

Faiza Susan

March 25, 2021 37:05

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Ahmadi Muslim, Nasirat, Qur'anic recitation, Prejudice, Racism, Persecution, Code switching, Immigrant parents, Counseling, Mental health, September 11, The University of Texas at Dallas, Muslim Student Association, Wylie, Pakistan

SPEAKERS

Faiza Susan, Rimsha Syed



Rimsha Syed 00:02

Hi, this is Rimsha Syed. The date is March 25, 2021. I am the program coordinator with IDCL, currently in Austin, Texas on a Zoom call with Faiza Susan for the Texas Muslim Voices oral history project. So without further ado, Faiza, can you tell us a little bit about yourself and also where you're joining the Zoom call from today?



Faiza Susan 00:32

Well hi, my name is Faiza Susan. I'm joining from Wylie, Texas. What else would you like? Well, I'm sort of excited to talk about my own experiences as a Muslim woman, especially as an Ahmadi Muslim woman living in Texas, and what my journey has been so far.



Rimsha Syed 01:03

Lovely. So I actually want to jump back in time a little and ask if you could tell us about your childhood and where you were born.



Faiza Susan 01:14

Sure. I was born in San Jose, California in 1990. But we didn't stay there for so long. We then briefly moved to Oklahoma. And then in 1995, we moved to Texas. I had a really

good childhood. I have my mom and my dad and my two younger sisters. And it was mostly peaceful. Played around a lot like a normal child growing up here. Nothing really out of the ordinary. I played, I had dolls. I just was an ordinary little girl.



Rimsha Syed 01:59

Right, right. And what is your family dynamic like? Are your parents from California originally, and you have siblings?



Faiza Susan 02:11

My parents immigrated from Pakistan, my dad came earlier, he came around 1980, and my mom came around 1989. I have two younger sisters, so I'm the oldest. They've been going strong for as long as I've been alive, at least maybe 31 years. They've been going strong together.



Rimsha Syed 02:36

Right. Yeah, I'd also love to hear about your school experiencing as you moved around a lot. First from California to Oklahoma while you were younger. I'm just curious as to how that affected you and your siblings being in school?



Faiza Susan 02:55

Well, when I came over to Texas, when I was five years old, that's when we decided to just stay. So I didn't really have that much moving going around. But let me see. I was pretty much really young. Born in California, and then going to Oklahoma and then Texas, I don't really have that many memories of that. And it wasn't like we moved around a lot. Back in 2003, we decided to move from Carrollton over to Wylie, I guess for more space. But that really didn't have any effect per se because it wasn't a lot of moving or shifting around. It was during summer we would move, so it wouldn't be obvious interruptions with our schooling. It really didn't have much of an impact on us growing up.



Rimsha Syed 03:56

Yeah, that makes sense. Thanks for sharing. Seems like you've been in Texas for the majority of your life now. And I was wondering how you like it here and how you like it in Wylie and what the Ahmadi Muslim population is like they're.



Faiza Susan 04:15

Sure yeah. I've been here in Texas for about 25 years. I love Texas. It's one of those places where there's no other place like it on Earth. Only in Texas you can get below zero degrees and then you'll go to 90 degree temperatures in the afternoon. Isn't that unique? So you just learn to love this state. You learn to love its eccentricities, like the big Texas size donuts or Texas sized drinks. Growing up here especially - the community, I remember when it started off real small here in Dallas. I remember that especially.



Faiza Susan 05:01

Growing up, when I was eight years old, that's when we opened up our first mosque around the Dallas area, it was really around the Carrollton-Farmers Branch area, it was a little suite of an office. And with a little partition curtain differentiating between the men's and the ladies' hall. It was always been that way, sort of a closed off community. And because that's how we've grown up, our parents and our grandparents who came over from Pakistan, that's how they had to be in a sort of closed off enclave, worshipping in different areas, up until they raised enough funds for a mosque. So it's always been like that.



