

Faegheh Shirazi

June 18, 2021

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Abadan, Austin, Brand Islam, Culture, Culture shock, Education, Educators, Hijab, Immigrants, Interior design, Iran, Iranian-Americans, Islam, Islamic Republic of Iran, Islamophobia, Kansas State University, Language barriers, Middle Eastern studies, Muslim woman identity, Nowruz, Ohio State University, Pluralism, Rituals, Textiles, The University of Texas at Austin, *The Veil Unveiled*, *Velvet Jihad*, Women's and gender studies

SPEAKERS

Faegheh Shirazi, Rimsha Syed



Rimsha Syed 00:05

Hi this is Rimsha Syed and I am the program coordinator with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. The date today is June 18, 2021. I am currently in Austin, Texas on a Zoom call with Faegheh Shirazi for the Muslim Voices in Texas oral history collection. How are you doing today?



Faegheh Shirazi 00:27

I'm doing great. How about you?



Rimsha Syed 00:29

I'm doing good, too. Thank you so much for joining this interview. To start, I'd like to ask if you could share a little bit about your childhood and family dynamic.



Faegheh Shirazi 00:42

I was born and raised in Abadan, in the southern region of Iran in the city of Abadan, which is a peninsula. The country of Kuwait is very nearby and my town is also across the river of Arvand Rood where Basreh, Iraq is located. I have spent all my 12 years of schooling in my hometown. My hometown, was at the time, very famous for having the largest Middle Eastern petrochemical industry. So, I was accustomed to see so many people

from other nations because it's a port city. I used to see a lot of foreign naval ships coming in and [staying] for a few days. The biggest scene I recall was that ships would transfer petroleum from the Persian Gulf to other regions. I grew up in an educated family with lots of highly educated cousins, who were older than me at the time. My father had a PhD in pharmacy, and he used to run his own business. My mom was working before, but after she married my father became a housemaker. I had a very happy childhood. There were about three girls in my family - two other sisters and I only have one brother. Our age [range] is not that far apart, with the exception of my younger sister who is about six years younger than me.

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Faegheh Shirazi 02:31

From the very beginning, that I could remember, education was very important to my parents. I first [started] going to public school and then shifted to private school. We were all studying from the same textbook. There is no discrimination between the text that are selected for public or private school, because those are all assigned by the Ministry of Education in Iran. The only big difference is the number of students that are sitting in one classroom. So, I can say that I was probably privileged because my father was able to pay for our private tuition in the private school. But I had very good role models and those were all my older cousins that were 10 to 15 years older than I. I could just see that they were thriving in their education. They were educated and returning to Iran. As a matter of fact, several of them made a big impression on me. They were all university related cousins. One was a very prominent, well known architect and got a PhD at University of Rome, I think. He inspired me a lot because he was in charge of historical monument repairs in Iran. He became a minister in charge of cultural heritage. There were several others with backgrounds in mathematics or comparative literature. So, I was surrounded by my own family members inspiring and well educated people.

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Faegheh Shirazi 06:16

At the same time, we had very religious group in the members among my family relations, but they were highly educated too. I'm not just saying that they were preachers or anything like that, but they had PhDs in religious studies or they were high ranked in the seminary school when you reach the equivalent to a PhD. Since I am a Muslim - but Iran is Shia of the twelve Imams of Islam. So, most of the other cousins that were educated in relation to religion were highly well read in Shia theology and principles. And they were training other students. They had disciples. I wasn't very interested in the religion because I was mostly interested in architecture and literature. But even then, those who were religious were highly educated to the point that I had two cousins that reached the rank of ayatollah, which is the highest authority in [Shia] religious discipline. My grandfather from my father's side was a grand

ayatollah as well. So if I have to sum it up, I have been raised with a variety of exposure to education. From as far back as I can remember, going to school, being disciplined in education and also thriving for learning and graduating was the number one priority in our family.

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Rimsha Syed 06:40

Thank you so much for sharing that. You talked about the importance of education within your family and also your interest in architecture and literature. I was curious, how old you were around the time you were becoming interested in your favorite subjects?

