

# Seja Haque

March 21, 2019 43:06

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Ray High School, Corpus Christi, feminism, Muslim woman identity, Latino culture, immigrant parents, First-generation American, Eid, Ramadan, Pakistan, Destination Imagination, Urdu, culture, immigration, Sunni Islam, The University of Texas at Austin

## SPEAKERS

Kylie Heitzenrater, Seja Haque

- 
- K** Kylie Heitzenrater 00:02  
This is the second interview with Kylie Heitzenrater for the Muslim Voices oral history project. It is March 21, 2019 around 10 o'clock and I have Seja here with me. Would you introduce yourself please, Seja.
- S** Seja Haque 00:17  
Okay. Hi, I'm Seja. I'm eighteen and I was born here in Corpus and I'm a senior at Ray High School.
- K** Kylie Heitzenrater 00:28  
Could you please say your last name?
- S** Seja Haque 00:29  
Yeah, Haque.
- K** Kylie Heitzenrater 00:31  
Okay. Do you think you could tell us a little bit about yourself, like expand a little bit more about your background growing up in Corpus Christi or just a little bit?



Seja Haque 00:42

Okay. Yeah. I was born in Corpus. I play piano, which is really fun, and I do DI and debate and also I am really active in my youth group at my mosque. It's a lot of fun because we have Sunday school and so, I kind of went there all the time when I was younger. Now I teach there, so that's exciting. I used to play basketball, but not anymore.



Kylie Heitzenrater 01:20

Could you please explain what DI is and then expand a little bit more about growing up in your mosque community and then eventually teaching there?



Seja Haque 01:28

Yeah. DI is Destination Imagination. It's really big in Texas. This is a question that everyone always struggles on whenever they get asked what DI is because it's everything and nothing at the same time. It's supposed to be creative problem solving, which it is, and you basically use different skills to solve a problem or a prompt that you're given, and most of the time it involves a performance or some sort of community project. For example, a lot of the times we'll do the theatrical challenge. So we'll have a problem and we approach it through a skit or we'll do a project outreach challenge, which is addressing a need in your community. I did that one time and basically established a debate club in an elementary school and a middle school that both feed into Ray, so that was cool.



Seja Haque 02:31

As I got older, I stopped going. Because I was like, "Oh, well, I know everything. I don't need to go here anymore. I'm getting older." I had stuff to do on the weekends, which now, I wish I hadn't done that. But it's nice to see that it's grown. It's grown a lot. There are a lot more kids there. A couple of years ago, this lady who organizes the Sunday school was like, "Hey, do you want to teach here now that you're older and I think you can really get a good grip on what these kids are going to be able to understand." I'm like, "Okay, cool" because I was born here and so are these kids - it's not like our parents, who were born in a Muslim country.



Seja Haque 02:31

I got to teach Islamic studies there and it was a lot of fun and [I] got to see the new plans for the mosque that we're building right behind the one that we have right now. Because it's that much bigger that we need a new one because there's no room anymore. So that's

fun. I think that pretty much sums it up.

**S** Seja Haque 02:32

Growing up in my mosque was a lot of fun, honestly. When I was younger it was a very small community, there weren't as many people as there are now, so everyone knew everybody. I would go to Sunday school and all the teachers would be my mom's friends and the Imam at our mosque would teach us how to read Quran and that was a lot of fun.

**K** Kylie Heitzenrater 04:08

May I ask what sect of Islam you follow?

**S** Seja Haque 04:11

Yeah. My family and I are all Sunni, which is one of the two main branches.

**K** Kylie Heitzenrater 04:21

Thank you. Let's see, how would you describe your identity as a Muslim? What does it mean to you to be Muslim?

**S** Seja Haque 04:32

I think that a lot of it comes from first, do you believe in it at all, right? I don't think that to be a Muslim you have to be super strict and everything, if that makes sense. Maybe you do, but I don't think that because I'm not [strict]. I still think that I'm Muslim because I believe in all the things that we talk about in our mosque - and that is in the Quran, basic things, like be[ing] a good person.

