Young American Muslims

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Published by Edinburgh University Press

Kabir, Nahid Afrose.
Young American Muslims: Dynamics of Identity.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/67446.

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INTRODUCTION: MY JOURNEY AND THE 'MUSLIM QUESTION'

My acquaintance with American society has been developed on three occasions: first, as a spouse (and a student) when my husband was a doctoral student at the University of Texas at Austin, second, as a conference speaker/attendee, and finally, as a visiting fellow at Harvard University. I now provide a thumbnail sketch of my life journey from my childhood to my present circumstances.

I was born and raised in a Muslim family in the predominantly Muslim country of Bangladesh, but I spent several years of my childhood in Pakistan. I had a middle-class professional upbringing in Dhaka (the capital of Bangladesh, then known as East Pakistan) and Karachi (a city in the then West Pakistan). Both my parents were educated people. We moved back to Dhaka (in the then East Pakistan) in 1970. In 1971 East Pakistan gained independence from West Pakistan through a civil war and came to be known as Bangladesh. During the Pakistan period, my father was promoted to the position of an executive director in the State Bank of Pakistan. In the independent Bangladesh, he became the deputy governor of the Bangladesh Bank. My mother was a stay-at-home mum. I attended a private school and two missionary (private) schools and colleges in Dhaka and Karachi. In these educational institutions we had teaching staff from Europe and America. At home, I spoke Bengali (my mother tongue), and in schools and colleges the medium of instruction was English. I was also taught Urdu in Pakistan as it was a curriculum requirement. I was raised in a Muslim environment, where offering prayers five times a day, fasting in the month of Ramadan and reciting the Holy Quran were compulsory.

After completing BA Honours in History from the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh I got married and in 1981 I moved to the United States. While living in the US, I made some American friends, and studied history in the undergraduate school at the University of Texas. I appreciated the warm
friendship extended to me in the US, but experienced a degree of culture shock. I did not appreciate the pub life, alcohol consumption and what I perceived to be a lack of family bonding (children moving out of home at the age of eighteen, families only meeting occasionally on birthdays and at Christmas). Furthermore, I could not relate to the de facto relationships and acceptance of sex before marriage. I lived in the United States from 1981 to 1982, and then after my husband’s completion of a PhD degree at the University of Texas at Austin we moved to the Middle East. We lived in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia for five years (1982–7). I was happy because we were living in the Muslim world, and our stay in Saudi Arabia also gave me the opportunity to perform the Umrah Hajj. We then migrated to Australia (1987–90), then moved back to the Middle East but this time to Muscat, in the Sultanate of Oman. We lived there for another five years (1990–5). During this period, I went back to Dhaka for one year and completed an MA in History. By this time I was a mother of three children and very happy as a stay-at-home mum. I wanted to stay in Oman for the rest of my life because it was a Muslim country. But neither Oman nor Saudi Arabia gave citizenship to expatriates, so we had no chance of living there as permanent residents.

Quite reluctantly I returned to Australia with my husband and children in 1995. Initially, I was unhappy and did not like life in the diaspora. Nevertheless when I started attending the postgraduate school at the University of Queensland, Australia, I began to feel settled. In 1998 I obtained an MA in historical studies in Indian history and in 2003 I was awarded a PhD based on the topic ‘Muslims in Australia’. I then began making conference presentations on this research nationally and internationally. One thing worth noting is that between the time when I started my PhD project on the history of Muslims in Australia and the time I submitted and was awarded the degree, the world changed. After the 9/11 Twin Towers tragedy in New York, when about 3,000 people died (including 358 Muslims), and the Bali bombings in 2002, when eighty-eight Australians died (including one Muslim), it had become a different place. Since then some Muslims residing in the West have been viewed as the new ‘other’. I have discussed this phenomenon in my first book (based on my PhD thesis), *Muslims in Australia*.2

During my second visit to the United States, I made a presentation at a conference in Hawaii in 2003, and in 2004 I attended a conference on Islam in America in Detroit. I listened attentively to the relevant papers that discussed the placement of Muslims in American society since 9/11. In Detroit, I spoke both to Muslims of diverse backgrounds and to non-Muslims of Arab background and found that they were being treated as the ‘other’ because of their appearance. A few non-Muslim Arabs said that they had been targeted as the ‘other’ even before 9/11, through the media and video games.

