

# Khadeeja Moosa

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9/11, Culture, Discrimination, Education, First-generation American, Hijab, Islam in media, Islamic school, Islamophobia, Keller, Multicultural, Othering, Pakistani-American, Prejudice, Public school

## SPEAKERS

Aysha Moneer, Khadeeja Moosa



Aysha Moneer 00:03

Today is Monday, July 12. This is Aysha Moneer, an archives coordinator with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. Today I am with Khadeeja Moosa, and we are interviewing for the Remembering 9/11 collection. So to start I'll let you introduce yourself and tell us where you're taking a call from today.



Khadeeja Moosa 00:30

Hi, my name is Khadeeja Moosa, and today I am calling from Keller, Texas.



Aysha Moneer 00:36

Okay, cool. To start, tell me a bit about your background and your upbringing.



Khadeeja Moosa 00:47

Okay, so I come from a Pakistani household, but I have lived in Keller, Texas basically my whole life. So growing up, obviously, you get the Pakistani culture and also the American culture. The best or the worst of both worlds, whatever you call it. I have stayed in the same city, in the same school system for all of it, from elementary school through high school, except for this one period where I went to Islamic school for one and a half years.

But I guess, that's the basics of where I was raised.

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Aysha Moneer 01:36

Tell me a bit about growing up Pakistani-American in Keller and the experience you've had with your identity.

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Khadeeja Moosa 01:50

Growing up, it's been difficult to find out what my identity was, if I was Pakistani, or American, because I used to just call myself an American Pakistani. Obviously a Muslim Pakistani American. For some reason, even when I said that, it didn't really seem to fit, just because I grew up with the Desi community really close to me, surrounding me. So it's not like I lacked people surrounding me from that aspect. It's just that even when I was there, it felt like I wasn't really a part of it. Even then they're like, "Oh, but you're from here. You're from America." I never really got that. Because, I mean, yeah, obviously, I am from America, I was born here, my parents came here. Then when it came to being at school with my friends - because this is a majority White suburb where I live - I didn't fit in there either, because Pakistani didn't really exist. I was always called like, "Oh, you're from Mexico." And I'm like, "No, that's wrong. I'm not from there." And they're like, "Oh, then what are you?" And I'm like, "I'm Pakistani." And they're like, "What is that?" So I guess if people had to associate me with one thing, it would definitely be Muslim, but that's it. When it came to my culture or my identity, no one really acknowledged it. And I didn't really know myself, so I can't really blame them for a majority of it, because I didn't know how to introduce myself anyways. But yeah, it's definitely taken a while to figure it out. I think over time, I have had to become more confident in my identity, because even to this day, it's not like people still acknowledge it.

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Aysha Moneer 03:52

Oh, wow. Okay. So going from public school to Islamic school, and then back from Islamic school to public school, how was that experience like?

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Khadeeja Moosa 04:07

I was really young when this happened. I was in fourth grade. It was my last year of public school before I went to Islamic school. So this is from my perspective, back then. I had the same group of friends when I transitioned back to public school once again when I was coming from Islamic school, but it was really weird just because it felt like they were

completely new people, even though I just spent the four years in elementary school with them. Because when I came back, obviously it was a different environment in Islamic school where you had the boys and girls separated, and majority of the focus on subjects were not on mathematics or English. It was mainly on Qur'an and history and Islamic studies. So when I transitioned back to public school, I definitely felt like I was disadvantaged in the fact that I didn't know how to interact in the real world. I guess, because they create this ideal situation. There's circumstance for kids in Islamic school, that when I went back - and public school, I was just there less than two years [before], but I still didn't know how to interact with normal people. And I came back wearing hijab for the first time, too.

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Khadeeja Moosa 05:37

People treated me so much more different than what I thought. It was like, "Oh, welcome back," hanging out with my friends again, but it was just met with so much confusion and even isolation too. When I came back to public school, it was in the middle of the year. The only reason I went back was because it was difficult for my family to keep sending me to Islamic school, just because it was really far and circumstantial and whatnot. But I definitely remember that half the year being one of the worst ones just because it's hard to adjust. The way that people treat you also is difficult as a kid, 'cause that's all you want: social acceptance. Let me tell you, that was definitely not what I got over there.