**S** Seja Haque 04:32

Or if you are in an argument with someone and you do something and they apologized and you don't forgive them, all of the blame of that situation is placed upon you because this person is making a giant effort into making things good. I think that is really cool. Honestly, it's kind of a struggle, I think, living in a country where being Muslim is not something that's very common or at least [not] where I live in Corpus in Texas. Because - my gosh, i'm gonna cry - oh no.

- S** Seja Haque 05:06  
I think it's really unique to me because there are a lot of things that are supposed to be haram, but when it comes to a time in need, or a special circumstance, those restrictions are lifted. For example, you are always supposed to stay away from things that are haram in terms of eating or drinking. But if you're in a situation where you could be ill or you need medication or you could literally die if you don't eat this, it's permissible. Or we're really supposed to try and encourage others that are in our community to follow the teachings of the Quran, but we're also not supposed to judge them. You're not supposed to judge them and you're really not supposed to hurt their feelings because hurting someone's feelings is a bigger sin than actually committing a thing that we would typically think of as a sin.
- K** Kylie Heitzenrater 06:58  
It's okay. It's okay.
- S** Seja Haque 06:59  
Because laws and society can conform to you as much as they want and try and make you feel comfortable, but you're always going to have this internal struggle that nothing can alleviate. Because you constantly go back and forth between, "Am I actually being a good person? Am I properly following or honoring my faith? And if I'm not, what does that make me?" [Cries] oh my god.
- K** Kylie Heitzenrater 07:35  
It's okay. Hold on, let me get you a tissue.
- S** Seja Haque 07:36  
It's fine. We're chilling.
- K** Kylie Heitzenrater 07:37  
Yeah [background chatter].
- S** Seja Haque 07:45  
Thank you [background chatter]. Sorry.



Kylie Heitzenrater 08:13

No, that's perfectly fine. This is a very emotional topic. If you feel comfortable talking about it, do you want to expand a little bit more on that internal struggle? Or would you rather we move on?



Seja Haque 08:25

No, it's okay, we can talk about it. I'm sure a lot of people feel like this. It's just little stuff that I do or that I see that I know that I probably shouldn't be doing. And it's hard because it's not that I don't care enough to refrain from doing it, but it's at the same time, I don't know if I actually do want to stop. It's stupid stuff like not wearing a hijab and letting my hair down or wearing a short sleeve t-shirt not even a sleeveless one, just one where my entire arm isn't covered. Then I will feel super guilty about it because I know that technically you're not supposed to do that. At the same time, I feel like I don't care enough to not do it and that makes me feel like I'm not being the best Muslim that I can be.



Seja Haque 09:31

I know that it's really something that isn't really a big deal and, in hindsight, probably doesn't matter. But stuff like that or even telling a white lie can keep me up at night because I know that it's wrong to do that even if it's for something small or something that doesn't matter at all or for a good reason. It eats me up and I don't know how to stop that.



Seja Haque 10:07

A lot of times my parents, when we talk about going to college, they are afraid to let me go. I think it's really dumb because I'm always like, "Well, you let my brother do it and he lives alone and everything's fine with him." And they're like, "Well, you're a girl and you're a Muslim." What does that mean? How does that matter?



Seja Haque 10:32

It's really hard to look at something as someone who could identify as a feminist and say, "Well, that's not wrong." And then look at the same thing from the point of view of being a Muslim woman and seeing where that could be wrong. I don't know how to make my values line up, so I just do the best that I can, but sometimes it just doesn't feel like it's enough.



Kylie Heitzenrater 11:07

Thank you so much for sharing. Going off of that, this project is also really interested in seeing how people perceive their identity as a Texan. As someone who was born and raised in Texas, in South Texas, how do you feel that you identify as a Texan? And if you feel you identify as a Texan, how do you reconcile that with being a Muslim?