From 2006 to 2008, as a postdoctoral and later research fellow at Edith Cowan University, Australia, I conducted studies on the identity of
young Australian and British Muslims, and discussed my findings on young
Australian Muslims in several refereed journal articles. My findings on young
British Muslims were published in a book titled Young British Muslims.3

In 2009, my third visit to the United States was as a visiting fellow on the
Islam in the West programme at the CMES, Harvard University. My fellow-
ship at Harvard was for two years (2009–11), and during this period I con-
ducted research on young American Muslims. I interviewed young Muslims
(and a few Muslim adults) from six states: Massachusetts, New York, Virginia,
Maryland, Florida and Michigan, in that order. I found that the participants
described their identities variously, as I discuss later in this book. In this section
I want to describe how I approached this study. In the first place I felt I could
relate to the feelings of the participants because I am a fellow immigrant in a
diaspora. I am also a parent trying to support my children in two cultural set-
tings (ethnic/religious and host/wider society). And I am a researcher, trying to
investigate in a fair and reasonable way the placement of the participants, who
were mostly second-generation immigrants.

Many first-generation immigrants who live in a diaspora dream that one
day they will return to their home countries, but second-generation immigrants
rarely feel this way. A first-generation migrant may fear losing his/her culture
in the new country but a second-generation person is less ambivalent about his
new home. For example, Asaduzamman al-Nur (not his real name), of Yemeni
background (male, 15, overseas born), who migrated with his parents as a one-
year-old boy, spoke of his identity:

I’m Arab American but now I’m probably 75 per cent more American . . . I mean
people have families all around the world but they still live here. And America is a
country which used to be of native Indians. But now it’s a country of people who
come here for their needs, like for work or religious reasons. It’s kind of, what do
you call it, like a beacon . . . Yeah, because I remember doing a song that was about
the Statue of Liberty; it said it was a beacon.

We came here because in our case my parents came here. In our place [Yemen] we
don’t have much to do. My dad’s a butcher here but in Yemen butchers aren’t exactly
considered a high working people. It’s kind of levelled in Yemen and we wouldn’t get
much work there, so we came here because we had to. (Asaduzamman, interview,
Michigan, April 2010)4

For Asaduzamman, the difference between Yemen and America was high-
lighted by his father’s employment. He thought that only in America were
there opportunities and freedom – the liberty to fulfil the ‘American dream’.
In other words, regardless of social class, people in America can accomplish
success according to their individual abilities. Asaduzamman felt connected
to the United States, as reflected in his metaphor of the Statue of Liberty as a
‘beacon for immigrants’.
Asaduzamman also praised his local area when I asked him to recommend the places I should visit in Michigan. Then he asked me, ‘Do you think Michigan is a happy place or do you think it is a kind of okay place?’ My response was, ‘Yeah, I think it is an okay place.’ Asaduzamman replied, ‘Yeah. Because of the publicity and stuff and what happened to Mayor Kilpatrick . . . There was some scandal that broke out . . . Like he was using tax dollars for something.’ Then he added:

It’s kind of, you know how they say in English, ‘What comes to mind when you say a word?’ When you say ‘Detroit’ I imagine it is kind of like a ghetto place. [However,] there’s some good places in it. For example, Stony Creek, it’s a great place. It has lots of beaches here and there. That has one of the clearest waters. Grand Rapids is one of our interesting places in Michigan. It kind of has beaches and colonial things, and peninsula, it’s got its upper peninsula, we have islands around there I think. And it’s just more natural.

Asaduzamman tried his best to make me feel impressed by Michigan, and particularly Detroit. He felt that Detroit’s image may have been tarnished by Detroit Mayor Kilpatrick’s $9 million scandal. Asaduzamman contemplated that one day he might have to return to Yemen, so in his spare time, ‘I read the Quran and try to understand it more. I am learning Arabic [in school].’ He continued, ‘I just deal with my responsibilities and when I, if I have completely nothing to do, I sometimes just watch some TV. That’s the western side of me.’ Talking about music he said, ‘We listen to some Arabic music. But, like I said, I listen to more American music.’ Then he said, ‘And I’m trying to get back to my heritage ‘cos I’m going to have [to] go back to Yemen soon. I can’t just leave my home country.’ On sport, Asaduzamman said, ‘I like to play soccer because it’s really a fun game. I like basketball but soccer is more, just feels more natural.’ He then returned to his culture, ‘Well, sometimes you play [soccer], it’s kind of like a typical thing. Yemenis . . . their sport is soccer. And that’s kind of the more culture side of me, I like to play soccer.’