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Khadeeja Moosa 06:36

I think one of the biggest things that I remember back then too was it was just three weeks in when I got transferred, and I got called to the counselor's office. And I was like, "Oh my God, what did I do? I just came here, I didn't do anything yet." And she was like, "Oh, how are you doing? How are your friends?" And I have no friends. I'm like, "Oh, it's good. I'm doing fine. Thank you for asking." And she's like, "Oh, okay. I was just wondering, there has been a recent talk of you recently." And I was like, "Okay." And she was like, "So I just want to ask, I'm just going to be straight up with you, okay?" And I was like, "Okay." And she says, "Are you by any chance pregnant?" And I was so confused. I was like, I am a twelve-year-old hijabi girl that has not talked to anyone. My only two friends is this one guy from the football team and another one's this really religious conservative Christian. "No, I'm not... if you haven't noticed, no." She's like, "Okay, I'm just making sure, cause some girls came up to me with the concern that you might be." And I didn't even know how to take that. I was like, "Okay, I guess that's fine. Whatever." I'm like, "No," and then I just went back to my classroom.

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Khadeeja Moosa 08:00

And I was considering not telling my mom because she was really struggling back then. I didn't want to burden her with more. But I told her anyways, because she was the only person that would listen to me. And I was like, "Someone said I was pregnant and told the counselor." She goes up to the counselor, obviously. And she was like, "What is this talk?" And [the counselor's] like, "Oh, I would be concerned if your daughter wouldn't have told you." I guess that makes sense, but at the same time, I think one thing that struck me was how they assume that everything works the same. Like every person is in the same situation. I think that was one of the most vivid things coming back to public school after being so welcomed when I was younger. But man, maybe this might be a little bit different, just because I even look different from them now. So I think that was the most memorable of transitioning.

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Aysha Moneer 08:58

Yeah, yeah. Wow. When did that transition get easier? Were you able to be more comfortable with your identity in the public education system?

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Khadeeja Moosa 09:21

Honestly, maybe my sophomore year of high school. I know it took a long time, but even then - because eventually I started wearing abaya too when I went to public school from seventh grade through the end of ninth grade. It was like I was kind of treated as a joke. And I had really good friends. Eventually, I made some really good friends that I was with, we'd studied together and whatnot. But just the cultural differences and also the way I look. I was a little bit more quiet and kept to myself back then too. It was really difficult just to be treated as a person for some reason. The teachers would look at me as if they're pitying me. And I'd be like, "I don't know why you're pitying me, I'm just coming to your class." Students would also just - you know how in middle school, the girls and guys, they would just be like, "Oh, try to get that person just because I think it'd be funny." It was kind of like that type of environment, where it's like, they would talk to me as if it was like, "Oh, just talk to the girl who's wearing abaya and hijab, the Muslim girl who keeps to herself." Obviously, I am so grateful for my family and the support that I had, because I didn't even concern it. I was like, "Why are you even talking to me?" And I would brush it off, whatever things would happen. But it was clear that I was not welcome.

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Khadeeja Moosa 10:57

In ninth grade I had gym class, and I would have to switch out of my abaya during that

time, I'd have PE clothes to run. And I would keep my abaya in my locker. But then one time, I came back and there was paint and stuff all over my abaya, and it was soaking wet. I couldn't do anything about it because I can't wear that [at] the school. You're supposed to be clean. That's what it is to be wearing a hijab too, just because it's a standard of being there and showing that you are who you represent, in a way. And so, the entire day, I just had to walk around in my gym clothes, and people would offer me their jackets, so I'd wear their jackets. So that's when I knew that there were people who cared for me. But there was also a lot of people who were against me, at the same time.

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Khadeeja Moosa 11:49

I think right when people started to accept me was when I forced myself to put myself out there, to create an image of myself, to start being more open and talking to people. I was close to the teachers, but really close to the teacher so that people knew my name. And the thing is, once people know who you are, and you go up in the social standings, people have to respect you. Because then they know if they do anything to you, someone else will come at them for that. I was so close to the administration, the principal, the assistant principal, all the teachers, my friends. I had so many friends then in my sophomore year of high school, that anytime anyone did anything, then everyone came up to them like, "Why would you do that?" That's when I had to create that for myself to be able to be accepted. And even then you still have to brush off the things that still happened to you.