Seja Haque 11:41

Texas is really big. Everything we do is big and loud and a little obnoxious, but that's fine. I think that I'm unknowingly, subconsciously, kind of like that. I go to other places and people are so to themselves, they don't really care, not in a bad way, but they're just indifferent. And I think living here isn't anything like that. I think everyone here is - even if they're not friendly, they're very outgoing in a sense. I feel like that sometimes.



Seja Haque 12:20

I think country music, even though I don't really like it that much, is a really big part. I think a lot of Hispanic culture, like Latino culture, is ingrained into Texas culture. I think that's really cool because it's nice - especially in Corpus or South Texas - it's nice to see a multitude of cultures, if that makes sense. And I think Texas was cool like that because it's just really big. There's no way that you're going to have a uniform thing in every single city. At least from where I stand, in the south, I think it's pretty diverse but in a really nice way.



Kylie Heitzenrater 13:15

Thank you. All right, let's see. Do you think you could tell me a little bit about what your family is like?



Seja Haque 13:21

Yeah. I have two brothers and I live with my parents. My older brother is at UT Austin, he's finishing up his last semester and he was going to go to graduate school there too. And my little brother goes to Baker, he's an eighth-grader, he's super cute, he plays basketball and all that. And my parents, I love them so much. My dad is - he works at a company - he manages a convenience store on Leopard. My mom is a phlebotomist at Doctors Regional, so right by Ray, and at Bay area.

S

Seja Haque 14:15

My parents are super cool. They're also kind of strict and religious, but at the same time they're pretty chill about things that aren't super important, if that makes sense. They'll let me go out on a school night to go to the gym or something - they won't keep me at home all the time. I think growing up with two brothers is fun because you learn how to fight and you learn how to get what you want. Everyone puts you on a pedestal because you're the only girl and you're the middle child, so they feel like they have to compensate for that. But my family is super cool. They're super loving and they're very supportive and I love them.

K

Kylie Heitzenrater 15:04

So you mentioned earlier in the interview that, well, first of all, that your brother goes to college and that he's fixing to go to graduate school and then that your parents were a little bit more worried about you going off to college versus your brother. Do you think you can speak a little bit about your education here in high school and then where you see it going in the future?

S

Seja Haque 15:26

Yeah. I recently got accepted into McCombs, the business school at UT, so I really want to go [bell]. Okay, sorry. There's another bell that's going to happen. That's like a one minute bell.

K

Kylie Heitzenrater 17:00

Oh, okay. [SESSION BREAK].

K

Kylie Heitzenrater 17:10

So we were talking about your education here at Ray and then going forward into the future, you were mentioning being accepted into McCombs at UT.

S

Seja Haque 17:20

I really want to go to school at UT. [I] got accepted into McCombs, so hopefully I will get [to go].



Seja Haque 17:32

I don't know what it's called.



Kylie Heitzenrater 17:37

Is it like a scholarship?



Seja Haque 17:43

I don't know. Is it just called your undergrad? Is that just what it's called?



Kylie Heitzenrater 17:48

Like the four years getting your degree? [NOISE; SESSION BREAK]



Kylie Heitzenrater 21:55

Okay, so take three. We were discussing your education, your time here at Ray, where you see going in the future. You were mentioning being accepted into McCombs for undergrad.



Seja Haque 22:08

Yeah, I want to do that. And then afterwards hopefully get into a law school because I really, really want to be a lawyer. I've always really wanted to. If that didn't work out, there's so much that you could do with a business degree. But yes, I want to go to law school, that's usually three years. [Then] do an internship, hopefully, [then] work at a nice firm, not in corporate. That's it really and just learn new things along the way.



Seja Haque 22:46

Obviously I'm not just going to be completely focused on a career path, but I think it's important to grow as a person. And I want to do that before I'm stuck in a position where I have just [keep] going to school and working. I think being in college is a really nice place to do that.



Kylie Heitzenrater 23:09

All right. And growing up, going through education, how was that for you? Was there ever



a moment where you realized that you were Muslim or had this epiphany or did it come on gradually?