Faiza Susan 05:48

But now I see that the community is indeed thriving more, there's way more Ahmadi Muslims over here. Especially, we're now in Allen right now, and we have a big mosque we built. So I'd say it's thriving, but it's still sort of a more closed off community. If you were to ask people in North Texas which mosques to go to, of course they'll say Collin County mosque or the Allen mosque, they wouldn't really call us because we're kind of a closed off community in that way.



Rimsha Syed 06:28

Right. And did you have friends at the mosque who were around your age?



Faiza Susan 06:35

Yes, I did. I wouldn't say friends so much as they were girls my age. Because at that point, they were already - it's because they were there among themselves, they were cousins. It was a sort of like, if you weren't from their family, you felt that being an outsider, just because you didn't know their own family or whatever.



Rimsha Syed 07:02

Right. Yeah, so something that I hear a lot from Muslim immigrant children is the whole concept of code switching, when you act a certain way around your immigrant community. But then when you're in school, say, a predominantly White institution, for example, you catch yourself acting in a different way, based on that community, and I was curious if you have any experience in that.



Faiza Susan 07:35

Definitely. I grew up in Wylie and Wylie, that is definitely Republican, predominantly White town. And there are just some things you would not catch yourself doing at, let's say, Wylie High School. I would have to just talk and not say "talk White," per se, but I would really have to talk at their lingo, be into their stuff. Not really mention so much my mosque activities, because at that point, this was around maybe the early 2000s. This was still the aftermath of 9/11. People still had that attitude of "Muslims are terrorists" or what not.



Faiza Susan 08:18

So I had to keep that part of myself hidden and talk in their way. Use more southern drawl, more Southern dynamics, be into football more. But then when I go to mosque, let's say for, Islamic school or whatnot, that's an entirely different me over there. We talk different things over there. So it's like, you have to maintain two different roles. One is for your high school persona, and then one is for your mosque persona.



Rimsha Syed 08:51

Right. So I'm getting the sense that there weren't very many other brown kids at your high school.



Faiza Susan 08:58

Not at that time, there was one other, but she wasn't really my friend per se. We were really just the only two was. It was at that point, really, really predominantly White.



Rimsha Syed 09:13

And as you've gotten older, do you find yourself switching between those two personas

less often? Or is it still the same thing?



Faiza Susan 09:25

I think less and less often because I am out of high school and then going into college where there's so much more diversity, so much more, for lack of better terminology, brown people, Muslim people at college. I find I could be more of myself at college and grad school, versus how I was in high school. So definitely, as I've gotten older, those two personas have meshed together. I've grown to accept more of my heritage. I've grown to accept more of my Islamic background and my faith and whatnot than I was in high school. High school, I really hid it. But now I'm just like, "I'm proud to be Muslim" and whatnot.



Rimsha Syed 10:14

Yeah, totally. I would love to hear more about what that process was like for you personally and becoming proud, as you say, about your heritage and your Muslim identity.



Faiza Susan 10:29

Well, growing up I would say, high school, that's really the salient point for this. 9/11 happened when I was in sixth grade. And it didn't really hit me up until maybe eighth grade - eighth grade over here, it's sort of the starting point before high school. So eighth grade, that's when I'd have people here in Wylie call me "sand n-word." They will call that to me straight to my face. And at that point, I never heard that word. And someone had to explain to me, that's what they used to call Muslims in a very derogatory way.



Faiza Susan 11:04

So that was the point where it really hit me like, "Wow, there are people that would hate me just because I am Muslim." The way my mosque approached the hatred towards Muslims at that point, they were saying you have to be quote, unquote, "the best example of being a Muslim." I tried so hard to be nice to ingratiate myself and not try to talk about my religion so much, but try to put a good foot forward. Then going to college, and then grad school, and then just having to learn more about the world and learn more about my faith, per se, I was just like, "Okay, this is my faith. This is what it really is. I don't have to always be ingratiating myself or be ashamed of who I am. This is who I am. I shouldn't be hiding that."



Faiza Susan 11:59

So it took a long while. And also that was a spiritual journey for me just having to go from being totally naive to the point where I know the facts and I'm not ashamed of it. I don't proselytize by any means. I don't like proselytizing. But if you want to talk about faith, I'm okay with talking about my faith. I'm at that point where I'm chill with that. Not trying to hide or trying to be, quote, unquote, "the good example," "the ambassador," or whatever.



