

# Manahil Bilal

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

9/11, 9/11 in the classroom, Black Lives Matter, Code switching, Culture, Family dynamics, First-generation college students, Hate crimes, Immigrants, Immigration, Islam, Islamophobia, Microaggressions, Multigenerational households, Pakistani-Americans, Salah, Stereotypes

## SPEAKERS

Rimsha Syed, Manahil Bilal



Rimsha Syed 00:02

Hi, this is Rimsha Syed. The date is Monday, July 26, 2021. I am the program coordinator with the Institute for Diversity and Civic Life on a Zoom call today with Manahil Bilal for the 9/11 twentieth anniversary collection. How are you today Manahil?



Manahil Bilal 00:21

I'm doing well, Rimsha. I'm doing well. Today was a busy day, but I pulled through. How are you?



Rimsha Syed 00:27

Yeah, I'm good. Thanks so much for making the time to be here. So to start, I'll let you introduce yourself and also tell us where you're joining the call from today.



Manahil Bilal 00:38

Sure, sure. Okay, so my name is Manahil, I also go by Mina for short. I'm currently a software developer, and I'm joining the call from Spring, Texas, which is a suburb of Houston. A little bit more about myself, I recently graduated from UT Austin last year in May, and that was a really big milestone, especially since I'm a first-generation college

student. Neither of my parents had a college education at all actually, before we moved to America. So yeah, that was super exciting. I've lived in Spring, pretty much my entire life. We moved here actually two months after 9/11 happened, so I was like three and a half. We moved here, so we've been here pretty much my entire life. I went to school here. I grew up here, so it's home.



Rimsha Syed 01:45

Lovely. Thank you. So to kick off the interview, I'd love if you could share a little bit about your background and your upbringing. You mentioned a little bit about how you moved to Spring two months after 9/11 happened, so I was hoping to hear where were you before that, your parents, their decision to move and everything, and a little bit more about who you are.



Manahil Bilal 02:10

Sure. So I was born in Pakistan. I was born in 1998. I have an older sister, Amna, she was also born in Pakistan. So I think in probably 2000, my mom had applied for a visa to come to America. It's something that was kind of taboo in a sense, because it didn't really work out for everyone. My dad was super against it, because he's like, "Oh, you're wasting your time, it's not gonna work out. There's no way that we're gonna be able to go to America at all." But my mom kind of did it behind his back, and it ended up being in our favor because my mom's visa ended up being pulled. Then after that my mom's family was super encouraging. They were like, "This is a great opportunity, your kids will have a better education, a better life if you do move to America." My parents ended up making that decision. That was around a few months before we had moved. We officially moved to America in November, 2001. I was about three and a half. I had one uncle, my mom's brother, who had already come here, so that was a little more comforting for her, especially since both my parents would be leaving their entire families, their entire lives in Pakistan to come here.



Rimsha Syed 03:48

Three is a pretty young age, three and a half, to remember everything going on around you. But do you have any memories of that relocation period in your life?



Manahil Bilal 04:03

My memories from before that were mostly in Pakistan. I just remember being with my

grandparents, being with my family. In fact, growing up, Pakistani culture is super family-oriented. Me and my sister, my parents barely took care of us. We literally only slept next to our parents. That's pretty much it. Everything else, like feeding us and playing with us, all that stuff, our families did. My grandpa or my uncles or my aunts, they would definitely be around us more often. When we moved here, I don't really remember much of it. I do know that when we first moved to America, we were living with my mom's brother's family, so my first cousins. We lived with them for a little bit until my dad was able to get a job at a gas station nearby. Sorry, it wasn't even nearby, but he got a job, and after a few months of living with my cousins, we were able to move out. The reason why I said that his job wasn't even close by was because we didn't have a car, we literally came from nothing, my dad would be walking. I think his his walk would be about five miles to and from the gas station that he got a job at. He would do night shifts as well. I'm kind of happy that I was too young to understand what was going on at that time, because I'd be too sad to think about it. But that's pretty much what I remember from my early childhood. Yeah, to answer your question, it's not a vivid memory at all. I ask my parents a lot to fill in the gaps for that time period as well.