This interview was conducted in one of the suburbs of Detroit where one can see many Arabs, Muslims, mosques and women wearing the _niqab_. While listening to Asaduzamman express his admiration for America and his local area, Detroit, and also his connection with his heritage (Yemen), I was impressed by the bicultural stance of his identity (though it tilted more towards his American identity). In my earlier studies on young Muslims in Australia and Britain I found that biculturalism was important for building their connection to the host country. By biculturalism I mean a blending of majority and minority ethnic/religious cultures. Biculturalism can work at two levels: first, as a national policy (a variant of multiculturalism or the ‘melting pot’) of acceptance/expectation that migrants will retain much of their culture/heritage but will adhere to (new) national laws and gradually adopt the national language/
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culture; second, at the individual level, as a personal practice of blending the old and the new – retaining religion, ethnic culture and language and taking on new language and culture in order to have dual membership.

When ethnic minorities adopt parts of the majority culture, such as speaking English, reading English-language novels, listening to music or watching English-language television programmes, engaging in contemporary politics and participating in mainstream sports, while at the same time retaining their ethnic and religious practices, this enables them to participate as citizens of their host society, with a hyphenated/dual identity or diverse/multiple identities. I also found that retaining a single (ethnic, religious or national) identity may not be a cultural deficit as long as young people maintain a bicultural stance.

Earlier research on Muslims in America

Some scholars have already written about the growing Muslim community in America, and their issues and challenges. The first work on Muslims in America that came to my notice was Kathleen M. Moore’s PhD thesis, ‘Al-mughtaribun’, where she observed:

Although Islam has been practiced in North America for more than one hundred years it has only recently received even nominal recognition as an American phenomenon. Islam is still widely perceived to be a foreign creed and is maligned by its association in the media with terrorist activity abroad and black separatism in the U.S. Because of the prevailing sense, however erroneous, that Islam is a threat to society it is a faith that is not easily accommodated.6

Other contributions, such as Islamic Values in the United States, Muslim Communities in North America, Islam in the United States of America and Muslims on the Americanization Path?, offer information on Muslim settlement in America, Muslim beliefs and values, diversity within the Islamic community and Muslims’ encounters with the mainstream media.7 As discussed earlier, much has changed in people’s perception of Muslims since 9/11. After the Twin Towers attacks on 11 September 2001, the ‘Muslim question’ came to the fore: who are these people, what is their faith, is violence associated with their faith, why do some Muslims hate the West, is the American media going overboard with its representation of Muslims in America, how is Islamic visibility impacting on this group? Several publications have answered these questions; for example, in Muslims in America: Seven Centuries of History 1312–2000, Islam in America and Muslims in America: A Short History the authors reminded readers that Islam first came to America with the African explorers and again later with the slave trade.8 Some books have offered comparative studies of Muslim settlement in the West, such as Muslim Minorities
in the West, Religion and Immigration, When Islam and Democracy Meet and Muslims in the West after 9/11.9

The term ‘Islamophobia’ was coined in 1997 by the independent pro-diversity think tank the Runnymede Trust in the United Kingdom to describe xenophobia towards the Muslim ‘other’.1 In the case of Australia, anti-Muslim (and anti-Arab) sentiment has been prevalent during times of crisis, for example during the 1990–1 Gulf War.11 In the United States, anti-Muslim (and anti-Arab) sentiment surfaced after Timothy McVeigh’s act of terrorism in Oklahoma in 1996.12 As various publications have reported, however, repercussions against some Muslims and Arabs intensified after the Twin Towers attacks. For example, the Council on American-Islamic Relations’ report American Muslims: One Year After 9-11 and the books Muslims in the United States and Islamophobia and Anti-Americanism: Causes and Remedies have all included discussions of the unprecedented wave of hate crimes against American Muslims since 9/11.13 Hostility against some Muslims and Arabs increased with the enactment of the USA Patriot Act, as discussed in books such as Policing American Muslim Communities, Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11, Citizenship and Crisis, Homeland Insecurity, The Future of Islam and Islam in America.14

Literature on young American Muslim identity is relatively limited. A few books, such as Muslim Women in America, American Muslim Women, Educating the Muslims of America and Muslims in Motion include brief discussions of the dynamics of young Muslims’ identity. Only one book, Muslim American Youth by Selcuk Sirin and Michelle Fine, includes an elaborate discussion of the way young Muslims negotiate their hyphenated or dual identities with everyday cultural and global challenges.15 In their study Sirin and Fine interviewed 204 young Muslims aged between twelve and twenty-five from New York, New Jersey, Florida and Michigan. They applied multiple research methods such as paper-pencil surveys (sketches), open-ended questions, focus groups and individual interviews to determine the participants’ concept of hyphenated identity. Sirin and Fine found that, growing up in the midst of Islamophobia, Muslim American youth confronted developmental challenges because they were carrying the burden of international crises (as they are viewed with suspicion). For Muslim youth since 9/11, negotiating their identities has also become far more challenging because they are perceived as a potential threat to the wider society. Sirin and Fine’s study overall found that young Muslim men and women did not differ in terms of their perceived discrimination, acculturation practices and anxieties. Nevertheless the way in which these young people negotiated their identities was quite different from that of their peers, as indeed was the way they dealt with everyday cultural and global challenges.

