

Wajiha Rizvi

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SPEAKERS

Aysha Moneer, Wajiha Rizvi



Aysha Moneer 00:03

Hi, today is Thursday, July 22. My name is Aysha Moneer. I am an archives coordinator with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life. I am with Wajiha Rizvi for the Muslim Voices collection. Just to start, could you re-introduce yourself and tell us where you're taking the call from.



Wajiha Rizvi 00:29

Hi, yeah, my name is Wajiha Rizvi and I am currently in Austin, Texas, where I've lived for about [thirteen] years now.



Aysha Moneer 00:42

Wow, great. Okay, thanks. Yeah, to start, if you could tell me a bit about your background and what your upbringing was like, any formative experiences in your childhood.



Wajiha Rizvi 00:57

Sure. I'm the daughter of Pakistani immigrants. The daughter of Yasmin and Majid Rizvi and the granddaughter of people who were part of the seventeen million displaced in partition

in 1947. When my parents came to this country, they came from Pakistan. But not too long before that, my mom was in what was then known as East Pakistan, present day Bangladesh, and my father actually was alive during partition, and they came from North India. So that's the trajectory of where we've come from. My parents lived all over the Midwest before I was born, and they moved to Texas, to Arlington to be specific, when I was about six months old. I'm the youngest of four, I have two brothers and a sister, and the six of us, we were really all we had. Growing up, we didn't really have family, aunts and uncles, everyone was back in Pakistan at the time. We were really what was tethering each other to the ground. So we built this little world that was our safe space in the DFW area.

Wajiha Rizvi 02:20

W

At that time, there wasn't a Shia mosque. My [parents], as well as a few other families, they were really the founding members of the Shia mosque in Dallas. Now of course, on last check there are like ten. It's really grown so much over the years. But I remember times when we would get together at people's houses or families would get together and rent out community centers for major commemorations like during Muharram and things like that. We all cobbled together this practice. Wherever we were from, it was just this family, this family of people who were all trying to find their own family in the absence of their loved ones who were all far away. I have a lot of very romantic memories of my time growing up in Dallas and the world that we had all built together.

Wajiha Rizvi 03:37

W

It was interesting growing up, because my parents always raised us to be on our guard. My father and my mother were very much advocates of instilling in us that you have to work twice as hard to achieve half as much, because we are not like everyone else. That was something that was always very apparent to me. I remember at a department store, if you had picked up something to purchase, you couldn't take the escalator down even if you were in the same department store, because my father would be like, "Even the optics of that just look bad." Or if the salesperson asked if you wanted a bag or not, the answer is always "Yes, I need the bag," because it was almost like you always had to prove the legitimacy of your existence in a space, whether it's in a store, or wherever. The principles of keeping your receipts, that was something that was very heavily instilled in me. My siblings and I are hoarders of proof because we always felt like we needed to justify our existence, no matter where we were.

W

Wajiha Rizvi 04:54

Again, I think that's something that immigrant families have, right, because there is this sense that the ground you're standing on, especially for first-generation immigrants, the ground you're standing on isn't a hundred percent solid. You've really got to hold on to what you can to make it feel solid. There's a sense of survival in that. I didn't quite understand that growing up, but now that I look back on my parents attitudes about how they raised us, I really understand that there was this dire need to instill a sense of survival in us and really just a sense of making us feel like we're safe by giving us the tools that we need to make our way in the world around us. So I can give them a lot of grace for that now looking back as an adult.

A

Aysha Moneer 05:46

Okay, yeah. I guess this makes sense because Sadia connected us, but I'm actually from Arlington as well, so that's pretty cool to hear. I know even when I was growing up, depending on what part of town you were in, you obviously weren't seeing a lot of diversity or representation for South Asians, but also for Muslims across the board. What was that experience like growing up, specifically in school settings, with peers? How many other Muslims were around you? What was that like?

W

Wajiha Rizvi 06:25

Yeah, no, I agree, there really wasn't a lot of diversity growing up in Arlington. Yeah, in my elementary school, I was one of the few non-White kids, and it heavily informed my sense of self and my sense of even just beauty standards. Growing up as a girl and taking away from it lessons about what makes someone attractive. I never thought that I was attractive because I wasn't blonde and didn't have blue eyes. All of that I think was really rudimentary in my development and my sense of self-worth. Because my parents were so active in founding the Shia mosque in Irving, I did have a lot of friends through my mosque. That was really where I came alive. I was almost a different person as a child when I was with my mosque friends. I was very assertive and very confident, and I spoke up a lot. But during the week at school, I was very quiet, I tried to blend into the furniture as much as possible. My dream was really just getting to hang out with the popular, pretty White girls.