Rimsha Syed 12:36

Thank you for sharing.



Faiza Susan 12:38

You're welcome.



Rimsha Syed 12:39

I guess that leads me to ask, what does being Ahmadi mean to you?



Faiza Susan 12:48

That's a pretty loaded question. I remember there was one point when I was eight years old, I had a friend named Anita. I found out at that point, she was Muslim too. And I thought, "Oh, wow, I have a Muslim friend." And so I remember one day, I can remember this clear as day. We were in the playground, and I was like, "Hey, what sort of prayers do you do at mosque?" Because sometimes you just want to know, "Hey, do we do the same thing?" That sort of child-like curiosity. And she was saying the prayers that she used, and I was like, "Wow, that's different than what we use." So that was the point where it really honed in to me, "Hey, there's a difference in Muslims."



Faiza Susan 13:39

And then, as time moved on, and then I went to Islamic school more often, I would really learn what being Ahmadi Muslim really meant. And it was not just like, "Oh, it's just a sect." There are a set of beliefs that we have that differentiate us from other Muslims, that we believe that the Messiah of the time has come in a metaphorical form, and that we believe he is the second coming of Jesus. And that, even though the prophethood of Holy Prophet, sallallahu alayhi wasallam, has ended, that the final law is there, that doesn't mean to us that other people can come and revive that message. That's what they really

teach, this is who I am.

F

Faiza Susan 14:40

What it means to me being Ahmadi Muslim, you're part of a worldwide community where there are people that have the same beliefs as you do, so you're in that sort of fraternity, that sorority, that sort of brotherhood per se, and you're united under one khalifah, one caliph. You feel like you're in a family of other people. So wherever you go, you're never alone. But it also can be sort of isolating as well, because you have this stigma attached to you that if you tell who you are, there's a big chance people are not going to accept you.

F

Faiza Susan 15:19

And that's what I do not like, I wish people could - I'm not saying we are forcing you to accept it or whatever. It's just the peaceful coexistence like, "Hey, we're Muslim, accept us at that face value. We believe in same Qur'an. We study the Hadiths. We do the five times prayers, we do the Ramadan fast. Accept us and love us." That's what it means to me, being Ahmadi, is that the love that we have amongst us as a family, that should be the love that's within us through the whole ummah. No matter if you're Sunni, Shia, Ismaili, Alevi, or whatnot.



Rimsha Syed 16:02

That was very powerful, thank you. Earlier, you mentioned that you attended Islamic school. What was that whole experience like for you? And how old were you around that time?

F

Faiza Susan 16:16

With our sect, it's called Nasirat class. Girls from ages 7 to 15, we would go every Sunday to learn about Qur'an recitation, memorizing prayers, how to do salaah, the basic Islamic knowledge, as well as try to quote unquote, get some "sisterhood." And I would say my experience, it was a mishmash, because we would have different teachers every single year. So the experience was always so different. You'd have teachers who take it seriously to teachers who were just like whatever about it.

F

Faiza Susan 17:03

I know earlier on, I didn't like it, because I didn't know at that point how to recite Qur'an. It always made me feel bad among the other girls that they could recite Qur'an. And it wasn't until I was 16 that I was able to learn and fully recite Qur'an and recite the whole book. I always felt resentment because others were ahead of me, or they just had more help, or there were obvious favoritisms. Then we'd have competitions for who would recite Qur'an nicely, or who'd memorize the most prayers, or we would have poetry recitations, Islamic poems. Who would recite it prettily? That sort of thing we would have, and I wouldn't like it so much, because I don't like having to compete to learn about things that I should be learning anyways. I don't feel like there ought to be some sort of incentive, but that was just me.

F

Faiza Susan 18:04

It was okay. But then, coming out of that, I really resented it, because I started to learn more stuff about my religion outside of that, and I would be like, "How come my teachers never were invested in that opportunity?" But I can't really fault them. They were people. They did the best that they could at that time.



Rimsha Syed 18:30

Right. And how often did you attend those classes? Was it a weekly thing?