While appreciating the valuable work scholars have so far done on Muslims in America, I take the research one step further by incorporating a wide range
of cohorts from diverse ethnicities and examining the dynamics of one’s identity from single, hyphenated to multiple identities. I have introduced new arguments and debates in my work. I have shown under what context the participants developed their opinions, and I have done extensive research on diverse topics, for example, the media, politics and international relations. I hope this book will add to the existing scholarship on Muslims in America and particularly on young American Muslim identity.

**Aim of the research**

The primary objective of this study is to examine the life stories of Muslim youths and young adults with a special focus on their hopes and dreams. Key questions in this study are:

- How do cultural practices contribute to the development of being a worthy American citizen?
- How do Muslim youths and young adults define their identity, or their sense of belonging?
- To what extent have Muslim youths and young adults integrated into mainstream American culture? Where do they position themselves in the ‘integration’/’assimilation’ debate?
- What is the role of socioeconomic factors in the youths/young adults’ identity construction?
- What is the role of the media in young Muslims’ identity construction?
- Is political awareness a contributory factor for identity construction?
- What are the methods for ‘a humanitarian way forward’?

**Organisation of the book**

This book contains a brief introduction and seven chapters (including the conclusion). Chapter 1 sets the scene. I briefly examine the history of Muslims in America and some of the contemporary issues facing American Muslims. I discuss social identity theory and explore how society can impact on the construction of one’s identity. In Chapter 1, I also discuss my research methodology and my experience in collecting the data. In Chapter 2, I examine the cultural dimension of identity within the Muslim community. I discuss the different ideologies within the Islamic community and the placement of minorities within the Muslim majority. I also examine the place of women and the position of young men within the Muslim community. In Chapter 3, I consider the debate on identity or what it is to be an American. I discuss the identity of the respondents – their sense of belonging to America, to their country of origin and to their religion. I also discuss whether sports interests have any impact on the participants’ identity. In Chapter 4, I examine how the American
media is shaping young Muslims’ identity. I examine some print media to test the validity of the participants’ comments. Chapter 5 is concerned with identity politics. I examine only the views of Palestinian Americans because most of them spoke of their experience of differential treatment meted out by the Israeli authorities when they visited Palestine. In Chapter 6, I examine the interest of young Muslims in American politics. I evaluate the participants’ political awareness and thereby discuss diverse topics such as domestic issues, education and unemployment, together with foreign affairs concerns. The final chapter, the conclusion, is a plea for further reconciliation. I point out the areas that need attention – the United States media’s role, Muslim women, youth, Muslim leaders’ role, the emphasis on biculturalism and sport – and suggest a humanitarian way forward.

Limitations

In this study, all of the interviews were in-depth and semi-structured, and all the 379 interviewees responded willingly to the topics of national identity, the media and President Obama. On the topic of culture (Chapter 2), only a few relevant voices were included. The topic of Palestine was raised by some participants of diverse backgrounds. Yet in the Palestine chapter (Chapter 6), I have only reported responses of the participants who had Palestinian inheritance. Qualitative research involves fieldwork, in this case organising and conducting face-to-face interviews, which in turn generates a lot of data to be analysed. Hence the work is very labour intensive and by necessity entails a smaller sample of subjects. Furthermore, this raises the question of whether the sample is representative in terms of sociocultural dimensions, geographic location and other factors. For example, some states in the Midwest, such as Arizona, could have been included but funding constraints prohibited me from extending this study any further. Similarly, the West Coast (and Los Angeles in particular) could not be incorporated in this study because of lack of funding.

In America Shi’ites form a minority within the broader Islamic community, although they constitute a higher proportion than in the general Muslim population: it is estimated that one-fifth of American Muslims are Shi’ites as against 13 per cent worldwide. However, there were only eighteen Shia participants in this study overall. Dearborn, a suburb of Detroit, has a large Shia population. I did conduct a few interviews in Dearborn. But my period of time there was much shorter than other places of my fieldwork. It is worth noting that in this study, I did not specifically look out for participants’ religious affiliation, for example, who was a Sunni or who was a Shia. My focus was on how young Muslims in general fared in the wider American society.

Overall, there was a rich set of responses on all topics and this has enabled me to present themes that I believe are characteristic and informative. Ultimately, of course, the reader will judge the credibility of my work.
Notes

4. Names of the participants mentioned in this book are not real.
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