W

Wajiha Rizvi 07:58

It was an interesting sense of survival by being a chameleon, and just doing what you need to survive in a space, even if that means, sadly, changing who you are a little bit for

acceptance. It was tough. I would say that looking back on it, I really wish that I could hold that younger self and just say, "You are beautiful, and it's going to be okay, and you don't have to change yourself to fit into these settings." I think that a lot of what I experienced as a child growing up in Arlington, I actually write about. Writing was always something that I did, starting in middle school, to cope with the trauma of feeling constantly like you're on shaky ground and like you don't belong. I know we talked about this, but I'm currently working on a book, and a lot of those stories of the things that I experienced evolved into making their way into the book. Writing has always been a way that I could cope with the world around me.

A

Aysha Moneer 09:29

Like you just mentioned, you are working on a book. Can you speak a little bit about what you're writing about, and where that idea came from, the process of beginning that manuscript?

W

Wajiha Rizvi 09:49

If I had asked myself even last year, I would have been really taken aback and extremely excited to know that a year from now, I will have said, "Oh, I've written a book, and I'm trying to get it published right now." It was always a dream that I had, but never something that I thought was in any way shape or form something I would get to until maybe in my old age. But I think 2020 really brought things into sharp relief for a lot of us, right? It forced us to see the cracks and to reassess our priorities everywhere. For me, I was really dissatisfied with my with my job, and I was burned out. I was working in house. I had been working in house for about ten years at that point as an attorney doing regulatory litigation. It was something I just sort of fell into, and I really wasn't happy at all. I had been doing a lot of diversity and equity work as well, essentially doing three jobs and getting paid for one, which I think oftentimes happens with employees of color in the corporate world. We get this additional responsibility of having to educate our White coworkers.

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Wajiha Rizvi 11:14

But essentially, I was just done, and I was tired. I had paid off my student loans, and I said, "You know what, I'm just going to take some time to focus on some radical healing." So that's what I did. I quit my job, I did some voting rights work through the 2020 election. But then in 2021, I took time off, and I acquainted myself with my love of writing that had so helped me survive as a kid and as a teenager. It was really getting that space that allowed me to create and to really envisage myself writing a book. So I wrote. It started with a

poem, and I wrote a poem about something that I've always been really affected by and interested in knowing more about, which was partition in 1947, and the creation of Pakistan, and India's independence from Britain. It started with a poem, that poem turned into a short story, and then after I wrote the short story, it sort of gave me permission to write a book. So here I am, 50,000 words later.

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Wajiha Rizvi 12:25

But yeah, the story is about partition in 1947, and how it affects a town that's really this idyllic place where there are no barriers between faiths, and there's really a sense of a tight-knit community. But even they can't escape the horrors of partition and imperialism. As the town is starting to be affected by this, you're starting to see this unfold, but it's through the eyes of a South Asian demoness called a Churail. I've always been fascinated by Churails because they're these female forms of malevolence. I've always seen them as sort of a cautionary tale. They're these women who walk the night, and they have crazy wild hair, and they have a fierce sense of independence, and they act on their infatuations, and they're not someone to be trifled with, but they're certainly not a personality to emulate. I've always thought that was taught as a cautionary tale for what not to be as a woman.

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Wajiha Rizvi 13:44

I've always been fascinated about hearing their perspective, so this was my opportunity to really write their view, a Churail's view of partition and imperialism and man's ability to create carnage. The book is her perspective, but then she takes to a family that looks very much like mine, and she follows this family generation to generation, leading up to a lawyer who grew up in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, and sort of grappling with the missing pieces of her identity. That's kind of where it turns into a memoir, because it is very much my story in a lot of ways. So that's the long, long story about my book.

A

Aysha Moneer 14:33

Thank you. Thank you for that background. My familiarity with the concept of Churail is this mythical creature. Tell us a little bit about where the themes of magical realism came to be. Did you set out knowing that you wanted those themes there? Maybe some influences that inspired that.

W

Wajiha Rizvi 15:01

Yeah, absolutely. I've always been fascinated by folklore and supernatural regional tales. I have so many warm memories as a child of getting together with the cousins and exchanging jinn stories and Churail stories, and I'm a big scaredy cat. I cannot watch horror movies. The fact that I set out to write this fantastical tale with elements of supernatural horror is kind of funny. But also, I think when you're using tools like magical realism or dark fantasy or fantasy in any way, it really allows you to do two things: one, to create distance, especially when you're writing about something that's traumatic, because I do feel a lot of this ancestral trauma of what even my father lived through, and my grandparents lived through. It gave me the ability to have a little bit of safe distance from the story that I was telling and the horrific nature of what happened. Having it through the Churail's viewpoint, and having her act as an intermediary provided a sense of safety. I would hope that it would also provide the reader a sense of safety, especially readers who are from the South Asian diaspora.