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Faegheh Shirazi 09:18

In our education system that I grew up with [was] before [the] establishment of Islamic Republic government of Iran. I'm not too sure what they do now, but when I was growing up, we didn't have the Islamic revolution yet. Our country was the monarchy of the Shah of Iran. So, in our education system, as I mentioned before, all the textbooks and subjects were already set for each class level such as, for example, 10th grade or 9th grade. We didn't have any choice to pick from. If I'm in seventh grade, if I like this or that, I [still] had to take seventh grade level subjects. These subjects were not per semester, it was per academic year. So, when you register for the school, it would be nine months and a break, the Iranian New Year and some religious holidays in between. School went all the way through for nine months and then we would get a three month break during the summer time. My interest in architecture - I was really basically interested in art and then when I came to learn a little bit more about architecture, it was just by studying subjects, something equal to social science. But we had to study history, it's important in the culture. Through those courses, I got interested in such and such buildings. I had an opportunity to see those monuments because my father would take us [on] a month and a half [long] road trip as a vacation around Iran every summer to see our relatives and learn about monuments and different regions in Iran - most everything that we read in the text books I had already seen them in person.

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Faegheh Shirazi 11:40

It really dawned on me, "That was made in 12th century?" - I really started thinking about it. "I had read about it, now I see it," and it was just amazing to me. Several times when we were visiting my architect cousin, the one who became a minister for the cultural heritage, I remember the very one thing I wanted to ask him was, "how do you build a dome that is well rounded?" I remember he sat with me with a piece of paper and a pen and he showed me exactly how you make a dome, explaining how it starts from a square. Every row you deduct one brick, at the end, you will have a dome with only one brick on the top. To me that discovery was so fascinating, that I'm looking at buildings that are really based on geometry. Then it dawned on me that, "Okay, maybe that's why they teach you geometry."

Or maybe that's why you learn math." And he explained to me [that] everything has an order.

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Faegheh Shirazi 13:07

I don't know what other lessons I took from that personalized individual teaching, but I never forget how interested I got when he explained to me. And then [I got] more interested as I grew older. We would travel every summer, as I mentioned around Iran [and] then we will go to a different city and see the architectural preservation projects. What really impressed me, my cousin's name, was honored as the master of the project, the supervisor of historical monument. I used to admire that. Now, I'm reading in the book. He is my cousin, but look how far he has gotten. I was really interested in design and pattern as well as literature. I also had lots of love for literature and that was because of my mom. She loved poetry. I remember she used to keep a notebook that she would jot down her favorite poetry in and she would memorize them. As she was working around the house or doing some sewing, I would hear her reciting those poetry to herself. I learned a lot of Persian, Iranian classical singing. It is based on the same master poets productions, like from the eighth century or seventh century. So, that really got me interested too. Poetry is just not for being in the book. Poetry can teach you a lot. A lot of Proverbs in Persian comes from the poetry. I was quite good, I must brag about that. I was really good in composition. Although my major in high school was not literature, we did have to study literature for 12 years. My major was natural science. From the ninth to 12th grade, I was focusing on natural science. So, this is my background about how I got interested in architecture, design and literature.



Rimsha Syed 16:09

So earlier, you mentioned that you weren't very interested in religion while growing up. I was curious if your relationship with Islam has changed over the years?

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Faegheh Shirazi 16:24

When we were growing up, we were taught about Islam, how to practice it and understand the principles and names of Imams etc. At least my parents were very devout, obviously. My father's side of the family, they were very religious. My grandfather was an Ayatollah, and he used to live in Najaf [an important center for teaching and learning Shia Islam] in Iraq. We only had the opportunity to visit him once in my life and I was five years old. All I remember [of him] was the turban and religious gown and he used to conduct lessons in his house. He would have disciples going in and out. So I couldn't remember much. I didn't understand what they were doing, but I was told not to run upstairs and disturb them because they were taking lessons. That was my

first encounter with serious religious people. But as a Muslim, we were taught that was part of the school curriculum. Imagine that was not the Islamic Republic, but a monarchy. Religion was part of the curriculum. If you were not a Muslim Student, you would be given a break, you wouldn't even register for that class and that was understood. During those hours, the non Muslims had an hour break and they could do whatever they wanted to do in the school ground. A large number of them wanted to stay and learn. But the deal was, if they stay, they have to take it for a grade, they have to study Islam just like the rest of the class - many did stay.

