

Duriba Khan

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SPEAKERS

Duriba Khan, Zubia Akhtar

- Z** Zubia Akhtar 00:05
All right. It's March 4, 2019. This Zubia Akhtar and I'm here interviewing Duriba Khan for the Muslim Voices in Texas project. Hi.
- D** Duriba Khan 00:16
Hello, how are you?
- Z** Zubia Akhtar 00:17
I'm good. So, tell me something about yourself or tell me about your life please.
- D** Duriba Khan 00:23
My life, should I just go in chronological order?
- Z** Zubia Akhtar 00:27
You can say whatever like - growing up, your school life, and I know you went to an Islamic school so that, and just anything.



Duriba Khan 00:34

Cool. I moved to Texas from Chicago when I was about three years old and we lived in a small apartment complex near my school, which was Austin Peace Academy, an Islamic school. It was the first Islamic school in Austin. I went there up until about sixth grade when they started another Islamic school here in Austin, so I shifted over there. And for my 11th and 12th grade, I ended up going back to APA and I graduated from there. And yeah, I have lived in Austin since I was three, like I mentioned. It's a great city and I love to be here.



Zubia Akhtar 01:14

So, coming from an Islamic school to UT, was there a big difference in your experiences and stuff?



Duriba Khan 01:22

I feel like people have this weird image of Islamic school. They think of it as like this place and there's the scary Middle Eastern teachers that smack our palms with a ruler. Don't worry, it's nothing like that. Islamic school is, I would say, the class sizes are super small, but other than that, there's always a variety of interests in the room. People have different stories and they communicate that well. And then we also have a lot of non-Muslim teachers. That was always something that was particularly interesting to see how watching them watch us and what they thought.



Zubia Akhtar 02:05

Interesting. I know in Catholic schools you have to take theology and stuff. Did y'all have to take that in Islamic school?



Duriba Khan 02:17

Yeah. We had to take Islamic studies courses, and then Quran and Tafseer, and understanding classes. That was pretty interesting, I would say. There was some parts towards the end of the Quran we had to memorize, the surahs or the chapters. And then in reference to your first question [of] was it a culture shock when I came to UT? Yes, in some ways, no in other ways. I feel like because I was in Islamic high school, we didn't have a lot of AP classes, so we did dual credit at the community college. I think through there I had my slow awakening.

Z Zubia Akhtar 02:53
Exposure to the world.

D Duriba Khan 02:55
Exactly. Some kid in the back of the class that was offering me drugs and I'm like, "Oh, this is new" [laughs]. I don't know, people have this perception of Islamic school like it's this holy place and super govern, genders don't mix, but that wasn't exactly the case. We were all friends [and] people were in relationships. I would say, from what I saw about public school on TV, at the end of the day, we're all just kids. We all go through the same things, we watch the same TV shows, read the same books, as like, whatever we see in popular culture. There was definitely a lot of parallels. There were more similarities than differences, I would say.

Z Zubia Akhtar 03:37
Okay. So, now being at UT and being in the Muslim community and just a part of all that, do you feel that you're very similar to them in how y'all grew up and stuff or any differences or anything?

D Duriba Khan 03:52
Something that I noticed off the bat was, when I graduated high school, I noticed that all my friends they were the same race as me, they were the same religion as me, not even the same religion, they were the same sect of religion. I made it a super bold point to kind of go out of my comfort zone and befriend people that I wouldn't have that much in common with just because I wanted to be experienced with different kinds of people in the world with different perspectives and viewpoints. So, I tried that. I joined an improv troupe, I ran for student government. [In] a lot of ways, I think, I definitely tried to put myself out there, but I started noticing that drinking was a really common thing in college, obviously. I think the statistics say that's about, at UT particularly, and I could be wrong, it's like 3% of UT students practice - they don't drink.

Z Zubia Akhtar 04:50
Yeah, I think that's the correct statistic.