F

Faiza Susan 18:37

Yeah, it would be every week, I would do that. My mom was really strict with us growing up. So we would have to go there every single week, no matter how we were feeling.



Rimsha Syed 18:47

So I want to transition just a little bit. Last time we talked, which was a few weeks back, you mentioned that your mom specifically has dealt with various struggles related to being Ahmadi, and if it's okay, and you're comfortable, I definitely want to hear a little bit more about what happened.

F

Faiza Susan 19:08

Sure. Yeah. I'm just going to also segue into my mom's dad as well, because that was also his struggle too. So what my mom experienced growing up in Pakistan - I don't know exactly the year, so around, I would say when she was 15-16 growing up, Zia-ul-Haq came

to power in Pakistan and enacted Ordinance XX, which basically called us non-Muslims, that we could not say Salaam, we could not have mosques that have the Kalima on there. We could not do prayers. If we were caught then we would be jailed or whatnot.

F Faiza Susan 19:51

But even before that, there was still already that resentment among many people in Pakistan, that "Oh, you're Ahmadi." So she would tell me that when she was young and she would go to Islamiyaat classes, classes to learn about Islam and how to recite Qur'an the moulvi there would say, "Hey, you're Ahmadi," because people, they know over there because people are neighbors and people talk. They definitely know, it's not like you have an identification at that time that you're Ahmadi.

F Faiza Susan 20:24

So when she was little the moulvi saw when he was teaching her how to recite Qur'an, he would say to her, "Hey, I know you're Ahmadi, but if you want to renounce it, just tell me and you can go live with me," and whatnot. And of course my mom would be like, "No, I don't want to," because what person want to live with a stranger versus her own family?

F Faiza Susan 20:49

And then years later, there was the mob that was going to come to her house to burn her house down. And luckily, my grandma's brother came over and warned my grandfather about it. He said to her, "They're going to burn your house, you need to get your kids away." So they had to pack up and leave for the countryside. And luckily, their house was not burned down. But that's scary having to think that at any moment in time that your mosque could get burned down. Sorry, "mosque," I mean, your home could get burned down just because you're Ahmadi.

F Faiza Susan 21:28

And also, I think years later, this is before my grandfather passed away. It was around Ordinance XX at that point. My grandfather, he was a police detective at that point, and that was when they started asking questions about who's Ahmadi and who's not. And so his superior asked him, "You tell me you're not Ahmadi, you tell me to my ear you're not Ahmadi, and I'll make sure no one else finds out about this, and you can go on and advance in your post." And just basically have to deny his faith to get a post and my grandfather's like, "No, I'm not going to do that." So he had to essentially be forced to resign from his post because of his religion.



Faiza Susan 22:18

And then years after that, I think about a couple years after that, they were praying, but it was not at a mosque because the mosque was forcibly closed down. My grandfather and my uncle, they were praying the namāz and a bomb went off at the mosque and my uncle lost his eye for that, and he still to this day has a fake eye.



Faiza Susan 22:45

Also, my mom would say later on, when she was in university, they would give her bad grades just because she was Ahmadi and that put aside her dream of being a doctor because she wanted to be a doctor. But you know, with bad grades? How could she? Because they kept lowering her grades just because of that. Yeah, that was her experience growing up with that. You hear that a lot with a lot of people over there. This is what their experience is like.



Rimsha Syed 23:27

Right, thank you for sharing that with me. I'm sure it was a very difficult time for your family. I'm wondering if that discrimination played into the reason why your parents then decided to immigrate over to the States.



Faiza Susan 23:50

My mom and my dad, they mostly migrated because - my dad migrated for his job, for opportunities here in America. And my mom, she immigrated out because mostly she married my dad. But I remember asking her once, maybe two years ago I asked her, "Do you ever regret not being in Pakistan?" She said, "No. I don't regret it because of how they're treating us over there." And I don't blame her because still to this day - I think about a week ago, the police or a mob was tearing down a mosque, rubbing aside the Kalima, and the police were not stopping them.