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Wajiha Rizvi 16:37

But it also achieves this secondary outcome of being able to really get a chance to fantasize and think outside the box about how you want these characters to interact with each other. I think it allows me to really daydream about these characters. For example, one of the main characters is very much modeled after my father's mother. I didn't know her very well, I knew her at the end of her life when she had dementia and would forget a lot and repeat the same things. I felt like I didn't really have a chance to get to know her, but I know stories about her. So using the Churail's ability to read minds - I don't know if Churails actually have this ability in folklore, but I gave her that. It's wonderful to have that freedom when you're writing in this modality. But it allowed me to really interact with my own family in a way that I could never imagine doing so in real life. It just opens up the options of where you can go when you're telling a story, and I think that's really, really empowering.

A

Aysha Moneer 18:04

I know that earlier when we were speaking, you were telling me a bit about the experience of being in the space of publishing, the lack of diversity within a lot of authors who are published. What is that process been like? What are some barriers to entry that you've experienced as women of color?

W

Wajiha Rizvi 18:28

I don't even know that I could begin to answer that question because I'm still at the very

nascent stages of understanding the industry. It's funny because I set out to write this book in February of 2021, and we're now in July, and I have a completed manuscript, and I'm now thinking about ways to shop it to publishers. I know that that's a pretty short turnaround. Some people work on manuscripts for years, and in many ways, I have been working on this for years through oral histories and things like that. I guess what I'm trying to say is, I'm still learning. I'm still learning about how the publishing process works. There are several barriers to entry, such as, you have to get an agent. Before you get an agent, you've got to have a query letter that's drafted just so, and all these things whittle down and bottleneck the types of stories that actually finally make it to a publisher, because the agent is essentially the one who puts out your work for submission to a publisher. By the time you get to publishers, there are very White spaces that your stories have to go through.

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Wajiha Rizvi 19:58

When you have a story like mine where I do try to code switch, but I don't try to provide a lot of translation - my first draft had tons of footnotes with definitions, and then I decidedly removed all of that. I know that in doing that, I'm taking a risk because I could lose someone along the way, along this bottleneck of gatekeepers who are all traditionally very White, often White male, I could lose them, and they could just not see the point. But also, in naming that system, there's almost a sense of sadness there, because as I'm writing this, there are points where I'm like, "Oh, how's this gonna go over with a White publisher or with a White audience or a White reader?" I really had to disaggregate that from me just telling my story and being true to my voice.

W

Wajiha Rizvi 21:02

You mentioned influences earlier. One of the contemporary writers who I think has done a really great job of that is Fatima Farheen Mirza, the author of *A Place for Us*, because she code switches and will use terms in Urdu. I understand it as an Urdu speaker, but she doesn't try to define it, it's really either look it up, do the work of educating yourself on what this means and what the richness of the nuance of this word means, or put it together, cobble together a definition through the context. I just found that really empowering, and it really gave me permission to also feel safe doing that, too.

A

Aysha Moneer 21:52

Great, yeah. To move back a bit in the timeline of your life, you mentioned practicing as an attorney. When we spoke earlier, you said that you went to Texas Law, I know that you clerked for a bit. Tell me a bit about the experience of the legal space and what led you

to, to pursue that path.

W

Wajiha Rizvi 22:23

Yeah, so what led me to pursue a career in the law was really hearing stories of my ancestors. There's this famous legend - I call it a legend, because I haven't really found that much outside of family lore about it - of my great grandfather, who defended this famous outlaw. He was kind of the equivalent of Robin Hood. His name was Sultana Daku. By the way, my middle name is Sultana, so I've always felt a certain kinship with the story. His name was Sultana Daku. He was essentially a thorn in the side of the British Empire. He would steal from the British in northern India, and he had a hideout in the foothills of the Himalayas, where he would keep all his wealth and then redistribute it to the poor. He was defended in court, as the story goes, by my great grandfather. Ever since I had heard that tale as a child, I was always fascinated by defenders of the rule of law and ways that could look.