D Duriba Khan 04:54

Yeah. Exactly, it's our little pre-orientation. I was ignoring that. I feel like drinking is a big part of college culture [and] so is smoking and obviously, there are Muslims who do that, but I personally was not really into that. So, it was kind of a shock in that sense. I went to some kickback for a student group that I'm a part of on campus. And it was a lot of alcohol and drinking and then I think it was at that point where like, I had never been in such proximity with those things. Really internally, the Islamic school girl in me is shaking. I think that was a big culture shock in that regard. I feel like although I tried a lot to venture, I ended up just keeping friends with the people that were a lot like me. But I think college really helped me grow in that. I also have friends that venture outside of that, but I think it's just easier and more comfortable to be with the people that had the same values as you regardless of whether or not they have the same religion.

Z

Zubia Akhtar 06:08

So, going off of that, tell me more about what it means to you to be Muslim or Muslim this, as people say?

D

Duriba Khan 06:20

I think the beauty of being Muslim in America is that a lot of people will prescribe to this idea that they're a Muslim, but there's no concrete definition for what that means. And I think it's best that way because everybody defines religiosity on their own levels. For me in particular, I just frankly believe that if you take Allah (SWT) as your God, you believe in the five pillars of Islam, four pillars of Amman, then congrats, you're Muslim. And regardless of whether or not you can manifest that in your daily life in your practice - because there are a lot of my really close Muslim friends that they drink or they eat pork, but that doesn't make them any more or less Muslim to me.

Z

Zubia Akhtar 07:11

Going off of that, you went to an Islamic school, so you were around a Muslim community and now, you are still in another Muslim community. Do you see differences in within them? I guess, being a young Muslim American, what you just said, you're not less Muslim than me if you do this and you're not more Muslim than me if you do this, do you see that? [Do] a lot of people talk about that in your community?

D

Duriba Khan 07:38

Yeah, I think a specific distinction always has to be made between culture and religion. I feel like that's something that has negatively impacted a lot of people in Islamic school

and here in college because there's this notion that, I guess, sexism was kind of something that is more rampant in the Islamic community here, I would say. But not so much because of religious prescriptions, it's more like a cultural thing. And that can also be further emphasized through fact that, yeah, we have a really big Muslim Student Association at UT here, but it's not very ethnically or culturally diverse. It's all people that come from predominantly the South Asian continent, which is kind of startling to see how that kind of manifests through the MSA and then contrast that to my experience in Islamic school where most people were of Middle Eastern descent.



Zubia Akhtar 08:42

Another thing I want to talk about is that you are the president of the Pakistani Student Association.



Duriba Khan 08:47

Co-president. My co-president likes to make that distinction.



Zubia Akhtar 08:51

So, you're the co-president. And something that I've noticed or heard people talk about is that, like what you were saying [about] how we fail to make the big difference between culture and religion, where do you see that in the functions you have to put together for your org and stuff related to that?



Duriba Khan 09:12

Definitely. I think a big misunderstanding that people frequently have is that the Pakistani Student Association's predominant purpose is to just represent Pakistan in the US, like hundred percent unadulterated Pakistan. But the way I see it is that it resembles the Pakistani-American experience, right. I think with full confidence a lot of people, myself included, could say that there's definitely some kind of difference there.



Duriba Khan 09:45

Obviously, in Pakistan, women don't get their due right and process in a lot of regards and that is a hundred percent due to cultural forces, not actual Islam. But over here, it's more liberating in that sense and that manifests through singing and dancing, which are things that, if done in some parts of Pakistan, back home, would be seen as - they would elicit a really inflammatory response. Whereas here, it is more accepted. But there are still some

people that tie that back to their feelings in terms of what they practice at home. Even within our own board, it's kind of hard to navigate that space because everybody's definition of what is Pakistani or what is Muslim is different. I could say that something is unislamic or not Pakistani enough whereas to someone else that may be the only exposure they have to Pakistan or even a song.

Z

Zubia Akhtar 10:48

Alright. Something you mentioned was women have more say here and stuff and feminism is another topic that I want to talk about because I know that it's something you voice a lot on your social media and you're very passionate about. So, as a Muslim woman, how do you feel being an American being in Texas and what are some things you experience - some challenges and stuff?