Rimsha Syed 06:03

You mentioned that you had extended family who raised you and your siblings, and I was curious about how that impacted your relationship with your parents. Then also, how does that measure up to your family dynamic with your parents today?



Manahil Bilal 06:20

So when I say "raise," I more so mean - since we were the first kids on my dad's side, we're among the older kids in my dad's side and the first grandkids, right, so we were spoiled. What I mean by "being raised by," we were spoiled by them. They would feed us, they would play with us, they would take us everywhere. It was a super easy job for my parents, because my parents didn't have to do that until they came to America. That's when I guess my mom really had to step up, because she didn't have that support from my dad's family with raising us. As for the dynamic with my parents, we were still very, very close, and we still are. It was never like my parents didn't want to take care of us. It literally wasn't that at all. My grandpa especially, on my dad's side, he would literally fight my parents to take us from my parents, because he wanted to be the one to take care of us. It's because they wanted to. Like I said, we're the first grandkids, so we got all the attention. My sister hated me for the first three years of my life because I took the attention away from her whenever I was born, because I was the second grandkid. Everyone loved me. We were always playing with some uncle. We were always going somewhere with somebody because I guess it was just fun for them.



Rimsha Syed 07:52

Yeah, that sounds really lively and fun.



Manahil Bilal 07:56

Yeah, it was a lot of love is what I'm trying to say. It was never anything like, "Oh, you take care of the kids, you do that." It wasn't like that at all. To come back to that question, that's kind of what I remember a lot in most of my childhood. I don't remember my parents. I don't remember what my parents even looked like during that time. I remember the rest of my family, what they looked like, because of how often they would just be the ones playing with us and everything.



Rimsha Syed 08:26

Is the rest of your family still nearby in Spring, Texas?



Manahil Bilal 08:32

The closest family I have in Spring are my first cousins, my mom's older brother's kids. We grew up together. We have the same story. We come from the same family. That's my closest family and they've been my best friends throughout my entire life.



Rimsha Syed 08:55

Right. So shifting gears here a little, tell me about what it was like to go to school and grew up in Spring, Texas outside of your family.



Manahil Bilal 09:08

Spring, Texas, the majority of the population here is White. I don't really remember anything out of the ordinary growing up. But then I do know that those experiences definitely started to change as soon as I - I guess I'll start over from the top. So whenever we first moved to America, the schools that we went to were more mixed than what I went to later on, but the majority of the population was still White, so I didn't really feel any different. That wasn't there, but then I moved to another school when I was around six or seven, and those schools had less diversity. That's kind of where I started feeling a little

different, 'cause I was like, "Okay, so there's a lot more White kids here. There's not many kids that look like me. There's not as many Hispanic kids as there was at my last school. There's not as many Asian kids or even Black kids." So it was a little harder to make friends, but it wasn't that bad. That district that I moved to after I was six or seven, I stayed in that district until I graduated high school.



Rimsha Syed 10:38

Do you see yourself in Spring, Texas or Texas in general long term? And more broadly, how do you feel about Texas?



Manahil Bilal 10:46

So, I do love it here because it's been my home. It's been what I've been most familiar with. I was able to travel, I traveled to Seattle, I traveled to California, I was able to see a lot of what differences there are with the population. To answer your question, I would love to settle down in Texas, because it's the thing that's most familiar to me. I guess being Pakistani and being Punjabi, I kind of yearn for that familiarity feeling, the place that feels like home. I'll give Texas that. I will always call Texas my home.



Rimsha Syed 11:33

Yeah. So I wanted to hear a little bit more about your religious upbringing. Can you share with me what religion means to you, and then maybe how your relationship has evolved over the years as you've grown older?