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Faegheh Shirazi 18:27

So, my formal religious training came from textbooks. Our teacher who was teaching us, in addition to the religion as a subject, we also had to take - from the seventh grade onward - we had to take Arabic. Arabic was not conversational Arabic, it was really formal, grammatical Arabic. The only reason for it was because we are Persian speakers, we are not Arabic speakers. The only reason that was part of the curriculum, because as a Muslim, you're supposed to know how to read and understand the Quran. That was two times during the week. Our teachers were very serious about it. It was just a subject that you had to take, but I never really thought about it that seriously except, "Okay, we are Muslim. This is a subject we have to take." I see my parents pray, but they never forced us to pray. We were all taught how to pray. I did that for maybe five, six years, all the way through the year before graduation from high school. We used to fast. My father was more serious about all this religious obligation, but it was never pushed on us.

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Faegheh Shirazi 20:25

I remember once, one of my religious aunts, from my father's side called my dad - she was older - and told him, "Aren't you worried about your kids not praying? They are at the age." Of course, we're 12, 13, and 16 year old kids - "They are all old enough religiously, aren't you worried about what happens to them?" I remember one thing from that conversation between my father and my aunt, and he said, "I have fulfilled my religious obligation. That is, I have taught them how to pray, they have learned the principles, and as an adult - not an adult for the age group, but an adult in the religious understanding -the rest is up to them." Because as Muslims you believe in the day of judgement. He reminded my aunt, "On the judgment day, I am not responsible for whatever my children did." Because in Islam, when you are adult, you become responsible for your own deeds. So, to me that was very liberating. Even though coming from a very religious background, he was open minded enough not to shove his way of religion on us. And I admired him for that.



Faegheh Shirazi 22:35

To me religion, and the belief is in your heart. If it is in your heart, you will behave accordingly. But I'm not so much convinced about all the rituals that people do in any religion, they go to church, or mosque or synagogue and they just do it automatically, not knowing the depth of it. To me, you don't need to be in a mosque or synagogue, or a church. You could do all those things and practices on your self and behavior. What I'm trying to say is, I don't believe following the rituals of any prescribed religions will make you a better person. Because in my understanding, I don't know of any religion would tell you, rape or kill. They're not. So, if you really believe in the principle of all the religions, and putting aside the rituals, you will find out how similar all of them are. They want you to be a clear conscious person, don't bother anybody, don't harm animals, don't kill, don't rape, don't steal. And then it becomes divided in different religions. So, I have maintained that principle. However, I have never in my life questioned because that we were told also in my household, you will never question anyone's religious practices. You just see them as they are and it's none of my business to correct them, to preach them because they are adult and they understand that on their own. So, with that type of growing up, I have learned also, I cannot be biased towards other religious practices. It is what it is. If they believe in it, that's good. I don't have to believe in everybody's practice, but for myself, I have to watch out how I present myself and how I do my daily actions and it does not necessarily means following rituals.



Faegheh Shirazi 25:46

In my own head, I might pray, I just ask God to help my family or help my daughter for her exams and you know, things like that. But cleansing and purifying myself, by washing up and going through the ritual of cleansing and then a stand there and pray five times a day. To me, that is not necessary. And to a lot of people, if you don't do that there are very judgmental, then you are not a Muslim, but I consider myself a very good Muslim because my practice of Islam is very different. It's not based on the ritualistic aspect of it or political Islam.



Rimsha Syed 26:51

Yes, that was a really good way to put it. Thank you for that. So, on the topic of religion and culture, I was wondering if you and your family had any special holiday traditions that were more tied to your Iranian heritage?



Faegheh Shirazi 27:05

Yes. In Iran, even after the Islamic Republic took place, the biggest holiday for the Iranian culture - and that's also inclusive of the Iranian people, not only people from Iran, but the those who are part of the greater Persian culture, like the Afghans, the Uzbeks, the Tajiks, and so forth. I think the most elaborate form of it is celebrated in Iran. It is the Iranian or Persian New Year known as Norwuz. It has nothing to do with Islam. It is a 13 day holiday. It is called Norwuz, which means the new day. It's the start of the Iranian calendar. On the very first day of spring, which changes. It usually falls on the 20th or 21st of March. It is observed very seriously. The most interesting aspect of it is most people think that's a cultural heritage -and this really goes back to what I mentioned before - people do their ritual things, but they don't understand the concept behind it.

