosque and nobody was worshipping there. But once there was a demonstration that took people there, they ended up destroying this mosque. That was in high school, just before I went to college. One day I heard in my classroom - a friend of mine who she was discussing with another boy and then I heard her say, "Why don't they just go to Pakistan?" That was my first - I didn't read the newspaper - politics and current events and whatever I gathered from my school studies, that's all I knew - I was not really a big reader of newspapers. I was very naive [laughs], I would say.

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Roshnara Mustafa 19:47

But then I started thinking about it and in college, I began reading a little more from the translation. My father gave me useful Yousuf Ali's translation - and then I would just go through it - but even then that was very little [laughs]

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Shadia Ingram 20:13

And you were reading an English translation?

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Roshnara Mustafa 20:17

Yeah because I never learned my regional language. I went to a school run by central government and I was never taught my native language. I only knew how to speak it well, whatever reading I did was taught by my great grandmother and that was just basic. I would read a few comic books and some small books of fiction, but that was all. Most of my education was in English. So, in college, towards the final year - when I went to Singapore, I got Islam between East and West, which is a book that my father recommended and he's a very well read person, but like I told you, I never grew up with him until in my very late years, and he was businessman at that time, and he didn't really have any time for much time for family. So, his influences came in my later years, like after my marriage, you know. But this was a book I had heard about from him. I saw that in a bookstore in Singapore and I started reading that. That was my first reading into [the] intellectual part of Islam. I had not given any thought to the religion as such and tried to make sense with my life. It was more cultural, I would say.

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Roshnara Mustafa 22:09

From that book, you would get a perspective that this somehow brings together, the essence of the West and the essence of the East and something in between is Islam. Somehow, in Islam, you have a holistic view of being human. That's the understanding I got from the book and it made perfect sense to me. It was a very difficult book to read. Somehow, I persisted and read the whole book. When I came here, there was always that pride of being a Muslim. But then the political events are the ones that really pushed me into that identity, I think as a Muslim. What happened like I told you, it began in India with the Babri Masjid Demolition and suddenly there was a fear in Muslim minds that somehow they're Indian nurses being questioned and all that. When I came here, it was after my first one was born that September 11th happened. When that happened, I was afraid to go out that day I remember, but then when I went out nothing really happened. I went to a book fair and a man came and said, "Salaam" to me.

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Roshnara Mustafa 24:20

I told you I was just a stay at home and most of my friends were from Kerala and Muslims. So, Islam was more about being part of the community I think. After I started driving and started going to the masjid, I got involved with things happening, like the Tafseer classes for women. Before that, I wouldn't go, when my children were little I didn't go much. I found it hard to manage them in the mosque. And so I just thought it was better to stay at home than go there and run after them. It was only after my kids were in school, even my youngest one started going to PreK that I started going to the mosque and making friends there. Before that my social life was just limited to people from Kerala who were Muslims, like a small group of friends. The mosque - and of course there were - family groups - my families all into intellectual discussions about religion and all that - so I got into those discussions. We had a family group on family.com. That's where I started really thinking and applying my thoughts to the religious aspects and how we live as Muslims, and what does it mean to be a Muslim - in those interactions, there were arguments and there are all kinds of Muslims in my family, the whole spectrum, some marry Muslims, their wife might be very observant, but they are not. Usually it's the men, I have not seen women, in my family who are that atheistic [laughs] or agnostic, but there still are many men who are like that.

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Roshnara Mustafa 24:21

There were all kinds of people discussing that. So, I started discussing and I enjoyed putting my thoughts into words, and expressing my self expression became something I like to do. When I went to the mosque, it didn't really go well for me there because many of the interpretations seemed too narrow and I felt it didn't serve me as a Muslim or the community to have such narrow ideas of religion and especially in the globalized world that we are living in and where we are all in close connection with people from other religions, not to say that when I hear that other religious communities are not really going to be saved or something like that, I heard at the mosque and then I had to respond to that and it didn't really go well with me. There were other issues at the mosque so, I left the mosque for a while.

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Roshnara Mustafa 28:34

My friend Lena, she was asked to leave the mosque and she was from Lahore Ahmadiyya Movement. That's when I realized that there's so much diversity. I'd never heard about this group of people before that Even though she was a friend, I didn't really know anything about it. I knew there was Qadianis - we used to refer to and Mirza Ghulam Ahmed was the Prophet. My mom had a friend she knew who was from the Qadiani community in Kerala. I've heard from her that they have his picture in the house and they are just like us,

but they are not us [laughs] - that sort of narrative. But I never knew that there was another group that broke off from that .So, these things - even though I knew they existed, I didn't know how they all fit into Islam.

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Roshnara Mustafa 29:49

My approach would be to divert those differences. How would I deal with those differences? I never had to deal with those differences because I didn't have any friends who are from another minority community from Islam, or my friends were Sunni Muslims or they were from other faiths. These minority groups within Islam, even though I knew existed - was not something that I had to have an understanding of, for my own personal purposes - it didn't really affect me. So, this was the first time that I had this friend who I liked a lot - and then somehow she didn't belong to the mosque and she was asked to leave. That forced me to expand my understanding of God and Islam. I began reading more and I even got her Muhammad Ali's translation and I began reading that. I got involved in a Quran group and I was part of that. That's how I began seriously understanding the spiritual aspect of Islam - I would say that I got it from Quran group.

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Shadia Ingram 31:38

You mean, the experience of being involved in the Quran group?