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Aysha Moneer 12:54

Yeah, definitely. You're able to come out of that. Transitioning from that conversation about experiencing discrimination and Islamophobia towards you, how did you first learn about 9/11 in the classroom? Do you remember how it was taught?

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Khadeeja Moosa 13:23

Yeah, so the first time I was taught - obviously, I was born after it happened. It was in kindergarten, it was my first year in the public school system. We had an assembly on the day of 9/11. I just remember being really confused. I remember being really confused, because obviously, I didn't know what happened, or when it was. It happened in 2001, and I was born 2002. So obviously I was one of the groups of kids that were pushed to [hear] the discourse of 9/11 and whatnot. So we had this assembly, and they were like, "Oh, let's take a moment of silence for the lives were lost and everything." And I remember being like, "Wow, this is such a tragic event." And I mean, it is, obviously. But I had no idea what had happened or where. I thought it was happening today, or it was just yesterday. And

then I went to the classroom, and they're like, "So you guys have heard about 9/11, we're just gonna talk about a little bit more." They told us about what happened, they showed us pictures of the Twin Towers.

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Khadeeja Moosa 14:48

I think this is when I started connecting that this might be something that's going to affect me, was when they started mentioning the Islamic radicalists and the terrorists. I was like, "Wait, is this the same word - Islam, Islamic? Does this have to do with me?" And they showed pictures of Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda. And they're like, "These are the people who took the lives from these innocent people, the Islamic terrorists." I'm like, "Okay, well, I don't know what that means, but I definitely recognize one part of that word." I mean, I was like five. I had no idea what was going on. Then that's obviously what continued for the rest of it. I mean, in North Texas especially, they're really strong on patriotic acts and Texas pride, US pride. So every single year, it was the same routine, because as I got older, people started asking more questions too, to me. And so they would be like, "Oh, so are you part of them?" Like, "No, I'm right here. I live down the street. You know me."

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Khadeeja Moosa 16:09

And obviously, then more questions. Because they never really knew what Muslims were until after 9/11. The teachers would start pointing me out too, they'd be like, "Oh, how do you feel?" I'd be like, "I mean, I don't know, you're kind of pinpointing me in front of the entire class right now. Obviously, I feel a little uncomfortable." But the response that they want to hear is, "I feel really sad about what has happened, and I hope the world can become a better place, and we do something about these Islamic radicalists." They're looking for a specific answer from you, because they choose you to represent. They're like, "You are the hijabi, the Muslim in this classroom, say some things that the rest of the class can follow."

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Khadeeja Moosa 16:50

I remembered then, in maybe my junior year of high school, the assemblies got a little bit more grand as you grew up, with ROTC, and military and army coming in to mourn with us. I remember this girl came up to me after school, and she was like, "Do you ever feel guilty about what your people did?" And I just kind of stood there, because I didn't even know how to answer that. Like, "What do you mean 'my people?'" And she's like, "You know, your people." We didn't have time to continue that, because one of the administration then came in and was like, "Hey, what are you doing? What are you doing?"

Then he asked me if I was okay, and I'm like, "Yeah, I'm fine." But it gets weirder a little bit as you get older somehow, even though I was more confused back then. Just because then you understand how people are thinking about this. They say, "Oh, it's not everyone, it's one group," but they will literally just blame all Muslims. They'll say "your people" and while wearing hijab, I am a target for them to put the blame on me. So it's definitely been interesting.

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Aysha Moneer 18:23

You mentioned that discussion in the classroom. Can you tell me a bit about what those lessons looked like? What kinds of descriptions were used? How was it taught? And then what were your feelings and responses in the classroom while these lessons were going on?

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Khadeeja Moosa 18:44

Yeah. I don't remember too much when I was younger, but I remember vividly about having those lessons. One of the biggest things that I remember was that they always had to say "Islamic" before they said "terrorists." They would say the "Islamic terrorists," they didn't let it go once. As I got older, I feel like they connected it more and more with Islam. And it would be like, "Oh, so what Muslims do is that they pray five times a day." And then I'd hear the kids saying, "What? Five times a day? That's so much." I'd be like, "Are you the one doing it? Clearly not." They would associate more during Ramadan, and they would really exaggerate what we do like, "They would fast the whole month." And they're like, "A whole month, not even water?" And then they looked at me to confirm it. And I'd be like, "Yeah, from sunrise to sunset for thirty days, and you feel great. I don't know what to tell you." I do know what to tell you, but they won't let me say anything because they just want to hear, "Oh, is it true?" And I'd be like, "Well, yeah," but God forbid that they let me continue with that.