S

Seja Haque 23:28

When I was younger, I obviously grew up in a house with two immigrant parents that they spoke English very well, but they didn't like to speak it in the house. All the English that I would hear would be from either cartoons, which I wasn't allowed to watch that much, or my older brother who went to preschool or kindergarten at the time. I didn't really know a whole lot of English or really at all except for what I would see on PBS. It was kind of hard to go to school, even preschool, and communicate with people.

S

Seja Haque 24:12

My parents, they were really good about it. They got a whole bunch of books with letters and little words and writing tools so that I could learn. Recently, [they] completely cleaned out my room so I could get ready for college and I found all the books that I had and my little handwriting in it. It was really cute. That was really interesting, but other than that, growing up, I went to Windsor Park after first grade, so in second grade, and I did pretty well in school. [Then I] went to Baker [and] did pretty good, didn't really have any problems.

S

Seja Haque 24:53

Now I'm an IV senior and all the problems associated with that don't really have to do with me not getting school. I didn't really have a whole lot of issues with learning or being able to do work. I think it's mainly when I was younger, just communicating, which I eventually got over, and now I'm the captain of the debate team so [laughs].

K

Kylie Heitzenrater 25:26

May I ask what your first language was?

S

Seja Haque 25:28

Yeah. My parents and I speak Urdu, which is a language native to Pakistan. It's kind of a mix of a whole bunch of different languages, mostly Hindi. If you understand Urdu, you probably understand Hindi. It's a cute language. There's a few words here and there that could be words in Spanish. The word "la camisa" in Spanish is "the shirt" and in Urdu, "camise" is a shirt. So it's kind of similar and obviously like Hindi, but that's because [of]

the whole India-Pakistan thing.

K

Kylie Heitzenrater 26:08

So I take it your parents emigrated from Pakistan to the U.S.?

S

Seja Haque 26:11

Yeah. First my dad and his brothers came here when they were probably in their mid 20s to go to school. Eventually, they stopped doing that [because] my uncle got into this accident and my dad kind of took care of him. They were in med school and just kind of stopped [going]. Then my dad went back to Pakistan and he got married to my mom. And my mom was in school there, but my dad had a job here and had established a place for him here, so they moved together.

S

Seja Haque 26:55

My mom finished up school in Corpus and now she's a phlebotomist. She's still going back to school, hopefully to work in the lab, more technology stuff. That's really cool. I don't think that my parents have had a lot of problems in terms of being immigrants, fitting in mostly. It's kind of like my parents just trying to keep us in a place where we know where we came from because obviously we didn't immigrate from Pakistan. We are still unfamiliar with a lot of stuff that happens in our culture even though my parents try their best to emulate it.

S

Seja Haque 27:52

I went to Pakistan two summers ago to see my grandmother because she was really sick. I wanted to make sure that I got to see her at least once before she could potentially die and it was so different than what I thought it was going to be. Everyone in Pakistan is really close together, not in proximity, but just their relationship with each other. They're so close it's like on TV when you see a really friendly neighborhood. I know people don't typically think of Pakistan like that, but you'll have an entire city act that way, like everyone knows each other and I think that's really cool.

S

Seja Haque 28:38

I went during Eid or during Ramadan, so I got to spend Eid in Pakistan and it was so much fun. We just went shopping for clothes and we all got henna or mendhi on our hands. We got our eyebrows done and all that, but it was definitely too hot to go out on Eid, so we're

all dressed up at home. It was fun.



Kylie Heitzenrater 29:07

Thank you. Do you think you could say a little bit more about the role that you see Islam playing in your life?



Seja Haque 29:17

Yeah, I think there are a lot of things that I am. I don't want to say that it limits me because I don't think that. I think that the word limit has a really bad connotation. But I think there are a lot of things that I won't do that maybe I would have wanted to at some point just because it's something that doesn't really coincide with Islam.



Seja Haque 29:49

For example, I really, really wanted to be an actress - like really badly. But there's just some stuff that I think that I wouldn't be able to do in order to still feel like I'm being a good Muslim for myself because there's already so much that I think I do that I probably shouldn't be doing. That's not something that I can really compromise anymore at this point. And I know that there [are] Muslim actresses and all that and I think that's really awesome because I think representation is so important. But I think for myself, I wouldn't ever be able to do that.