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Roshnara Mustafa 31:41

The Sufi side of the sacred script. I knew that there is the Sufi stream of Islam and all, but I didn't really read much into it or understand it much. But then when I was in this Quran group, I found that they focus a lot on the spiritual aspect of it, where you focus on your own individual transformation of your soul, from, "How do you overcome your desires and your ego?" and how you elevate yourself from your base realities and get going on the spiritual path to higher ways of being, where you focus on your responsibility to other people and to service - that sense of religious understanding I got from that group.

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Roshnara Mustafa 33:10

Of course there was this other rationalist stream also within Islam, where you have to make sense - it has to make intellectual sense to you. That was also served a little from being in that group. But then at one point, I had my differences and I felt that I was being an outsider questioning their views. So I didn't feel that I was being fair to them, so I left the group. I thought I was better off without it, and they were better off without me. They were questioning everything. There are certain things that I couldn't agree with. I didn't



feel it was necessary and I felt that it would limit me in some ways. So, I left the group and that was when Sheik Yasir came to the masjid and I started going because of his depth of understanding of the Quran and how he brought so much intellectual sense to the religion. I started going back.

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Roshnara Mustafa 34:35

But then again, I saw that there was this intolerance for different views in the mosque, and then he ended up being removed from there. That's when Muslim Space started and I got involved with Muslim Space. I think over the years what has happened is, I have understood the - and also I took another course - that online course, Islam Through Scriptures - and that really informed me of the diversity within Islam and that I had no idea about how much diversity there is and the cultural side of Islam - I had not really given any importance to that, like, where I'm from - I'm from Marbella - I told you, we have our songs that my grandmother used to sing and those songs would be about many Islamic stories were made into songs, and each song would have a tune that they were already familiar with. So somebody would write a song, and they would be that would be printed in a book and the tune that they have to sing it in would be denoted at the top. So, my grandmother would look at it and she would know, in what way to sing those songs. I was I grew up with all these cultural aspects.

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Roshnara Mustafa 36:23

There was one song about profit use that she used to sing. In this course, I realized that these are all part of being a Muslim. Somehow, the politicization of Islam had removed all those aspects. There were groups weighing that all these [sects] are not part of Islam. Islam in Kerala has been more from the Sufi side and there are a lot of tombs of saints throughout Kerala. It was part of being a Muslim, to go to the those places, and they were festivities there. I still am not comfortable doing all that, but there are a lot of other cultural things, like I said, songs - that were suddenly alien. I never gave any thought to it, but when doing this course, I realized that even those are part of being a Muslim.

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Roshnara Mustafa 37:29

There may be things that I don't agree with, like for example, there are Muslims who go to the Durga and worship there, I may not agree with it, but I cannot say that that is not Islam. That has also been part of Islamic tradition from where I come from. I don't feel the need to attack their way of worshipping. There are people and there have been people, for a long time in Kerala, who have been attacking all those kinds of worship very fervently, which is why I also sort of cut myself off from that cultural part of being a

Muslim. But then that course opened me open my eyes to like there is Qawwali and all these cultural things - all these nashids and songs. Those aspects bring a lot of beauty to how we practice our religion. The religious message always needs that cultural vehicle to get its message across different cultures and different communities will find their own.

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Roshnara Mustafa 39:07

For me, those things suddenly found an importance. Even though I don't sing, I appreciate that there are these things now. And so what has happened to me over the years, is [that] I have become more and more embracing of the diversity within Islam. At this point, my relationship with God - even it is trying to break the barriers of the Islamic language and find common narrative with other religions and other faith communities. I would say that that is the spiritual stream of Islam where religion is not approached through the law, but through a pursuit of the ultimate reality. God is not seen as purely as a law giver, but something beyond even that. At that point, there is a harmonious relationship and feeling that you can develop for other other faith communities, and orthodoxy is not important so much, like your doctrines, and theology and all. That they have a purpose and we can discuss and all that, but there will always be differences. That's what I think. There may be differences with my children, they will understand things differently at an intellectual level.

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Roshnara Mustafa 41:17

The spirit of the faith can be very similar to the spirit in other faiths. How you have to focus on your responsibility to the community and social justice and that sort of thing. In those respects, there are a lot of our agreements within amongst Muslims and amongst people from other faiths. I think it is more beneficial for me in my relationship to God, to focus on those rather than get stuck in the intellectual debates.

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Shadia Ingram 42:07

Yeah, wonderful. The last thing we want to touch on is if you could share - tell me what Texas means to you now that you've been here for 13 years? What does it mean to be a Texan?

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Roshnara Mustafa 42:39

I don't really know [laughs]. I joke to my family and friends of India was my "janmabhoomi," place of my book, and this is my karma bhoomi. Karma is where your action is. If it was somewhere else, I would have been from that place. For me, these borders don't have so much meaning that it is made out to have like, [laughs]. I don't

know

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Shadia Ingram 43:18

There is no wrong answer. Lastly, there anything else you'd like people to know about? You, your work Islam, or Muslims or anything else?

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Roshnara Mustafa 43:43

I would like to change Muslim perception about their own religion. There is a sense of exclusivity that I still encounter when I go to the mosque. There is this narrative that this is the fastest growing religion and somehow we are going to beat everybody else to the top position, it's like belonging to a club. I want to somehow change that. I think it has become very important. There may be people who think differently, and I don't know if it is the truth, but this is what I feel very strongly now. That sense that somehow this religious language and the laws and everything attached to it have a supreme purpose in this world. Apart from everything else, there is all other scriptures and faith teachings and all that. So, that narrative about Islam, I wish I could counter and change [laughs].

S

Shadia Ingram 45:17

Perfect. Well, thank you so much