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Khadeeja Moosa 20:03

Because they just want to prove their point that, "Oh, Muslims are really extreme. They're very conservative. They do the very most. How are they sane after doing all this?" We go to hajj and they're like, "Oh my goodness, that many people?" I remember one girl saying it looked like a cult. That really confused me just because it's a religion. I remember going to interfaith programs, I remember loving those. It makes sense, because they are different religions, you learn about different religions, but when you learn about it in that context, that was the only time [teachers would] introduce it. So obviously, that's the idea

that [students] have in their head, they're gonna associate Islam only with the fact of 9/11. Even with the curriculum, sometimes you'd have to learn about Muslims and Islam, or Saudi Arabia in geography class or history class. But the only time they would do it was literally in the beginning of the year during September. And it's like, "Oh, we have to put the curriculum for this." Do really have to, though? We can't introduce another religion first? Or do something else first, I mean, there's a lot of parts of the world, so many, and we got to start off right with the Muslims, I guess. And the way they say it, it's like they're saying "the barbarians."

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Khadeeja Moosa 21:33

As I grew older, obviously there was more connection with Islam and 9/11, and showing more images with the Islamic pillars and the Quranic scriptures. And obviously, the teachers didn't really stop the commentary that students would make, it was always something so rude. Especially when it comes to a religion, it was so disrespectful. But obviously, the teachers didn't stop it. They would kind of encourage you too, they were like, "Oh, what do y'all think?" What are they supposed to think when they see a picture of the Qur'an? It's a book that's in Arabic. They're like, "I think it looks weird with the squiggly lines." Funny how language works, dude, that's how language is. It's all squiggly lines. But it was increasing in xenophobia and Islamophobia as time went on. And it's not like the teachers did much, they didn't really seem to care about the education of it. They just want to do their part with, "Hey, these are the people who are responsible for it." They would always, as I mentioned, use me to be like, "Oh, how did you feel? What happened to you?" What am I supposed to say happened to me? I wasn't even born. I don't know what my family was doing at the time really. I guess it has affected me, in a way that not the teachers or the other students will understand. I'm also trying to think of what has happened.

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Khadeeja Moosa 23:28

I think, as I got older, I remember I realized this back in my sophomore year. I had an art history class. We used to learn about different types of art and religions and whatnot. The day of 9/11, when we had the whole assembly, I was so used to it. I'm numb to it, you do the same thing every 9/11, you try to avoid certain people, go to a different hallway and stuff. And I remember going to art class, and he was like, "You know what, today we're going to realize how beautiful Islamic architecture is." So we spent the whole class talking about Islamic art and architecture and artists and people. And I remember just being like, "I have never been taught Islam in that way." I've never seen it in a way that I realize how nice it is and how beautiful it is. And I think he knew, because we're a class of seven people, two of us are Muslim. So I think he knew that day it was - you just need to hear



something nice about your own religion once in a while.

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Aysha Moneer 24:41

Yeah, definitely. That's beautiful. I'm glad that you are able to have at least that kind of an experience. You mentioned how you were talking about it in school. I also saw hajj on TV screens and whatever, but as an adult hearing you say that, it's like, wow, they really showed the Qur'an or showed hajj or Ramadan as if that had anything to do with the event. How did you learn about it differently at home or from your parents? Was it something that was taboo to talk about? Or were they open about the kind of discrimination you might face? How was that different than what you were learning in the classroom?

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Khadeeja Moosa 25:35

It was definitely different just because when I first asked my parents about it, I remember all of us kind of staring at each other, just because it was a little bit quiet. I had no idea. I asked a question. They weren't answering it. I remember they were really subtle about it, really vague. Like, "Yeah, it did happen," and whatnot. Then my mom told me later on that night, "Khadeeja, whatever you do, don't make yourself stand out. Whatever you do, make sure that you don't do anything that puts people to blame you." I think that's definitely one of the earliest memories I have of these things, it's my mom telling me, "Make sure you do everything right." And it's not because she wanted me to be perfect, just because she knew that if something is gonna happen between me and another kid, it's gonna be on me. She was always like, "Don't make yourself stand out. Don't be too involved." So I never got really involved in school or anything, I would just come, go to school, do my classes, and then go home.