Seja Haque 30:31

I also really wanted to be a forensic scientist when I was younger like on TV and stuff like that. I just gave up on it because I felt like I wouldn't really be able to spend the time that I needed to devote to my faith. Like being a very busy person, it's hard to make sure that you're praying on time and make sure that you're going to the mosque at least once a day. I don't even do that because I'm at school most of the time then I go home and I have to do homework. And while at school, I've missed two prayers already. [I] wake up early in the morning to pray and then take a 30 minute nap before I have to start getting ready for school. So there's just a few things that I don't really think I can or would want to do, I guess.



Seja Haque 31:30

But other than that there's nothing really in Islam that makes me feel like I can't do stuff. I know that a lot of times people are like, "Well, this isn't very empowering." As a woman, it's

hard. I talked about that earlier to see where my values line up. I think it just comes down to what I think is right based on other principles that I've learned through my faith - to be fair and to not hurt anyone's feelings. I think if that means that I have to do something that could technically be haram or that someone would frown upon, then I would still do it because it's the right thing to do. And I think that's more important. I think that's something that I've learned in Sunday school and through my parents and even my mom will talk about how doing the right thing is always important. So I think it just comes down to me as an individual and everyone else.

K

Kylie Heitzenrater 32:34

Alright, thank you. Let's see what else you've got here. So this is the last question from my end. As I said before, part of this project is identifying how you identify as a Muslim and then the other part is seeing how you identify yourself as a Texan. Would you mind discussing a little bit about how you see the Texan narrative, just from your own perspective?

S

Seja Haque 33:15

Yeah. Like I said before, I think Texas is super big, super close knit, at least in different regions. I think there's a lot of different cultures in Texas, especially South Texas, a lot of Latino and Hispanic influence, which I think is really awesome living in Corpus. I think that there's a parallel between Texas and for example, my mosque. The really interesting thing about being Muslim or just religion in general is that you don't have to have a specific culture. You don't have to have a specific identity other than being Muslim that makes you Muslim, which I think is really cool.

S

Seja Haque 34:01

There are a lot of people in my mosque that are from different communities in terms of culture, right? And they speak different languages. A lot of people don't even speak English very well. I think that when you see something like that happening and you see a place like corpus or Texas where people tend to speak more Spanish and there tends to be more places where there's different restaurants and stuff like that - like you have a few Indian restaurants, and you have a lot of Asian food, and a lot of Hispanic food - I see that happening in my community too.

S

Seja Haque 34:49

We have community dinners the first Saturday of every month and you're supposed to

bring stuff from your home or whatever you would like to eat. And a lot of times it's exactly the same as when I drive around downtown Corpus and I see these small businesses. It's just like that. I see Mediterranean food or I'll see Mexican food. And I think it's really cool that I don't really have to pick if I want to be Texan or if I want to be Pakistani or if I want to be Muslim. I think that I can be everything and it's the same. I don't think there's a difference, at least for me.

K

Kylie Heitzenrater 35:34

All right. So you were saying that you grew up speaking Urdu and then you learned English in preschool. Do you do a lot of code switching at home? Do you switch back and forth between Urdu and English or is it still primarily Urdu?

S

Seja Haque 35:49

Oh my gosh, it's awful. I don't know how to speak English and I don't know how to speak Urdu. That's how I feel because it happens at school too. I'll be speaking a sentence in English and then I'll just say something in Urdu and everyone will look at me like I'm crazy because I just said a word that doesn't make any sense in English. Or I'll be at home and I will take a verb in Urdu - I will say the verb and I will add "ing" to the end of it and my mom is like, "What are you saying?" I'll try to say going. I'll say "I'm going," but I'll use the verb in Urdu and then I'll put "ing" at the end. So 'to go' in Urdu is 'jao.' I'll say 'jao-ing' and my mom is like, "What does that mean?" And I think that's really funny. There's still sometimes where I think in one language and I have to translate it in my head.