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Faegheh Shirazi 28:59

We all love Nowruz. There are certain things we do on Nowruz for 13 days. You're supposed to visit relatives, friends, elders, youngsters get gifts from the elders. There is a special table we set up. It's called haft-sin. There are seven edible items - the letter sin is equal to s in English. That is set up around seven item principles. But people do not understand that Norwuz is not secular either because a lot are raised with that culture, and they don't question it. The biggest holiday is actually the religious holiday of the Zoroastrian people in Iran and around the world. We are Shia Muslims in Iran, but a lot of us don't understand where this celebration comes from. We are celebrating our ancestors' religious holiday. So, when the Islamic Republic was established, the first thing they wanted to get rid of was this religious holiday. It didn't work. The government tried, even the members of the House of Representatives and the religious scholars - everybody objected to it. They said, "We don't care if it is not in Islam. It is part of our cultural heritage." I want you to understand that every Muslim nation are not Arabs. And even if they are Arabs, they don't do the same things all over the world, it [depends] on what culture of the Arab region you are from. For Iranians, the religious new year is only celebrated one day. Compare that with a 13 day long holiday for Iranian heritage. This could be equal to having Christmas off.

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Faegheh Shirazi 31:57

We are not exactly the same kind, the same practical principles. We are individual groups of Muslims around the globe, and every one of us practice, first our heritage and second is the Islam. By now Islam is interwoven so tightly with many of the local traditions that some people by mistake, assume it is Islam and it's not. This is one of the biggest holidays and then there are several other Zoroastrian holidays that we celebrate, like the very last Wednesday before starting the new year. These are interesting because both have to do with the principles of Zoroastrianism and the respect for the ancestors and their love for

greenery. The first day of a spring is designated as the time for growth and renewal. So every one of those holidays has a purpose. I don't know if that will give you enough information about the Iranian holiday.



Rimsha Syed 34:09

Yes, definitely. That was very lovely to hear. Tell me about how you became settled in Texas? Is Austin the first city that you moved to within America?



Faegheh Shirazi 34:21

Yes, Austin was the very first city I arrived when I left Iran to study abroad. The reason I came out of Iran at the age of 19 was because in Iran you have to attend a very serious national university entrance. It's only given one week for different majors to enter and it's called Konkoor and it is still very tough. Based on the number of students that graduate from high school and based on their high school diploma - like I was in natural science. People in natural science could apply for any field at the university, with the exception of engineering and math - I had studied math for 12 years during my schooling - but that was not the math that is required for math majors. I always wanted to be in the medical field; I'm laughing now because I know I couldn't. You could only choose three majors when you applied to attend Konkoor, the national university entrance. I chose medical school as my first field, nursing as my second, and microbiology as my third. I did not score high enough to be accepted to medical school, but I scored high enough to be accepted to the college of nursing, which is associated with a medical school there in the city of Shiraz. This was the University of Shiraz. I didn't get into the medical school there, but I got to the college of nursing, which is associated with a medical school there in the city of Shiraz. And there I went.



Faegheh Shirazi 36:55

Believe me the horrible things that I witness. After three months, I changed my mind. I almost begged my mother come down said please come and pick me up. I thought, "Oh my god, she would be so angry with me." She was so surprised. She said, "I thought you will give me this call after the second week you were in school. Because I know my daughter, you cannot deal with blood, trauma and make a career out of that." And the school was very serious. We had four hours classes in the morning and then you break and go for lunch, one hour rest. And then you go back to the wards in the hospital. So, the two hours you will be supervised by senior student nurses that were about to graduate. You would go to different groups, to different patients they were looking after. You would see things with your own eyes. I thought that was the best way to teach - there are the text material but there was the real action, the reality.

And that actual thing changed my mind. I couldn't stand it. And we had to stay in a dorm which was very nearby the hospital. Every five minutes, you would hear the siren, the ambulance, the weeping, visitors, they would bring injured people. So, I guess they would do all our initial nursing training with the reality in life and perhaps that was intentional? "This is what you will be facing."