D

Duriba Khan 11:11

Definitely. I mean, this distinction is kind of hard to make, I guess, through audio, but I don't practice hijab and I think that gives me a lot of leeway and freedom because people just assume that I'm of Hindu faith. I feel like the way you look carries a lot with you, especially in America. And when you don't practice hijab, people unfortunately have a hard time believing that you're even Muslim. You just get reduced to, not your hijab or however you cover, but the color of your skin.

D

Duriba Khan 11:48

I would say if I experienced any kind of discrimination outwardly through people that I don't know is through racism because I'm an Indian-Pakistani woman. Then when you contrast that to the opposition that people that look exactly like me, but they wear hijab, it's completely different, it's much more extreme on their level. In terms of, I guess, intersectional feminism is one of the things that I personally consider myself a huge advocate for just because the current White feminist agenda doesn't really cater to women that look or believe in the same things I do or are me. I think kind of working to modify your feminism for each person [is important] because feminism is also about choice. So the choice to observe hijab or to not observe hijab or to wear a miniskirt. That is something that inherently must be respected by everyone, all parties.

Z

Zubia Akhtar 13:03

No, that was good. And that's something you were saying about how choosing to wear hijab or not wearing hijab or wearing a skirt is something that needs to be respected by

all. Something that we were talking about earlier is how men don't always acknowledge that or people within our own community, Muslim men [laughs]. Have you experienced anything like that? Like differences between women or men in terms of [being] Muslim?

D

Duriba Khan 13:31

Oh, yeah, definitely. I feel like especially in America, and I would also distribute some of this blame to cultural forces, but even the way our parents treat us, if you contrast the way that a lot of guys my age are treated versus a lot of girls my age are treated, that can get very ambiguous. Because something that's frequently reported is that - this isn't so much of an issue in my household - I feel like because my sister and I are older than my brother, so we've always been able to insert, I guess, our authority in that way.

D

Duriba Khan 14:04

But a lot of parents tend to give a lot more leeway to older boys in their family. They're allowed to stay out late, if they smoke, it's just seen as them going through a phase whereas if a girl were to perform that same whatever behavior it would be seen as bringing shame to the family and she would be married off to a goat [laughs]. I hate that, you know, it's like the conversations we have typically boil down to these families that enforce patriarchal standards. You always hear about the families that do bad to the daughters, but there is a lot of Muslim American families that their daughters are allowed to go out and speak out and dance and sing [and] express emotion.

Z

Zubia Akhtar 14:54

Would you include yourself in that category?

D

Duriba Khan 14:56

Definitely. I feel like I'm very, very grateful that my parents have always - whatever freedoms they have guaranteed my brother, I've always received the same and that's how it should be. But unfortunately, a lot of families don't operate like that. My parents, a lot of times they may not agree with the things that I say or do, but they have never stopped me from - I know [going to] protest[s] used to be a big thing for my dad. He's always thought that going to protests is inherently bad for your safety - "You can be targeted, FBI is gonna spy on you, someone's gonna blow a bomb there." Unfortunately, these are things that we do have to consider. I have to think twice before I go somewhere. Like, "Oh, what if I get shot today?"

Z Zubia Akhtar 15:08
Because you're a woman who is brown and not white.

D Duriba Khan 15:38
Yeah, exactly. Those are the things you definitely have to consider, but I know my dad does it from a place of love and care. I feel like I've also been very outspoken about stuff since a very young age. And though most people, I would say, in the Muslim community in Austin, where I'm from, have been very appreciative and supportive of that and they have definitely given me platforms to uplift. There's a lot of organizations in Austin that planned events and they'd always ask me to help out or speak or whatever [or] MC. Even my alma mater, they've been pretty good about those kind of things. But there's still a lot of people even in our MSA that have problems with, I guess, I would say me in particular because I'm kind of loud.

Z Zubia Akhtar 16:29
Wow, and you think that has to go back to you being a Muslim woman [as opposed to] if a Muslim man was loud?