W

Wajiha Rizvi 23:42

That was kind of what got me my start, but also, my parents were really intentional about not shielding my siblings and I about talking about politics, talking about foreign policy, stepping out and protesting. One of my earliest memories was when we went to protest the Persian Gulf War. At the Dallas City Hall, we'd protest the war in Bosnia, the war in Kosovo. We were always out there talking about the ways in which we can speak up for others. I think that that was one of the ways that I really started thinking about how I could empower my career to continue doing that. During 9/11, I was seventeen. I had just turned seventeen. That was just such a formative event in my young adulthood. When I saw the civil liberties that were being taken away, when I saw the rise in hate crimes, to me, there was no other profession that I could pursue that would enable me to be a part of speaking up against what I was seeing that was happening. Funny enough, I had started wearing hijab a month before 9/11, the start of my junior year of high school. Suddenly, this event had happened, and I'm suddenly also very visibly Muslim. To me, I had to be a part of the fight for civil liberties, and a career in the law was the only way that I had seen that I could make that happen. So that's what led me to going to law school.

W

Wajiha Rizvi 25:44

Texas law, at the time when I started in 2008, was very White. It wasn't always that way, but I feel like I just started at UT Law at a time when enrollment was very White. I was still wearing hijab at the time, and [law school] was difficult. It was difficult. I did not realize what I was getting myself into, to be quite honest. I had all sorts of romantic notions about what it

means to be a lawyer. But suddenly, I found myself going to school with students whose parents were both lawyers, and they knew the practical tools that they needed. They were like, "Oh, I've already started gathering outlines for torts," and things like that. I was just like, "I'm still trying to figure out what torts means." [laughs] I felt so ill-equipped. The first year was difficult. I felt like I didn't belong, I didn't really have close friends at that time. It really took me a while to come into my own in law school. It wasn't really until 2L year that I was able to find people who I had a kinship with, who either didn't have parents who were lawyers, who were still trying to figure it out with me. We really bonded over that and were kind of in the trenches together.

A

Aysha Moneer 27:12

Okay. During your time in Austin or in undergrad, were you involved in any Muslim organizations or communities? How would you describe your identity as a Muslim?

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Wajiha Rizvi 27:34

As I mentioned, I used to wear hijab. I wore hijab for ten years, so I really felt a sense that because I am so visibly Muslim, I can't pass - with everything I do, I have to show the world that Muslim women are not oppressed, and that we are in all of the spaces, and we are making things happen. Now looking back, I realize that I didn't have to do that. It's not my job to educate people. But that was very much my attitude. Because of that, in my senior year of high school, college, law school, I felt like I needed to be in leadership everywhere. I was a part of the National Muslim Law Students Association, heading up those efforts at Texas law. In undergrad, I was a part of so many [organizations, such as groups like] Student Peace Action Network, where we would protest. We were outside of the dean's office all the time protesting something or another, it was great. Americans for Informed Democracy, all sorts of organizations.

W

Wajiha Rizvi 28:56

It was great, because I felt like I was moving things forward in terms of teaching lessons to anyone I interacted with who was not Muslim, or had certain preconceived notions about what it is to be a woman and to be a Muslim woman. If I could talk to that part of myself now, I would say, "You don't have to carry that weight. It's okay to just be yourself and be in your own skin." But I'm also really proud. I'm really proud that Wajiha at that age just took on this huge responsibility. Interestingly, between college and law school, I went to work on the Obama campaign, his first presidential campaign in New Hampshire, and that was probably one of the most isolating times in my life, because I literally didn't know

a soul. I got on a plane, I was told I'd be living with a volunteer, and I basically was taken in by this wonderful woman who lived in Concord, New Hampshire. She was basically my New Hampshire mom.

W

Wajiha Rizvi 30:14

But New Hampshire is a very, very White place. I remember my first day when I was walking to the headquarters of the campaign office in Concord, the head of the Democratic Party at the time in New Hampshire was out watering his lawn, and he saw me walk by, and he stopped me and was like, "Hello, welcome to America." And I was like, "Thanks." So it was just such a stark transition coming from what I didn't realize was actually really diverse, the DFW area, to being thrown in New Hampshire and going door to door in the middle of nowhere. Some of the situations I was in, I was just like, "I can't believe I put myself in that situation." But I also felt very much like it was my job to be there and to be this overtly Muslim woman knocking on somebody's door in Loudon, New Hampshire in the middle of nowhere.

A

Aysha Moneer 31:26

Wow, that's insane. That's an insane story. But not too shocking. Moving from your identity as Muslim more to the intersect of being Muslim and also a Texan, how do you see your identity as a Texan as well, growing up here, doing community organizing work here? I know you've worked with Texas Civil Rights Project. How do you see the community here?