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Khadeeja Moosa 26:56

I think one of the biggest things was my parents never let me watch the news when I was younger, either. I think when I was in fifth grade, I started reading the news and talking to my parents about it. It'd be like, "Oh, I heard this was happening." I think it was back in fifth grade when I started reading news articles in class in Islamic school. They're the ones who taught me that this is how America is portraying us. I'd be like, "Oh, I heard that this was going on and stuff." And I remember my dad just told me, "You don't have to read that. You don't have to do that." But then I got kind of annoyed that he said that, so I'd read the news every single morning. Then that was what kind of shocked me just because I was so sheltered. It's one thing to experience it with kids and teachers, even though that

was also pretty intense, but reading it on the news and knowing that everyone else in the world sees it the same way. That's how I felt, like the whole world was just like saying, "Oh, the Islamic terrorists, the Islamic terrorists." And I was like, "Man." And then I'd read the comments underneath the articles. I think that was one of the biggest things I wish I just never did growing up, just because it's harsh to be put into that world all of a sudden, and realize that this is your reality.

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Khadeeja Moosa 28:25

Even now, my parents don't talk about it. My little sister, she had her first experience in kindergarten, but she told us in online school, they got to have more time to discuss about it this past year, and she's like, "Oh, I heard about the 9/11 thing and Islam and whatnot. They were talking about Muslims, and I told them, 'I'm Muslim.'" And I had the same reaction as my mom. I was like, "Don't tell them you're Muslim. Why would you say that?" And she's like, "Because we are." And then I realized, yeah, you are Muslim. Either way, that's not going to change. It's not like whether you say it or not. More people are becoming aware of who we are, they're not going to mistake her for being Mexican, as they first thought that we were. They were like, "Oh, you look like you're Mexican." No, now they know that we look Desi, some part of that continent. But then I'm like, you can't change the fact that you're Muslim. And I was like, "Okay, yeah, you're right. You are Muslim, and that's nothing to be ashamed of." But then I also had that instinct, "Just don't mention it right now. You don't have to."

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Khadeeja Moosa 29:54

Because then I remember having friends when I was younger, and whenever they figured out I'm Muslim, they'd be like, "Oh, my mom told me I can't really hang out with you." And I'd be like, "Okay, that's fine. I've heard this before." So then sometimes I'd pretend I wasn't Muslim just so I can keep my friends. But for her, I felt that same fear that my mom had. Right when she said that, I swear, my heart dropped. I was like, "Why would you say that?" But I hope that as she is going through it - now I'm out of the public school system - but now that she's going through it, I hope that it changes, but from the looks of it, I don't really think it will anytime soon.

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Aysha Moneer 30:42

How do you feel about 9/11 and the way that it's represented in media today? How do you reflect back on the experience that you did have to go through in public school?

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Khadeeja Moosa 31:00

Looking back on 9/11 today, it's a tragic event. Of course. So many lives were lost, America was shook from what had happened, it was such a big deal. I can't imagine how scary it was. I hear about my own family's experiences with 9/11, and I can't imagine having that fear. I asked my grandmother, "How was it for you?" And she was like, "I remember watching it and thinking it was a movie, I didn't think it was real life." And it's so scary to think that all that has happened to them. It's a sad day to reflect on and whatnot, but honestly, I do believe that I don't deserve the treatment that I had, just because of it. I don't want to say that 9/11 was light or anything, but for the treatment that I had for something I am not connected to in any way whatsoever, it doesn't justify the way that the media portrays Muslims or the way that people treat Muslims or anyone that even looks Muslim. They don't even bother to educate themselves on who is Muslim and who is not. They just see features and they're like, "Oh, you're Muslim," it's like, "No, he's clearly Sikh." They're clearly not Muslim.

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Khadeeja Moosa 32:38

How do you feel about how it's impacted your global community and your larger community or your family?

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Khadeeja Moosa 32:38

And even then you can't assume. It's one thing when they wear hijab, you can't confuse that. But you can't assume and you can't treat people just because of the actions of, obviously, a group that took away so many lives. I'm also kind of numb to it at the same time. Just because every single year, now I associate the event with I can't leave my house. I don't go and go get my groceries that day, I don't leave the house to go hang out with my friends that day. I stay inside that week just to make sure that I'm safe.

