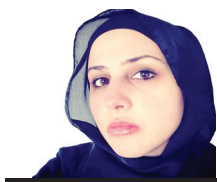


ILLUSTRATION BY AUDREY TSENG

US Islamophobia rooted in 9/11 attacks

Subsequent prejudice stole my feelings of safety, self identity



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Before I donned the hijab on Aug. 16, 2001 at the age of 12, hardly any of my classmates knew a Muslim or knew that I was one.

No one knew what “Palestinian” meant. Everyone assumed that I, like many of my dark-haired and tan-skinned classmates, was Hispanic.

After Sept. 11, 2001, my hijab became the bull’s-eye on my back.

I wasn’t safe at home, school or in public.

Rabid Islamophobia robbed me of my last safe place I had as a 12-year-old navigating the many traumas of adolescence and terror: the library.

Kids who didn’t know who Muslims were the week before 9/11 now not only knew I was one, but had been told by their parents and news media outlets that all Muslims were terrorists.

The next logical conclusion, then, was that I was a terrorist.

If kids couldn’t pull off my hijab, they would try pulling down my pants or pulling up my shirt. Kids took condoms from the health office, unwrapped them and threw them at me.

The lubricant made it stick to my clothes. I was constantly afraid I had missed one and was walking around with it stuck to my sweater.

I was called a “terrorist,” “towel-head” and “dumb fucking eye-raqi.”

Several teachers were supportive of me, but at one point a substitute teacher asked the entire class if they believed our government should allow people to practice a terrorist religion in America.

None of the people who bullied me understood that I, a patriotic American kid, was grieving the loss of my 3,000 countrymen and was also being made to shoulder the blame. He looked right at me and glared. I stared back in defiance but went home and cried.

Going home felt like entering the den of a large predatory animal. My father had been verbally and psychologically abusive to my two younger brothers and me. He was also physically abusive to my mother for as long as I could remember.

The days when I wasn’t afraid of him seemed few and far away like stars in a vast blackness that made up all the days when I was so nervous at home I couldn’t eat.

I made myself as small as possible. I spent as much time buried in a book

or looking as busy as I possibly could. I watched how I spoke so nothing I said could be construed as offensive or disrespectful.

The way I dressed, even while wearing a hijab, was scrutinized. Everything I did felt policed.

My father calculated his words to belittle us. He made sure we were present when he hit our mother, broke things he knew were precious, no one was allowed to have friends over and we were seldom able to leave the house.

The last place of refuge I could find was the library. Every weekly visit to the small Cambrian Branch Library made me feel like Roald Dahl’s Matilda, with her love of books and appreciation for their magic.

Each book was its own escape hatch. I checked books out by the dozen. I built universes in my mind and spoke to characters in books like they were my imaginary friends.

It was peaceful in the library. No shouting or breaking of glass, no cacophony of kids jeering and harassing, just the quiet peace of thousands of books waiting to be chosen.

It was heaven.

One day, on our way home from the library, a truck with a car-dealership-sized U.S. flag streaming from the back tried to run us off the expressway. I was terrified. Accustomed to dealing with extreme tension, my mother kept her eyes forward and kept driving. The truck veered off at the next exit.

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Road rage incidents became a weekly, if not daily occurrence. People shouted obscenities, flipped us off, jerked their steering wheels toward us as though preparing to crash into us. People drove up behind us, dangerously close to the back bumper, smirking. As they drove off they would yell “fucking Taliban!” or “get out of my country!”

While on the sidewalk outside a

grocery store, a grown man spit at me and said, “go back where you came from!”

The following “library day,” my mother, who doesn’t wear a hijab, gave me an ultimatum: remove my hijab or stay home and miss the weekly trip to the place that had become my safe haven.

I had made a deep and personal commitment to wearing the hijab as an act of submission to God.

I couldn’t just remove it. I wouldn’t. It would mean that everyone who had terrorized me since 9/11 had won and taken something from me that was special and sacred.

At the time, I was told I was putting my family in danger. In wearing the hijab, I wore a target on my head. My mother and siblings appeared white, American and “normal” enough but I looked like, well, a Muslim.

In hindsight, I don’t blame my mother for escaping to the library herself. She didn’t understand the extent of my father’s emotional abuse of me. My presence in the car had, in her mind, turned our weekly excursions to the library dangerous. She was trying to find somewhere to take a breather but couldn’t while dodging white men in trucks trying to kill us.

But I didn’t endanger us. I simply placed a piece of cloth on my head, practiced my religion and did what any American should feel comfortable doing without fear of persecution.

Angry white men who were told I was the enemy and decided to believe it endangered us. They terrorized my family and me with purpose and malice and on many occasions laughed when they saw how scared we were.

Hate crimes against Muslims or people who were confused for Muslims sharply rose after 9/11.

According to a Nov. 15, 2011 article by the Southern Poverty Law Center, the anniversary of 9/11 can bring Islamophobic rhetoric and bigotry bubbling to the surface.

The past four years of bigoted anti-Muslim, anti-immigrant rhetoric from former president Donald Trump continues to have an effect on Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, Arabs and Southeast Asians.

Evelyn Alsultany, scholar of contemporary Arab and Muslim American cultural politics and popular culture, reflected on Trump tweeting out a doctored photo of Nancy Pelosi and Chuck Schumer in a hijab and turban.

“It’s not the first time Trump has promoted Islamophobia,” Alsultany said in a Jan. 19, 2020 article from the University of Southern California

Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences.

“With rhetoric like ‘Islam hates us’ and policies such as banning the entry of immigrants from Muslim-majority countries, Trump has reinforced the idea that Islam is a threat to the U.S.,” Alsultany said in the same article.

When 9/11 happened, I was a child who deserved to be safe at home, school and in public, especially at the library. I didn’t deserve to be blamed, scapegoated, maligned and bullied.

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The new wave of Afghan refugees arriving in the U.S. deserve to be safe. They are fleeing everything they know. Many will arrive in the country with little knowledge of English, no assets and no jobs.

Many will be traumatized from what they have endured in Afghanistan, the long journey to safety and culture shock that comes with crossing an ocean. We can’t change how safe they will feel at home while adjusting to life in America. Those of us who are not parents, students or faculty can’t change how safe they will feel at school.

But we can make Afghan refugees feel welcome and safe in public.

Thousands of them will arrive even as hateful rhetoric surrounding Afghans and Muslims rises again, according to an Aug. 20 Washington Post article.

By challenging bigoted rhetoric, standing up to those who spout epithets and uphold stereotypes and by attending bystander intervention trainings such as those offered by the Council on American Islamic Relations, we can halt the spread of infectious misinformation, protect new members of our community from bullying and harassment and de-escalate hate crimes and aggressions in progress.

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