Manahil Bilal 11:48

Yeah, sure. So I guess the thing that comes to me first and foremost with religion, just makes me feel loved. Because I guess that my parents did a very, very good job of teaching us how much love there is within our religion and how much hope there is. I'm Muslim, and I'm - proud is an understatement. I can't even imagine how life would be like if I wasn't Muslim. I mean, I guess that is biased, because I was born and raised in a Muslim household, but it does bring me peace. It brings me feelings of love and peace and happiness. I honestly haven't been religious throughout my entire life. A point in my high school experience, I think I was sixteen or seventeen, at that point, I kind of was just like, "Why pray to a god? How do we know that something like that exists?" I realized that curiosity is also really, really valued in my religion. Because our God, He says to question as much as possible, because there's answers to everything.

M**Manahil Bilal 13:19**

I do realize that I was very, very privileged to be taught Islam in the way that I was taught, because I know that that story isn't like that for everybody. For other people, it's really, really sad, but they'll be forced into wearing hijab or forced into having to pray five times a day and not really given an explanation. For me, like I said, I was given an explanation for why things are the way they are, which is why Islam makes so much sense to me. A lot of my friends are Muslim, and anytime they have difficulties with their faith, they come to me and ask me because I guess the way that I was raised, the way that I was taught Islam is different than the way they were taught. So it kind of helps them out with their faith as well. In no way am I saying - I definitely am not the perfect Muslim whatsoever. But I do know that me not being perfect is perfect. It is what Islam is. Me trying is what Islam preaches. That's what I was taught, and that's why I love it so much. Because there's so much room for recovery. There's so much room for understanding, and like I said, it just makes a lot of sense to me.

M**Manahil Bilal 14:46**

So yeah, I definitely try to be as religious as possible, alhamdulillah. I pray five times a day. My mom wakes me up for Fajr. I will say, my mom was super strict about prayer growing up. She would definitely yell at us to go pray our prayers, namaz. I guess that definitely stuck with us, 'cause now, it's weird, if I miss a prayer I feel really, really bad. My mom was super strict about us praying five times a day, which is why I subconsciously have a - I have this timer in my head, where if I miss a prayer, then I'll start feeling anxious out of no reason, and I'm like, "Wait a second. Oh, I haven't prayed my second prayer yet. I haven't prayed my third prayer yet."

**Rimsha Syed 15:47**

Yeah, thanks for sharing. Would you say that your mom was a mentor for you in terms of religion?

M**Manahil Bilal 15:54**

Oh, for sure. For sure. She and my dad, mostly my mom, because my dad was always working. So it was mostly my mom who taught us how to read the Qur'an. She would also teach us sometimes, but mostly, she sent us to the masjid to go learn Qur'an by the sheikh. She would be the one, like I said, telling us to pray five times a day, she'd be the one telling us, "Hey, don't wear low-cut clothing, don't wear unmodest clothing." But like I said, she'd give us an explanation of why. It was never like, "Oh, you just can't do that." Because

as a kid, you always ask why. In a way, it's not fair being told, "Oh, it just is that way," when you're growing up, because then it definitely leads you to be more closed-minded. But my mom would give us explanations as to why things are the way they are. My mom was also never forceful with the hijab either. My sister and I, she never forced us to wear the hijab. She did say we should, but it's completely our choice if we want to. It's better to. Then as far as clothing goes, I guess actually my mom is pretty strict about clothing, but she's okay with us wearing tighter clothes, but as long as we're covering ourselves, then it's not an issue.



Rimsha Syed 17:35

Right. In terms of your Muslim identity, when you reflect on also being Pakistani and also being American alongside being Muslim, how do those identities intersect for you? Have you ever found yourself having to explain your culture or religion to friends or peers, maybe in school?



Manahil Bilal 17:58

Yeah, of course. Oh my gosh. I actually have some regret about that. I guess I didn't really know any better. But in middle school especially, I would water down who I am - my Muslim identity, my Pakistani identity - in order to fit in with the majority of the kids, which were White kids. I loved having mehndi on my hands, like during Eid and stuff like that, but then I remember one day, I came home crying to my mom, because there was this one girl, and she was like, "Oh, why did you draw on your hands with brown marker? You should go wash it off, it doesn't look good." And she ended up telling the teacher on me too, and the teacher got really upset. She was like, "You need to not draw on your hands at all. It's not appropriate." And so after that, like I said, I watered it down a lot. I stopped putting mehndi on. One of the things that I did was I would always change my name. So my name is Manahil. It's kind of it's difficult to pronounce, right? So I would always be like, "Oh, you can just call me M for short. You can just call me any nickname you want for short, because I know my name is hard to pronounce." And like I said, back then, I didn't see that as a problem, but I'm very happy I grew up to realize that I don't need to change for anybody. Does that kind of answer your question? I don't know if I was just rambling.