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Khadeeja Moosa 33:41

I think growing up, obviously, we've all had the same experiences. So when I would hang out with my Desi friends, my Muslim friends, we would all talk about it, obviously, like, "Oh, how was your experiences growing up in North Texas where this is obviously very heavily emphasized?" We all have the same thing where it's like, yeah, we're just obviously all discriminated against in very harsh and violent ways sometimes. It's really scary too, just because we joke about it, we're like, "Oh, when we go to the airport with airport security, we get patted down. Oh, just typical things and what not." I think then we all laugh about it. Then you know that when that dies down, and it's kind of a solemn thing? That's how it

feels like every time when you think about it, or when you talk with your friends, like we kind of try to laugh it off. I feel like that's also what happened globally to Muslims too, just because there have been, I remember, YouTubers and stuff, and they would joke around about it. I'd be like, "Man, I don't even think I can joke about it, I'm just so tired."

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Khadeeja Moosa 35:03

And I get sad when I think about it, because we all just have the same experiences with how people treat us. With my own family too, I was so naive when I was younger, because I just didn't notice it. Because obviously, when I was with my mom, I'd focus on my mom, she was my whole world. I'd be like, "Okay, nice." But as I got older, I'd be like, "Wow." People would flip her off as they go down the road or just treat her as if she was dumb. I remember asking my mom, "How do you feel about that?" And she's like, "What? What are you talking about? That doesn't happen." And I was like, "Does she not notice it? Or are we just both pretending that it doesn't happen right now?" So I just didn't question it then. I was like, "Okay." I addressed it, and I guess we're pretending that doesn't happen, because there's no way you don't notice it. Especially when you notice the way you are treated, like the one out of everyone else. It's impossible not to.

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Khadeeja Moosa 36:21

And the thing that hurts me most sometimes is that with kids - when we were growing up, I would be a little bit frustrated when people would ask me dumb questions. They're not dumb questions. Questions about my hijab. They're like, "Do you shower in that? Or do you wear that when you go to sleep?" I remember getting really annoyed and being like, "Why would they think these things?" But it's because the way that they were taught, how can you even blame them? They aren't taught anything about our religion, except what people want to hear. When you look at the history that we were taught, it's all just propaganda, like that America is the best country in the world. There was one point that I did believe it. I was like, "Man, I don't know why we're at war when America is doing so much to help them." It's okay. It was a phase. It was maybe one or two years. I remember my dad being so frustrated, he was like, "Khadeeja no, that's not how it is." I'd be like, "Well, the book is saying it. The news outlets are saying it. The teachers are saying it. Everyone's saying it." But then when you get older, and you talk to more people - and I think the more people that you're exposed to - I think social media helped me realize how the world really is. And even then you have to take parts of it, what you can believe and whatnot, just because it's so dangerous. I think on Twitter too, I think that's one of the biggest things I can think of, it's the echo chamber. Right when you say one thing, everyone will latch onto it. So it's like taking it with a grain of salt.

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Aysha Moneer 38:28

Yeah, I definitely agree. I think American children are not taught to think critically about the world or other cultures. Well, I want to be mindful of your time. This is an oral history interview that will live on our archive for a long time. Is there something that you might want to add for future generations or anyone down the road that's listening to this ten years from now, twenty years from now? Is there something you might want to add? It can be on whatever note that you want. I can give you a minute to think about it, too.

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Khadeeja Moosa 39:17

Okay, yeah, just give me a second. I think one of the biggest things, just from my own experiences that I hope - it is difficult growing up. It feels like the whole world is against you, and that no matter what you do, it's just not going to be enough. But your impact, who you are as a person does affect the people around you every single day. And your kindness and just being confident in who you are will make the biggest difference in this world for sure. That's one of the things that took me so long to realize. But no matter what, even if you're just kind to one person that day, they will remember you. That will be your greatest support in knowing that in a world that - I don't want to say that it's cruel or dark, but it is difficult to see the bright side of things. But that's one of the things that definitely helps, just knowing that each one of us are light.

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Aysha Moneer 40:48

Great, thank you so much. That was great. Thanks for sharing. I will go ahead and stop recording.