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Faegheh Shirazi 39:02

I'm glad I learned my lesson after the third month. And my parents didn't have any issue with me going back home. But then going back home, "What to do now?" I was so anxious and nervous that I wasted one semester. What did I do? At that time, my older sister was in Cal Poly, California [California Polytechnic State University] and my brother and one of my cousins were at UT Austin. My parents decided, "Whatever you want to study," and I still didn't learn my lesson. I still wanted to be a microbiologist. I applied to UT Austin microbiology and within three months during June, I was in United States. My first course I took was the summer of '71, you weren't even born. I took the advice of my brother. Because they were there one year ahead of me. I chose my very first course. Again, a big mistake. That was psychology that is required from every major. And I remember I went to this huge auditorium in one of the buildings called six packs - at UT campus. I got in there with 350 more people and I'm looking around, it was just amazing. During that time, people could bring their dogs to the auditorium. They were regular dogs. [The people] would be a hippie type. They come shirtless. It was just something I had never seen in my life.

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Faegheh Shirazi 41:41

I always thought that university people would be so rigorous and dry and the students would be so serious. But say they're sitting there - and smoking was allowed. Some people, I didn't know what it was, [they were] smoking something, but didn't smell good. There was smoking. [I used to think], "Why is this something I have never smelled before" - they were smoking weed. They had pet dogs with them. They were bare feet. And they were just sitting there and listening to whoever was on stage. For my view, I was so far away. We didn't have assigned seats. I didn't even know how to take notes. I didn't even know what is it they are talking about. And every time I go to the class - you know, summer school is every day, every time for six weeks, I went to class, there was another person lecturing. I killed myself for that course. I made friends with an adult, Black student. This lady was very helpful to me. She told me that she has come back to school to finish her degree. She understood that I couldn't speak much English. Maybe my speaking was much better than my writing. I couldn't catch that fast to take note. After every lecture, she would Xerox them to me and make them accessible for me.

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Faegheh Shirazi 43:47

I killed myself for that course. I finally got through with a C. I was so disappointed, "I didn't come here to make a C." But let me tell you the funny part of this course. They used to post your grades with social security numbers. Now you can tell how far we have come. You cannot even talk about social security. But there would be a poster hanging behind the professor's door. I remember when I got to mine, I couldn't understand my grade. It said, I. I kept thinking, "What is I?" I thought it was signifying incomplete. I walked in to the professor's room and I said, "I'm in your class. What is I?" He checked his notes and said, "I means you did not complete the class." I said, "I took all the three exams." He told me, "Yes you passed the three exams. But there were three lab experiments that you didn't take." So, to make this story short, every time these guys would come to lecture - and they were PhDs, grad students - they were TAing for him - and he was the supervisor. That was why I was seeing a different person [lecturing] each time. The second thing was I couldn't understand the system. The other thing was, how many times had they spoken about registering for the lab experiments and I missed that - because I couldn't understand. I told him that I didn't understand and that I was there every time. He said, "No problem. You can go to such and such TA and register for it." So, I got it done and I learned that besides just passing the classes, there are so many other things that are happening, and that I need to pay attention to those. So, that was my first experience of being there.

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Faegheh Shirazi 43:59

But then I learned that other classes that I was taking, like microbiology - that was my next major. I took microbiology. After one semester, I learned I could not be a microbiologist either, because now we had to be in the lab as a separate course. I was interested in the subject, but I found that I cannot be cooped up in a room most of the day and looking through microscope. I need something more creative. So, I changed my major to something else. Here we are getting closer to the architecture part. As I mentioned earlier, I chose the major of interior design. There were lots and lots of good things in there that I loved. I graduated with interior design and part of the interior design was taken at the college of engineering, mechanical engineering, which we had to take and that is your first drafting. And I would be sitting there with maybe one or two other girls from interior design, with a bunch of guys that were in mechanical engineering course, that was the first course they had to take. We took those together, but it was very structured. And then other classes we had to take, when we get advanced, you had to take interior design laboratory, which was offered through our own department. But to get to that we also had to take structure or some other courses, which involved architectural drafting from the School of Architecture. And I found that I really liked that better than the microbiology. But my major didn't stop there because I changed again. So if you're interested, I finished undergraduate interior design, but for my master's, I wanted to do interior design, I ended

up to do something else. If you interested, I can tell you that.