D Duriba Khan 16:35
Definitely. And that can also be reinforced through the way that a woman also, Muslim woman, treat more outspoken -

Z Zubia Akhtar 16:43
Like women ourselves, how we see women who speak out. Yeah.

D Duriba Khan 16:48
Yeah. And I do improv, so I've kind of noticed that a lot - even when we're working on a film for - [the] Muslim Student Association has this competition [called] showdown. Something that I've noticed is that my group and I were working to make a short film, a comedy short film, and we're like, "Oh, should the main character be a guy or girl?" I think, somebody had said, and I always remember this, they said, "For some reason people always laugh more or think something's funnier when it's a guy that's doing it."

- Z** Zubia Akhtar 17:06
Really?
- D** Duriba Khan 17:09
I think that is something that also follows in Hollywood and Bollywood and current media. It's something and I find myself kind of prescribing to those weird, implicit rules, per se. And it's kind of -
- Z** Zubia Akhtar 17:35
An inherent thing.
- D** Duriba Khan 17:36
Exactly. And frankly, I wonder where that comes from and why that's there. [It's] so interesting because it's cross cultural.
- Z** Zubia Akhtar 17:45
Definitely. Yeah. Well, thank you so much. I was wondering if you had anything else you wanted to talk about yourself or let us know that you're really passionate about?
- D** Duriba Khan 17:58
Let's see. Is there anything you guys are particularly wanting people to talk about?
- Z** Zubia Akhtar 18:05
No, it's all about yourself, whatever you want, anything you want to say about yourself, running issues you have with anyone
- D** Duriba Khan 18:16
Okay, this was on [a] Muslim focus, not South Asian or cultural focus.
- Z** Zubia Akhtar 18:23
In the end, I feel like they go hand in hand. So, you could say that. It's about your life as a

Muslim woman. As a Muslim woman, you're not always just Muslim. Does that make sense?

D

Duriba Khan 18:33

Exactly. Okay, I'll share a story. My parents are both a part of the medical field. My dad is a psychiatrist, my mom is a PA and I feel like this is - and I only bring this up because I know somebody, some Muslim kid somewhere is listening to this - wherever you are, I know how you feel. I feel like there was always this obligation on me - most people when they're growing up, they get asked, most Muslim or cultural, most families they get asked, "Oh, what do you wanna be when you grow up, doctor, engineer or lawyer?" And people always laugh because they can all relate. For me, growing up, it was always like, "What kind of doctor do you want to be? Do you want to be a neuro surgeon or a dermatologist?" I feel like for a long time, I saw that my sister wanted to [be a doctor], she's in medical school now.

Z

Zubia Akhtar 19:19

She made it harder for you.

D

Duriba Khan 19:22

Exactly. It was in high school that I joined student government and I worked a lot with our school's board and help[ed with] leading initiatives and stuff. I really started loving public service. I was like, "This is so fun. I'm gonna be doctor and represent all these communities and help all these people out." I think the older I got the more I realized that, I guess, the medical field wasn't really for me. Not in that I didn't like helping people or what, but the material is just hard for me to grasp. I was more of a writer reader kind of person than memorize understand kind of person.

D

Duriba Khan 20:08

I feel like it was around my senior year of high school where I decided that, "Okay, I don't think this is something that I can go through with," and I was applying for colleges then. I remember I was driving home with my mom and I was like, okay, this is it, I gotta, I'm just gonna blurt it out, it's just gonna happen. So she was just driving and I was like, "Hey, you know, I've been looking into applying for colleges and stuff." And she's like, "Yeah, yeah, you should be." I was like, "I don't think I want to be a doctor. I don't want to do biology pre-med."