Faiza Susan 24:34

And they still kill Ahmadis that come over to help in humanitarian missions for doctors, they still harass people, there's still people in jail. She doesn't feel home here because of what's going on, but she can't feel home there because what they're doing to her family and to her people.



Rimsha Syed 25:03

Right, right. I want to transition a little bit. And I know that we've talked about your experience briefly in elementary school, high school and even Islamic school, but I also would love to hear about your college experience.



Faiza Susan 25:24

College? If I experienced anything in college? I don't think I did so much. Thankfully, I was spared most of the discrimination and harassment and whatnot that a lot of other Muslims have experienced. College was an enlightening experience, I had a good professor, Professor Muslu, I took her classes in Ottoman history, crusader history, and Islamic history. So I learned a lot more about my religion through her, which I'm always grateful for, because I wish I'd learned that earlier. But hey, never too late.



Faiza Susan 26:10

I would always kind of resent that there were some clubs I couldn't go to, like MSA, Muslim Student Association, because I would think, you know, I would love to join that sort of organization. But I always had that fear that at any point, if they discover I'm Ahmadi, what would their reaction be like? Now some people, they don't even know what Ahmadi is and that's okay because they're just, "Oh, whatever."



Faiza Susan 26:35

But there are still people who are like, "No, you're not considered Muslim." I still get that even on Twitter, I still get people saying to me, "You're not considered Muslim." I would hate that because sometimes I'd like to have a Muslim community outside of my mosque that I can talk with. But I always hate that lingering fear in my head that would they accept me or not? College was sort of an isolating experience because of that.



Rimsha Syed 27:08

Right? It's crazy how people take to social media to deny someone of their identity.



Faiza Susan 27:16

I know, where do they come up with the audacity?



Rimsha Syed 27:20

Yeah. I'm sorry that you weren't able to join MSA. Were you involved in any other orgs in college?



Faiza Susan 27:30

No, I wasn't, I pretty much kept to myself in college, which I deeply regret. Because I could have gotten some friends. I could have gotten some experiences. But hey, shoulda, woulda, coulda.



Rimsha Syed 27:48

Where did you go to college?



Faiza Susan 27:50

UT Dallas.



Rimsha Syed 27:52

I also wanted to ask, how has pandemic life been for you, given that it's been a little over a year now that we've all been in quarantine. I was wondering how that's affected your life, whether it's personally or through work professionally.



Faiza Susan 28:13

I would say pandemic life forced me to confront a lot of issues that I've had that I've ignored over so many years. And I would say it's both a good thing and a bad thing. Bad thing, because when you are isolated and you have everyone in the house, and you get that cabin fever. But then it's a good thing too, because it gave me an opportunity to be like, "Look, you either have to deal with your problems, or you're just gonna have to be subjected to it all your life."



Faiza Susan 28:48

So this was a year I undertook going to therapy, which I have no regrets about. Because finally I'm getting clarity about so many things, so many issues going on with me. And I've finally gotten the courage to do so many things that I always was like, "No, I won't do it. I'll

do it later." I'm starting to write a book now. I'm starting to show off a little bit more, get some more confidence in myself, I finally got an Instagram. For me personally, that was something I would never do. But now I'm just like, "Hey, why not?" So it's just been a year of wonders and a miserable year at the same time.



Rimsha Syed 29:36

Right. So you're writing a book, that's really exciting. Can you tell me more about that?



Faiza Susan 29:42

Sure. Yes. My book is really a retelling of the Trojan War and in an Indo-Persian setting, through the perspective of the Cassandra figure. I just had this idea, "Oh, what if Cassandra took back the city, and Troy was not lost?" Okay, just make it Indo-Persian, because that's the world I'm more familiar with, and especially put some Islamic flavor to it because that stuff I'm very familiar with. I've just been working on that. So far I've written two chapters, but I'm constantly revising and drafting, but then working full time and going to school part time. That's taking a lot out of me too.



Rimsha Syed 30:37

Right, I can imagine. Is writing something that you studied in university or are currently studying?



Faiza Susan 30:48

Writing is something I never studied, but it's always been a hobby of mine. In high school, I would write poems, and I got published in the school's magazine for that. I've always written poems just as a hobby whenever I feel really blue, or whenever the words would come to me. It's just been just a little hobby of mine that I want to foray in.