S

Seja Haque 36:57

Recently, in my English class, we read this book "Lost in Translation" by Eva Hoffman. And she talks about how going from speaking Polish to English is a very hard transition for her because she doesn't understand English. There's no emotion in English that really connects with her. To some extent I feel like that's true. I don't think that English is an emotionless language and I don't think that Urdu is the only language that makes sense to me, but there are words in Urdu that there are no words for in English. There's no way for me to translate that feeling and anything that could possibly be synonymous is kind of devoid of the same feeling.

S

Seja Haque 37:52

And in the same thing in English, sometimes there's a phrase or something that I'm trying to tell my parents and they're like, "I don't understand what you're saying, say it in Urdu."

I'm like, "Okay, but I don't know how to say it in Urdu." And I think that happens a lot. It happens a lot when I'm writing. I don't write in Urdu. I can't really. It's very similar to Arabic. I can kind of write it, but I don't really write in it, I never really did. That was before I was really writing and reading when I spoke it mostly.

S

Seja Haque 38:26

I will sit there and try to think of a word to kind of match what I'm thinking in my head. And I'll write something down really quick and it will make no sense when I go back and read it just because it's not something that you can really translate or switch over. But I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing. I think that languages even though they're meant to communicate, they're all special in their own way. They all kind of have little - there's dialects and stuff that differ in their diction, even their syntax, that you can't really have in a different language. I'm just glad that I know both of them because it would be really hard to communicate at school or with my parents if I didn't know both.

K

Kylie Heitzenrater 39:13

How do you feel having both of those languages ties into your own personal identity?

S

Seja Haque 39:22

Well first with English, I think it's just really nice to know it because this is the only really universal language in Texas other than Spanish, which I'm trying to learn but failing really miserably at. Because everything is in English, so if I don't know it then I feel like a stranger in my own country. Not to say that people that don't speak English are not the same, but I do feel left out when I see something and I don't understand what it means. Or if my friends make a reference to something that they watched as a child or something and I don't know what that is because my parents didn't know what that was. It's just stuff like that. Or when people say, "Oh, I bet your parents listened to this when they were teens." And I'm like, "Oh, no, they didn't. I promise you that they did not." My parents watched Amitabh Bachchan on TV when they were teens not Betty White or whatever. So it's stuff like that.

S

Seja Haque 40:27

But then for Urdu, I think it's just so important to me that I know it because there's already so much that I've kind of lost from my culture, that I can't have, that I will probably never get to have or experience in the same way that my family did before me. And having that language is just a connection that I have to that culture. Because even if I don't have all

the festivities, even if I don't celebrate the Independence Day in Pakistan or whatever, [even if] I don't keep up with the politics, it's like I have something that still makes me feel like I'm from Pakistan even though I was born here. I think that's really important because I never want to feel like I'm getting lost in this world that is, I guess, people say it's a melting pot, and I guess that's okay. But that's really more to say that people can live together, like coexist, but I don't think it's good to have everyone be the same.

S

Seja Haque 41:36

I think it's nice to have your own traditions, your own culture, things that make you feel like you're someone other than just one of a group. And I really like that. I hold on to that language. My parents yell at me to say it at home. I used to be really annoyed and I was like, "Well, I don't know how to speak Urdu" even though I obviously do. Now I say, okay, [and] I do because if I lose that I don't really have anything. It's not like I can go to Pakistan every day and my parents are getting old. Eventually they're just going to stop speaking in Urdu if no one is responding in it and I don't have other family close by that really speaks Urdu. All my cousins are older than I am, but they all pretty much speak English. Even when I'm with my family I don't really speak it that much anymore and that kind of upsets me. But I always try to make an effort around my parents because I know that they'll actually encourage it and I'll never actually lose that. So that's always nice.

K

Kylie Heitzenrater 42:54

Well, thank you so much for this interview. We're going to wrap up. It's around 11 o'clock and we're done.