Rimsha Syed 19:27

No, no, definitely. When you said that you would water down your personality, it reminded me of this term "code switching" that's used a lot in the immigrant children community where you have one personality at home and around the people that are part of your

same culture, but then at school you have to kind of alter bits of your personality to fit in. So you're definitely not alone, and I think a lot of kids growing up definitely did the same thing. I wanted to ask, when would you say that transition happened where you started to feel more comfortable and realize that you don't have to change who you are?

M

Manahil Bilal 20:07

I would say late high school, so probably like junior, senior year. It's funny, one of the things I was most adamant about growing up was - my name, I hated how incorrectly White people mostly would pronounce it. I guess I shouldn't just say White people, it was more so just American people in general, people who don't speak Urdu, people who weren't part of that culture - how incorrectly they would spell my name. So I would tell my mom, I'd tell my siblings, I'd be like, "Dude, I'm gonna only name my kids things like Adam and Noor." Really easy Muslim names that you can say it in English really, really easily too. So like Isaac, Jamal, really, really easy Islamic names, but names that can be pronounced by people at school, so my kids wouldn't have to go through what I went through. I think I was like sixteen or seventeen, later on, late high school, that's when I realized, I was like, "Wait a second, those names are really boring, and I should not have to name my kids something so easy just for someone else, just so it makes it easier for someone else to pronounce it." I feel like that totally takes away from my identity.



Rimsha Syed 21:33

Yeah, you're exactly right. Were there many other Pakistani or Muslim kids at your high school?

M

Manahil Bilal 21:40

Oh, my gosh. So my graduating class - my high school is pretty big - I think there was like, 850 of us. Out of the 850 of us, I think the maximum number of South Asian kids was I'd say probably twenty. I think I'm overshooting. Fifteen to twenty. And then Muslim, total, just in my graduating class, was closer to thirty or twenty-five. So a very, very small percentage. But it's funny. A lot of us, I think like fifteen of us, we were kind of like, "Hey, guys, we're a minority." This was end of junior year, beginning senior year, we banded together and we called ourselves the Brown Squad. Because we were like, "Yo, we're the only Pakistani, Indian kids at this school." We became really close friends because we had very, very similar experiences, all of us being Pakistani, being Indian, and being Muslim.





Rimsha Syed 22:48

Yeah, glad you weren't alone in that. Speaking of all these experiences related to school, let's transition and talk about how you learned about 9/11. How was it presented to you in the classroom, and had you heard about 9/11 at home prior to learning about it at school?



Manahil Bilal 23:10

Okay, so I was really little. I said this at the beginning of the interview, but when my parents told me that we moved to America two months after 9/11, I think I was twelve or thirteen when I realized how big of a milestone that was and how incredibly insane that was that it still even happened, that we were still allowed to come here. My first memory of learning about 9/11 was - I was like, five or six - around 9/11, they would make us make these little American flags, and we'd put them around the school and around the walls of the classroom, just to celebrate America. I was in second grade, and my teacher put on a movie, you know those VHS tapes that they would bring in to the classroom, and they'd make us watch TV on that? My teacher, she put on one about 9/11, and then I was like, "Oh, wow so it was people who were part of my religion that did that." At that part, I guess the other kids kind of didn't realize what was going on either. They didn't realize that I was Muslim as well, because we were seven years old, so I didn't get any comments about that. We just watched the video, and that was it. Then I went home and I was like, "Oh, mama, this happened? I didn't even know that it was Muslim people that did that." And she's like, "Yeah, it was," and that was that, because my parents also didn't know too much about it.



Manahil Bilal 24:48

Oh my God, I just totally thought of something. Wow. So this is crazy. I've never thought of this until now. So in eighth grade - that's my earliest memories of remembering 9/11.