Rimsha Syed 31:14

What are you studying right now in school?



Faiza Susan 31:17

I am getting a second master's in rehabilitation counseling.



Rimsha Syed 31:24

That's awesome. And where do you see yourself going with that?



Faiza Susan 31:30

I would like to be a counselor, especially for the Desi Muslim community. We do have a dire need for mental health professionals and counselors. In our community, we have so many - I wouldn't say problems, I would say that there's so many things that a lot of people in our community are dealing with, that it's perpetuating that cycle, that traumatic cycle that we haven't dealt with our problems. It's passed on to the next generation.



Faiza Susan 32:05

So I want to be part of the solution that helps them and tells them, "Hey, I can help you out. I'm not going to tell you it's gonna be easy. But we can work through this." That way, we can advance because there's so many problems we have. You have kids sacrificing their futures for their parents, and you have all sorts of nonsense going on. Our community does need help, and I would like to be in a position to help them out with that.



Rimsha Syed 32:39

Right. That's a really beautiful vision. Have you heard of Mann Mukti?



Faiza Susan 32:46

I haven't heard of that organization. I've heard of like SAMHA, the South Asian Mental Health Association. But I think I've been studying way too much. I haven't heard of that particular organization.



Rimsha Syed 33:07

Yeah, I think it's pretty similar to the other platforms you were mentioning, their goal seems to be to break the stigma around mental health and seeking professional help for mental health in the broader South Asian community. I thought that that was right up your alley.



Faiza Susan 33:28

Yeah.



Rimsha Syed 33:29

I think it's pretty cool that you just started therapy in the pandemic, and then sort of took to that to want to create a healthier space for generations to come in the South Asian community. I think that's really beautiful.



Faiza Susan 33:46

Thank you. Thank you.



Rimsha Syed 33:49

Yeah. Do you have any other hobbies that you've picked up during the pandemic?



Faiza Susan 33:54

I've been reading a lot more. In the past because of college and work, I would not read any sort of book. This time, when the pandemic started, I started buying, reading a lot more books, and I've just gotten into the world of book Twitter, and just having to read all sorts of wonderful things. Things I would not have read when I was younger. And so that's one hobby I've gotten into.



Faiza Susan 34:25

I do some arts and crafts, not a lot as I'd like to again because of work and school. I do go out more, I do a lot more planting. I got myself a little bonsai tree. So I've been taking care of that as well.



Rimsha Syed 34:41

I don't think we've talked about this yet, but where do you work?



Faiza Susan 34:45

I work at United Healthcare. It's a health insurance company.



Rimsha Syed 34:52

Okay, well, I'm looking at the time and I want to be respectful and maybe start wrapping up here. I did have one last question, and it's a bit open ended. So feel free to take your time on this one. But seeing as this is an oral history interview, I'm anticipating that people will be listening to it 50 to 100 years from now, hopefully. I was wondering if you have any sort of message or piece of advice, words of wisdom, anything like that to put out there.



Faiza Susan 35:35

One piece of advice I would pass on for future generations is that it does get better. I know, it sounds very cliché, but it does get better as time moves forward. I'm not saying it'll be less painful, whatever you're experiencing. But as time goes on, you learn how to deal with it better one step at a time, one day at a time. Especially with my experiences as a Ahmadi Muslim girl. You start to learn to just accept things and accept aspects of yourself.



Faiza Susan 36:21

There would be a point when you would think that "Oh, 25 is the end of the line." You're sad that you don't have your life together, but I'm telling you, where there's life, you're always going to be succeeding, you're always going to be doing wonderful things. So don't ever think that your life has ended, or that there's no way out. That's my message right there.



Rimsha Syed 36:47

That was lovely. Thank you.



Faiza Susan 36:49

You're welcome.



Rimsha Syed 36:51

Well, Faiza, I really enjoyed talking to you today. Thank you so much for taking the time to be part of this collection. I'm going to go ahead and end the recording part now.



Faiza Susan 37:02
Okay.