W

Wajiha Rizvi 32:04

Yeah, so there's a lot there, for sure. I think that in terms of the Muslim community in Texas, I think we've come a long way in terms of being more involved in what's happening locally in terms of politics. I also work with an organization called Emgage and that's one of the things that we work on is civic engagement in the Muslim community, getting people registered to vote, getting people to turn out. Working in the Muslim community has really informed the work that I do organizing outside of the Muslim community. The South Asian community writ large, or even my work with Texas Civil Rights Project, it's really highlighted for me the need to center the needs and the narratives and the priorities of the communities that you're working in. I can't go in and dictate to you what your needs are, and what your priority list or your goal should be. That absolutely needs to be centered by the community itself.

W

Wajiha Rizvi 33:21

I've seen that with the Muslim community, too. We'll have candidates who will come in and just tell us what they think we want to hear. I think one of the biggest misconceptions is that the only issues that Texas Muslims care about are issues of foreign policy, and that we don't care about things like health care and voting rights and racial equity, and that those aren't issues that are a priority for us, too. I guess it's just informed how to interact when you're organizing a community. You really just need to step back and have a sense of humility and make sure that you're not dehumanizing the people that you're trying to serve. Does that answer your question?

A

Aysha Moneer 34:09

Yeah, definitely. How do you view yourself in terms of your identity as a Texan? Part of this project is to start documenting the diversity that actually is within Texas that's not traditionally recognized or part of the mainstream narrative of what it might mean to be Texan. [We're] wanting to ask our narrators in each collection how they view what it means to be a Texan.

W

Wajiha Rizvi 34:47

I view that term as not mine. Even though I've lived here pretty much my entire life, I don't call myself a Texan. I certainly don't disavow that I'm from Texas, if that makes sense, but I don't feel like I belong in Texas. I don't know that I belong - quite frankly, I don't know that I would feel like I belong in any other state either though. I firmly believe that we need to make the world around us better, and that I'm not going anywhere. I'm deeply committed to making sure that lawmakers know that we're here and that we have policymakers who reflect our communities, and also policies that reflect our needs. I'm not going anywhere by any means. But I've never really felt a sense of true belonging. Going back to the beginning, I think a lot of that comes from this ancestral sense of flight from the displacement in 1947, to coming here as immigrants. I just feel like there's always been a sense that we're standing on shifting sands. Some of that has been imbued in me.

W

Wajiha Rizvi 36:22

I guess it's a really fraught question, because I don't feel like I'm necessarily welcomed here. We're seeing that now, the fight over voting rights and with the efforts to erase the history of this country. It feels very much like those in power do not want to tell the stories of marginalized people, and they don't want to tell the truth about what White supremacy has done to systems to subjugate Black people in this country, and indigenous people,

and the Latinx community, and the Muslim community. You can go on. I guess all of that to say, I've never felt comfortable saying, "I'm a Texan." But I really hope to create a world where at least a generation after me can hopefully be able to use that term and feel like it really fits and that they belong on the ground [upon which] they stand.

A

Aysha Moneer 37:30

I want to be mindful of your time as well. Usually at the end of these oral histories, because this will stay in the UT library's archive forever, as they say, [I want to] let you have this space to end on whatever note you want in terms of either going back something we might have missed, or if someone's listening to this interview ten, twenty, fifty years from now, what you might want them to hear you say. I know that's definitely a lot of a last question, so take a minute to think about whatever it is that you might want to end on.

W

Wajiha Rizvi 38:21

Oh, yeah, that is a lot [laughs]. I don't know that I have a great answer for this. I would probably need weeks to think about what I would want to be memorialized as saying as sort of a final thought. But I would hope that when people look back on this time, they realize that it's very simple to think on the past and to think about past struggles as without nuance, or [about] the people who were being subjugated, that they weren't fighting back, or that they weren't resisting in large and small ways. I think it's easy to sometimes focus on the exceptions, like the people who put their entire life into fighting against some sort of injustice. We focus in history, when we look back, we focus on those people.

W

Wajiha Rizvi 39:36

But I guess what I would want is for when people look back on this time, they look at all the ways, large and small, that people resisted. Sometimes that could even mean just existing. Just living your life and being out there in the world and loving the person you love and worshiping in the way that you worship or identifying as however you identify or whatever your pronouns are. Just being, in some aspects, is an act of resistance. I don't know, I would hope that in the future, we're granted that grace of, "Wow, look at all the ways in which people, despite the pain, despite the impediments and the hurdles and the ways in which people in power tried to keep us down, we fought back and we resisted in ways large and small." Yeah, I don't know if that makes sense, but I think we tend to forget the small things and how meaningful those are too.



Aysha Moneer 40:54

That was beautiful. Thank you so much for sharing. I will go ahead and stop recording now.