Rimsha Syed 25:03

Oh, okay, well, I definitely want to hear about what you just remembered.



Manahil Bilal 25:08

In seventh grade, I think 2011, is when they killed Osama bin Laden. I would get those comments, "Oh, sorry your uncle died," from the White kids. Yeah, it was really annoying, but then at some point I was like, "Okay, I just got to get through these next couple of days, and I'll be fine." But then after, that kind of became something that I would kind of

just expect every year. My cousin Hamza looks super Pakistani and super foreign. So this poor guy, he would get it so much harder, because his friends would make fun of it so much. They would say really, really mean things about our religion and things like that.

M

Manahil Bilal 25:50

But the one thing that I remember is, I was giving a some presentation in eighth grade, and I think I was talking about how my religion, we love and accept everybody. I raised my hand once, and I was like, "I don't really understand why my people were getting targeted the most out of everyone else. I understand that the people who did it considered themselves to be part of the Muslim faith. But I don't understand why we got the butt end of it." Then my teacher, this was in history, she was like, "Oh, so the reason why is because when you tune in to watch the news, you would see people in Pakistan, people in different Islamic countries like yours, they would be clapping their hands when they would be talking about 9/11. So that's why it is the way it is." At that point, I wasn't as educated about 9/11 at all. So that's just something that I remember, 'cause now, when I look back at it, I should have said something. I should have been like, "I don't know where you might have seen that." But yeah, that's just something that I just thought of.



Rimsha Syed 27:14

Yeah, that's a really horrible case of misinformation from someone who's supposed to be a history educator. So aside from eighth grade in your presentation, do you have any other recollections of talking about 9/11 in school, and then the reactions that your peers may have had?

M

Manahil Bilal 27:39

I would always hear stories, and I'd be super enraged by this happening to the people that I'm closest to, like other people. For me, like I said, I just got a few of those jokes. When Osama bin Laden died, it was like, "Oh, your uncle died. Sorry about that. Sorry for your loss." But other than that I didn't really get much negativity about that. But at some point, I guess I was like fifteen, I started noticing how Muslims in general were being treated around that time. So anytime it'd be the 9/11 anniversary, I would always hear stories about, "This Muslim couple were walking and they just got attacked by some radical right wing White person because of 9/11." Things like that. I don't know if there was a rise in hate crimes, or if I just started tuning in at that time. But I started hearing about those stories, and I guess that's when I started realizing, "Hey, wait a second, that is not okay."

M

Manahil Bilal 28:48

I was always very sympathetic towards families who lost their lives, who lost their family members during that attack. Death is something that is mourned by everybody, and I did feel really, really sad for those who lost their lives. But at the same time, it was like, "I don't understand how attacking my people - not even my people - attacking innocent people - because it wasn't just people of the Islamic faith." It wasn't just people of the Pakistani community that were being attacked. It was Sikh people. Sikhi people. There was Hindu people, it was anybody who fit that image of the people who did that attack. Anybody who fit that image, they were getting attacked. So that's when I was like, "Okay, that doesn't make any sense to me. There's no reason why that should be happening." So like I said, that was around fifteen or something.

M

Manahil Bilal 29:46

I'm so happy that I had that awakening because that made me realize like, "Wait a second, I kind of have been taught this information in a one way light." We talk about how sad it was for New York, for America. We talk about that, I understood that part. But we did not talk about at all how sad it was for everyone else. Everybody was affected by that. It doesn't take away from the families who lost their family members during that attack. I don't think it takes away from that at all, because there's people who still around the 9/11 anniversary - people lose their lives around the anniversary because of hate crimes. So I think it's a much bigger picture that we were supposed to have been taught that we weren't. That's what really, really upset me.



Rimsha Syed 30:47

Yeah, thanks for sharing. I think part of the reason we're doing this collection is to address how it wasn't just New York as a state that was affected by 9/11. As we can see, Muslim people and Brown people, anyone like you said, who fits a description, are still affected to this day.

M

Manahil Bilal 31:07

Yeah, exactly.