Rimsha Syed 49:10

Yes, yeah. I'd be interested in where you went from there and then how you eventually stumbled upon teaching?



Faegheh Shirazi 49:16

Yeah. I went to Kansas State University for master's in interior design. And the program was only a two years program, but you could finish it in one year, but it would be divided in three and a half semesters if you were taking the summer courses. Anyway, I entered as an interior design masters student. We were taking classes in interior design, the symposiums and all that stuff that is related. We are all required to take one course -textile department. I had no idea about textiles. I took textile as an interior design major undergraduate. We had to do laboratory identification, stuff like that. But nothing more than the scientific aspect of textile work. This course that was required for interior designers and textile majors - it was historical textiles. Another part of the course was textiles for the interiors. So, now you can see, I get so interested in textiles. I finished that semester because everything I have taken without being counted for my textiles. Maybe I lost three hour credit, but I got so interested in textiles that I thought, "Oh, my God, this is something that I wish I knew from the first day."



Faegheh Shirazi 51:47

I ended up doing my master's degree in textile science, which is mostly laboratory work where you're working with fabric and fibers. One part of it was that our final exam was three hours, and that was really interesting. It was forensic textile. We were assigned unknown swatches, test paper, and they give you three hours to run all the testing that you have learned - macroscopic burning, chemical testing - and come up with the identification of this mystery fiber that was found on a murder scene. And then from that point on, you have to go and explain yourself why you think this fiber is this and that. I was really interested in that. That was the third switch for me. So, I had a master's in textile science.



Faegheh Shirazi 53:01

Then I got married and I had to go to Buffalo, New York. I taught that two years in a college with my textile knowledge. Then my husband got a very good offer as a full

professor to go to Ohio State University, Columbus. That was my golden opportunity. I wanted to get a PhD and that was one of the designated number of universities in the U.S that would give you a PhD in textiles. This degree, was a PhD in textiles, but I didn't pursue the textile science. I decided the humanity side of it was now very interesting to me. That I learned from a very first seminar course I took with a PhD program in textiles at Ohio State. It was social, psychological aspects of clothing. We ended up reading a humongous amount of theories from different fields, but all of them were focused on choice of clothing from industrial perspective ,from agricultural, from marketing, management. sociology, religion, anthropology, you name it, every field had contributed to textile. And there, I think that was where I found my home.



Faegheh Shirazi 55:15

So I got a PhD in textiles and clothing with a focus - because we had to had a minor - on Middle East history of art. That was the end of my formal education. So, you can count how many different rounds I took before arriving where I am today. I knew I loved to teach because of all my childhood cousins that were professors. I grew up with principles of respecting knowledge, respecting those that teach you. I also thought it was a very nice career. Of course, we made a couple of more moves before we got to Austin. It was so funny, I got back to the same university, that I took my very first course in my life in college, which I couldn't understand what was going on in the classroom. You remember I talked about that psychology class.



Rimsha Syed 57:05

Yeah, sounds like quite a long journey, but also very well worth it. So to those listening to this interview, I took a class during undergrad with Professor Shirazi called Muslim Women in Politics that was very insightful and quite empowering, I would say. And I was hoping you could share how you see your role personally as an educator. And if you have a favorite topic that you teach?



Faegheh Shirazi 57:33

Yes. There are three courses that I really love to teach. By the way, I have created all all the courses that I have been teaching for so many years - I think I created 12 courses - because the department of Middle East studies - they all have some relationship to the Middle East, obviously, otherwise they wouldn't be approved - but they are also based on my personal interest. One thing I learned [about] textile is [that it is] also very gendered. The very first time I thought about it, and I kept reading material on veiling subject and I said that, "This could be a very good course. It's gendered. It's related to women."

But then the other aspect of it was hearing all the time in the media, that Muslim women are deprived, oppressed, suppressed, they don't have any choice - that really used to bug me. And then the issue of hijab, and only hearing people - because I come from a culture that it used to be practiced, but it was not forced upon the woman. Some families were super religious, they always had hijab. Some people like me, growing up in a religious family, but we were free. So it used to bother me why people from outside of the Muslim world, looking at hijab in such a limited division. They always think if you wear a piece of cloth on your head, or you dress in a way that you don't expose so many parts of your body or the flesh, you are oppressed. That was the idea for my other course, which is hijab in Muslim societies.