- D** Duriba Khan 20:41
She almost like, foot on the brake, slammed the breaks. She was like, "Why do you say that?" I was just like, "It's not for me," and she's like, "How do you know, you've never done it? You don't know anything?" I was like, "I know enough to know that no." She was kind of upset. She tried to talk me out of it and she was like, "What are you gonna do? Like, what else is there? There's nothing." I was like, "Oh, I want to go to law school. And she's like, "You're just gonna lie to people." That's every desi party I've been to - some uncle will come up to me and be like, "Oh, you're pre-law, you're just gonna lie to people and break families." And I'm like -
- Z** Zubia Akhtar 21:20
Never heard that one before. [laughs] that is so funny.
- D** Duriba Khan 21:23
Really? I get that one too.
- Z** Zubia Akhtar 21:25
My dad is so pro-lawyer.
- D** Duriba Khan 21:27
Really? I want to meet your dad for a self-esteem boost.
- Z** Zubia Akhtar 21:31
He would try to get my brother to be a lawyer. You don't know how many [times he's said] just be a lawyer. Any person's child he'd meet [he'd say], "Be a lawyer, go to law school."
- D** Duriba Khan 21:39
Oh my god, I want to meet your dad. What does your brother do?
- Z** Zubia Akhtar 21:42
He's [in] international relations. He works for Chinese immigration and stuff, so y'all would like each other. He's a lot like you, y'all would have a good conversation. He just doesn't

want to go to law school.

D

Duriba Khan 21:54

Cool. Yeah, there's so many other ventures, especially [with a] master's degrees in public policy. There's a lot you can do with that. But, yeah, what was I saying?

Z

Zubia Akhtar 22:05

Just like your parents telling - you decided to go be a lawyer.

D

Duriba Khan 22:08

Yeah. We were eating dinner and I told my dad and he was so upset. He did not talk to me for like a week. I was just stuck in my room all day. I was crying every single day. I was like, "I dissappointed my parents. My parents came to America, they worked their butts off. They did all of this just so I could have a better future and this is the one thing that they wanted from me and I still can't give it to them." I was reading about this a couple weeks ago and that can, I think, rightfully be categorized as immigrant kid guilt.

Z

Zubia Akhtar 22:40

Yeah. I've heard of that. And something you were saying earlier [about] how does this fall under being Muslim? I feel like a lot of parents - a lot of the reason we care so much about our parents [and about] what they want is because islamically, we should respect our parents.

D

Duriba Khan 22:57

Yeah, I would say that's one of the first things that we're taught in islamic school. There's that really famous hadith of the Prophet. A sahaba comes to the Prophet and he says, "Your mother, your mother, your mother" [laughs]. Part of Islam emphasizes that you should take care of your parents, do well to your parents. I feel like that gets kind of wrapped up in it, but there's nothing in Islam that says you have to be a doctor.

Z

Zubia Akhtar 23:33

Yeah, that's interesting to talk about the immigrant child guilt because that's true. And that's something that our generation specifically has to struggle with the most because I think the next generation won't have to deal with it as much as we did.

- D** Duriba Khan 23:47
No, and it manifests in so many interesting ways. For me, personally, I'm applying to law schools this year. My parents really, really, really want me to go somewhere in Texas, even if it means going to [a] less ranked school because they just want me to be close to them. And I feel like by not wanting to do that, I'm disappointing them. So even if it means less educational opportunities, if it means I have to make my parents happy, I'm willing to make that sacrifice even though I've worked my entire undergrad career for getting into a great law school.
- Z** Zubia Akhtar 24:22
Going off of that, do you think that being Muslim or being a Muslim woman specifically will have an impact on your career goal of wanting to be a lawyer? And already, have you felt any adversity in that?
- D** Duriba Khan 24:35
Definitely. This can be most witnessed with Congresswoman Ilhan Omar and I feel like mainly because she does wear a hijab. I feel like when you wear hijab, there's so much extra bias and hatred and bigotry that follows you when you're completely undeserving of it.
- Z** Zubia Akhtar 24:54
For sure.
- D** Duriba Khan 24:55
I've always been interested in venturing in local government or even public policy. And as a Muslim woman, I've considered that.
- Z** Zubia Akhtar 25:03
You've considered that.
- D** Duriba Khan 25:05
Exactly.



Zubia Akhtar 25:07

Wow. Well, okay, thank you so much, Duriba. This was great. I love talking to you and thank you.