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SELF-REFLECTION

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by **Shahzia Sikander** MFA 95 PT/PR

THE PURSUIT OF TRUTH is a fleeting premise when held hostage by authenticity. Human identity is mercurial. Like each of us, it is alive and liable to shift, evolve, challenge and surprise. I see identity as a pursuit curve—a chase where both real and fabricated are entangled.

I was born in Lahore, Pakistan, to a family of storytellers. My father was an enthusiastic narrator with oratory prowess. My first memory is of him reading me Korney Chukovsky's book *Unusual Tales*, translated into Urdu. His creative freedom in customizing the tales as he read out loud was infectious and entertaining. It signaled to me as a young child to be inventive.

A couple of years later, encounters with Edgar Allan Poe, Lewis Carroll, Walter de la Mare alongside the stories of Miraj—the visionary night journey of Prophet Muhammad—felt like the Everest expedition in pursuit of wit, candor and irony. In high school the pendulum swung between Shakespeare and Salman Rushdie and a multitude of sources in between, allowing my imagination to inspect the consequences of different cultural perspectives.



The World is Yours, The World is Mine, the piece on the previous page, was created for a 2014 *New York Times* op-ed. The images of two recent etchings on this spread are from *Portrait of the Artist* (2016), a suite of four created for *Pace Prints*.

But growing up in Pakistan in the 1980s under a military regime that incessantly institutionalized religion was a deeply conflicting experience. The Hudood ordinances, which limited women's rights, loomed large. Art school was considered immoral. Co-education dissipated. Religious tolerance diminished.

The Muslim culture practiced within the private sector was varied, complex and dynamic. I grew up in a multifamily household with an intrinsic mix of secular, spiritual and religious Muslim-ness. By the time I was nine, I had read the Koran several times and learned much of it by heart in Arabic—a language I did not understand. I realized that rote memorization was not my calling.

Though I loved my Muslim religious celebratory rituals—of fasting, Eid, saying prayers and putting aside *zakat* (alms)—I was equally enthusiastic about my concurrent Catholic schooling, choir practice and participating in the annual Christmas play. I had a probing mind, an independent nature and a spunky imagination, always ready to compete with the boys.

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Shahzia Sikander MFA 95 PT/PR

My first visit to the US was in 1992. I traveled courtesy of the Pakistani government to showcase my paintings at the Pakistani Embassy in Washington, DC. In Pakistan my art made headline news; in the show, not a single work sold.

I was disappointed but decided to call up art schools and share my work in person. My father had given me a *See America* ticket from Delta Airlines, which came in handy because it allowed me to fly from city to city on standby status as many times as possible. That mobility encouraged me to call on many art programs, and eventually I was accepted to the graduate Painting program at RISD for fall 1993.

Despite my pluralistic upbringing, I was anxious about encountering my first Jewish family at RISD—the Fains, my assigned hosts in Providence. I imagined the inevitable discussion around our respective faiths. As I settled into their home, I was taken aback at the uncanny similarities with my own tight-knit family: lots of affection, a healthy attitude toward spirituality and an appreciation for communication and education.

I babysat their two young children, reading them stories about our different cultures and rituals. Exchanging ideas and understanding each other's Muslim and Jewish faiths were instrumental to building the bonds we still share.

Now, my six-year-old son goes to a secular Jewish school in New York, where we live, and his godmother is a sculptor who is Jewish. I am designing a *ketubah* for the global Jewish community. My son is fluent in Urdu and deeply connected to his Muslim roots but he also speaks Spanish.

More than half the children in his kindergarten class are multiracial and multi-religious. Yet I am dumbfounded that in 2016, here in New York—one of the most diverse cities in the world—it is almost impossible to find a children's book that celebrates a Muslim child's heritage, family, culture and tradition. Why is it that we do not care to assimilate the Muslim American experience in the same effortless ways we do for other cultural and religious groups?

The onus to explain the Pakistani and Muslim heritage has always been on me as an artist as well as a parent. While generating a variety of cultural references for my son to express to his classmates over the past three years, I realized that therein lay an opportunity for us to create our own personal books. Luckily both of us love to draw and I have been able to tap into the lessons ingrained by my father's unwavering commitment to storytelling.

Recently, the Museum of Modern Art invited me to participate in its children's book line by reflecting from within and expressing my unique observations of cross-cultural experiences. Movements like #weneeddiversebooks have also been instrumental in bringing to light underrepresented narratives and identities.

Luckily the complex plurality I experienced as a child in Pakistan in the 1970s and '80s allowed me to navigate a multitude of categories as I negotiated a sense of belonging. Pakistani, Muslim, woman, South Asian and Asian American—all are lenses I have encountered as the other. Using creativity as a tool and embracing the potential of multiplicity instead of rigidity or singularity, I have evolved as a shape-shifter able to find meaning in all categories.

Issues around identity are still as relevant now as when I moved to the US in 1993. Even then, I didn't fit the average American's picture of a Muslim. It baffled many in the mid 1990s that as a practicing Muslim woman I did not wear a veil. My independent nature was also seen as an anomaly. Many assumed I left Pakistan to avoid a patriarchal culture and subjugation by a Muslim male. I was often left feeling that the complexities of being a Muslim in America were too nuanced for the majority to grasp.

In my experience, American culture in the early '90s was wonderfully porous. The first Persian Gulf War had not yet invaded the imaginations of many. And long gone are the days when one could travel on a Pakistani passport without raising security alarms and being forced to wait in detention rooms.

Now, the incendiary anti-Muslim rhetoric spreading in certain parts of the US is dangerous and suffocating. It robs all of us of our innate humanity and empathy. However, while I am deeply troubled and disheartened by the anti-women, anti-immigrant, anti-earth and pro-bigotry sentiments that emerged from the 2016 presidential election here in the US, I also feel newly energized to return to the studio. This is a moment when I am most charged as an artist—when I feel the urgency and clarity to speak out. In so many ways, making art is never about seeking stability in uncertain times; it is about confronting uncertainty.

The Muslim tradition and Muslim cultural practices are intrinsic to our shared human history. American Muslim identity is one of the most palpable, elusive and intellectually challenging ideas of our time. But intellectual freedom, knowledge and imagination are essential to opening up the discourse.

If the perception of Muslim Americans is to grow and deepen, it is essential that we welcome art and literature that is free to engage, explore, critique and expand its inherent Muslim-ness. The same personal, communal and institutional support that other religious and immigrant communities enjoy is necessary for multifaceted Muslim American voices to emerge in the 21st century.

Where is the Muslim American Historical Society? Why is there no stand-alone Museum of Islamic Art—contemporary or otherwise—in the United States?

For me, the everyday acts of cultivating imagination and fostering empathy started early in childhood. Learning how to co-exist begins with understanding and celebrating all our identities, pluralities and intersections.

Art and literature have played significant roles in shaping my understanding of differences (and similarities). Imagination is essential for both children and adults, but it's adults who must address and correct the forces of ignorance, fear and misplaced rage. ■

A slightly different version of this essay originally ran in the *Los Angeles Times* (3.24.16).

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