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Faegheh Shirazi 1:00:12

The third course, I really like it, I teach it once every two years. It has to do with gender and art in Muslim societies. All these three courses are related in some way, but are very different from each other. Because I ended up creating these courses and they were purely out of my own interest, I really think I did a good job, from my own perspective, because I did with lots of personal interest. The veiling issue gave me idea for my first book - the veiling issue is not one or two or three or 10 or 50 different subjects, they are endless. I created for all my courses, reading materials, which would pull from so many different disciplines, but focusing on the same topic with different ways of looking at the same subject. So, after teaching that class for two semesters, I thought, "My goodness, there is enough material for someone to write five books, depending on how you focus." So, my very first book is *The Veil Unveiled* - the hijab in Muslim culture - it was based on my teaching experience and being exposed to so many different genre, all the way from art, to advertising, to political combat, to religious aspect. You name it, it's in that book - even how the cinema depicts the veiled and unveiled woman.

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Faegheh Shirazi 1:03:05

At that point, I was very much interested in the Islamic Republic of Iran because they changed all the rules. The women were limited in so many different ways. So, that gave me an idea about not only the hijab, but also the idea of how within limitation, women function and achieve a lot. So, that gave me idea about politics, gender, and art. Art was a nice way of tying all of these up together. People can express themselves through art and artistic talents. So, this is how I arrived at those three courses. I taught 11-12 courses, but these courses were all undergraduate. I never taught undergraduate freshmen or sophomore classes. All my classes were upper division and it really was not required for anybody to take it because they could choose other classes from the Liberal Arts. It was not a core course. None of my courses were core courses. If you weren't interested in the topic, it was not for one without interest but would make a really good cut for the people who were interested.

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Faegheh Shirazi 1:05:16

I had many people that remotely connected to anything I was teaching. They were coming from scientific background and engineering and all that. They would be surprised. Sometimes I read evaluations and they would say, "There is so much material that had to do with veiling. All I know is what the TV told me." The other comments that I vividly remember was, "I didn't know a Muslim woman could lead a nation." To me, that was surprising. It doesn't mean it does not exist, because you didn't know about it. So, why don't you learn? I always say, the best thing you can do for me - I don't need your praise in your evaluation - the best thing you could do for me is tell me what you like about this class to the others. So you inform them to stop stereotyping Muslims. You're limiting yourself to four borders. It's not correct. Muslims are human beings. They come from many different cultural backgrounds. They eat different foods. They are from different racial background. They could be White, brown, Black, Asian, South Asian, so many other variety exists among the Muslims.

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Faegheh Shirazi 1:07:25

One specific thing that I had to get that through my students was Islam is not genetic. We don't have any genes called Islamic genes. Our genetic background is not Islam. It's not like Judaism where Jewish people claim to have common genes among themselves. Islam is not. It is just like Christianity, or any other religion, you can convert to it, you could be born into it, you could be from Africa, North Africa, South Africa, Brazil, anywhere in the world, you could be a Muslim. It has nothing to do with DNA. One of the biggest things that I always emphasize at the beginning of the semester, is just to take that stereotype that the biggest nation of Muslims are not Arab. They are not Middle Eastern, it is Indonesia. Indonesia has the largest population of Muslims, and they are not in the Middle East and they don't have anything to do with Arabic language or culture. They are not Arab people. One other class that I'm really interested in is Ritual Textiles and Rites of Passages in Muslim Societies. That is directly related to my textile interests. I am in the middle of finishing up a manuscript just based on the same idea [about] ritual textile and Islamic Society from different perspectives.

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Faegheh Shirazi 1:09:47

I think for every one of these courses that I discussed, I have also one manuscript published just because it was my interest in the course on politics and gender. I have a manuscript called *Velvet Jihad*, which talks about how Muslim women are empowered,

maybe not visible, but they are empowered and they get things done on their own terms. Another course that I have a book on is an edited book that I authored two chapters of and then I have other scholars who contributed to that is Muslim Woman in War, and Crisis. And in my chapter, I focus on the Iran Iraq war for nine years and how the government of Iran used the images of the veiled Iranian women to promote the continuation of war with Iraq until it ended. These are based on the posters, for example, that the government populated messages or there were images of the women were on the stamps, postage stamps, that obviously, government has the authority on its publication and circulation. So that was also on the imagery, the art work of these posters are fascinating. My last published book was based on a chapter that I couldn't include in my veiling book. I was told by the publisher at the beginning, on the veiling book, they said that I have too many chapters, maybe I reduce it by one or two.