Rimsha Syed 31:08

Yeah. So another question I had for you is, is 9/11 something that is now talked about amongst your friends or at home? Or is it sort of something that's taboo?

M

Manahil Bilal 31:20

It's none of that honestly, we just don't talk about it. The way my family and my friends view it, it's the same way that I view it. We all see that it's such a [bigger] picture than what was taught to us. My friends are Pakistani or Indian or South Asian. A majority of my friends are like that. And so when the topic of 9/11 comes up, it's the same level of - I don't know what the right word is. One of my closest friends is Indian and she's Hindu. She's the complete opposite of me, I'm Pakistani, I'm Muslim, but we are treated the same by White people. If her dad were to walk the street, he would not be treated any different than my dad would. I'm trying to figure out what the right word to say is, but to answer your question, it's not a taboo subject at all. It's more so we talk more about the implications that it had on Brown people, Arabic people, anybody who looked like the attackers, and the implications of that on them. Also Muslim women who wear hijabs and burqas, we talk about how [much] harder life is for them because of that incident.



Rimsha Syed 32:49

How do you feel about how 9/11 is portrayed in the media nowadays and how it's affected your immediate friends and family?

M

Manahil Bilal 32:59

I do like that nowadays there's more - I guess people are less afraid. I guess more people now understand. So the people that I've been around, my age group, when we were younger, it was always all about, "Oh, 9/11 happened. We need to mourn America, we need to mourn the families who lost their lives." But as I grew up, so did everyone around me and so did the way that we were thinking. We all kind of realized at some point that it was a much bigger issue than the families who lost their lives. Which, a hundred percent, that should be mourned as well. But I think that there's a way to do it, and that way is definitely not to be attacking anybody for the way that they look, for their identities, for being Muslim, for being Hindu, for having a beard, for fitting the description of looking like a Middle Eastern guy.

M

Manahil Bilal 33:53

To directly answer your question, I think there's much better coverage. People hit on more of how it affected everybody. I think it's definitely much better than how it was in the early 2000s, 2010s. I don't know if people are just more vocal about it, or if there actually has been a shift in the way we have been thinking, but I think there is a lot of talk about how 9/11 affected everybody and not just the people around that area when 9/11 happened.



Rimsha Syed 34:29

Right. Yeah, I definitely agree. So Manahil, being mindful of your time here, is there anything else that you would like to add on to this interview or elaborate on from before? Maybe something that we just glossed over, or anything that you would like to say to future generations who might listen to this interview?



Manahil Bilal 34:50

I guess I want to say as hard as it may be to identify as Muslim, to identify as Pakistani, I think it's very, very important that there's - the majority of people in this country are White. I guess that one of the main points that I wanted to talk about was how I was in no way saying that 9/11 is less sad [than] it actually was. I definitely talked a lot about how I know how sad that actual event was, but I also feel like that's been talked about enough. We could continue talking about that, but I think that now we should also be talking about the rise in hate crimes, the rise in how much life had become harder for Muslim people, people who looked Arab, who looked Pakistani, how hard life became for them as well. Why not live with love for each other? Genuine love. And that means - this is kind of off topic, but love that's helpful, right? Whether that is being in Black Lives Matter protests, whether that be being in support of minorities. Why is that so hard for people to do?



Manahil Bilal 36:33

I think if you have a voice, you should definitely use it. And I think because of the way that I was raised, but it's just so much easier to live with love for people, with kindness for people and understanding. Black Lives Matter, if you don't understand why it is that way, I think you owe it to yourself and to your community to educate yourself, to figure out why "all lives matter" should not exist, to figure out why we should not be in favor of closing off our borders to those who need it. We definitely need to educate ourselves more and figure out why things are the way they are, because it's not fair to minorities, to people who have been impacted by these large scale events. We need to definitely branch out and figure it out from everybody's perspective. Yeah, I guess that was my advice, that it's not that hard to understand why 9/11 was hard on not just people who were directly impacted, but also on Muslim people and anybody who fit that image.



Rimsha Syed 37:50

That was lovely. Okay, well thank you so much Mina for joining this interview. I'm going to go ahead and stop the recording now.