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Faegheh Shirazi 1:12:24

So, that chapter that I reduced - and I'm glad it wasn't published then because it gave me more ideas - I turn it into another project. It is about brand Islam. It's about marketing Islamic products to consumers. There I have hijabi women taking life on their own and that's about marketing, Islamic products, to consumers. And there I have the hijab, a woman on there take a different life of their own. They are out there on their own. They became part of the couture - the fashion scene. There are so many companies that make fashion only for hijabi women. That's one chapter of several other chapters based on Islamic principle of halal and haram dietary principles. These are not only Muslim nations that produce these products for Muslims, they are also in the West. It used to really bother me. That's why I'm so adamant about doing this work with brand of Islam. You turn on the people you didn't want in your nation, you make fun of them, and you consider them terrorists. All kinds of adjectives are used and we hear on a daily newspaper or on the movies, projecting them as somebody that is evil.

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Faegheh Shirazi 1:14:24

It used to bother me, these are the people you don't want, but you love their money, so you create products for them calling it Islamic this or that or Islamic halal cosmetics. This, to me, was the biggest hypocrisy. You don't want them, but you like their money. You don't like them, but you love their art without understanding the art that it comes and created by people who are Muslims. A lot of galleries love the art that is produced in the Middle East, or by the Muslim in North Africa. Without even hesitation they like it and they sell it and they benefit from it. If you're doing this, you're promoting their arts, why are you demeaning them? They come from the same culture that you have learned to demean and make fun of, and make fun of the religion and their ways of life. That was my last publication, book manuscript. And this new one, as

explained, it all has to do with textiles in the Islamic society, how it is used, and then how it has been adopted by other cultures. Obviously, the people who created these textiles and coming from Muslim nations never get credit, but I'm there to reveal the information.



Rimsha Syed 1:16:28

Thank you so much for sharing some of your works. I hope I get a chance to read some of those. I do want to be mindful of our time today, I have one last question for you and it's a little bit more open ended. This is an oral history interview, the hope is that somebody in the future will be listening to this interview. I was wondering if you had a message or a statement or any sort of piece of advice that you just would like to put out there for whoever is listening in today?



Faegheh Shirazi 1:17:01

I think to learn and be exposed to other cultures is very important. I could never understand why in the American school systems they focus so much on the American history. To me, that's selective history, because they don't tell you all the truth. Why don't they focus sometimes on the world history, not a tiny weeny part of it. To me to know about other cultures, rather than being all only Eurocentric, is very important. The importance is, you are not shocked by the way other people conduct their daily routine. Not everybody drinks Coca Cola. Not everybody has access to the best of the best of the medical facilities. Let me just give you one small example. If you were in Austin, during the horrible winter that we had, and the freeze, and the shortage of electricity, with no running water, at least for me, three days, no electricity, and then two days of no water - to me, that was not a shock. I have lived in places that routinely cut off your electricity because they cannot afford to have electricity for the entire city. So you take turns, and it's part of their daily life. Because of the shortage of drinking water, we all have learned to save water and that is nothing strange. So, if you learn about the condition and the facilities of other cultures how they live, you will be sympathetic to the causes. You go on, pass judgment on them - nobody wants to be dirty or unwashed. But we all have to think, "Do they have access to clean water?" Nobody wants to be sick. But do they have enough medical facility or medicine that prevents this sickness? To me, you cannot learn all these at the university level, you have to be interested in humanity not only encouraged by your education, but also on your own. That's my message. Educate yourself. You don't need to take sides for the political aspects of it, but learn because you are interested in learning about other people. I think that's all I have to say.



Rimsha Syed 1:20:53

That was beautiful. Thank you for taking the time to do this interview today. I really enjoyed speaking with you.



Faegheh Shirazi 1:21:00

Thank you very much for inviting me.



Rimsha Syed 1:21:03

Of course. I'm gonna go ahead and stop the recording now.