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The Dars: South Asian Muslim American Women Negotiate Identity

The predominant discourse surrounding Islam on the national landscape conceals the diversity of experiences for Muslim Americans. A close examination of the local landscape of a women's dars, or Quranic study group, contradicts gendered stereotypes. The dars gathering is a space of shared narratives, agency, and socialization. The nuanced reading of the discourse reveals a negotiation of religious and ethnic identity. Within their local communities, these groups of immigrant women are actively shaping their lives as distinctly South Asian Muslim American.

Keywords

AFS ETHNOGRAPHIC THESAURUS: Ethnicity, women, Islamophobia, folklife, Muslim Americans

AS ISLAM CONTINUES TO BE EXAMINED AND DEBATED in American national discourse, everyday local Muslim life remains unfamiliar, foreign, and invisible. In 2011, shortly after the killing of Osama bin Laden, President Obama addressed the American nation confirming his death. While promising the continuation of the War on Terror, he asserted: "Justice has been done." Obama, in his speech, was careful to remind all Americans that "the United States is not—and never will be—at war with Islam," but continued thanking those involved in the operation, informing Americans that they "can feel the satisfaction of their work and their result of the pursuit of justice." American newspapers emblazoned their headlines with "Vengeance at Last—US Nails the Bastard," "US Kills Bin Laden," "Justice Has Been Done," "Rot in Hell," and "We Got the Bastard."¹ As I watched the television media reports showing large crowds outside of the White House, in the streets, and on university campuses celebrating, jubilant, and chanting U-S-A, I was struck by how this display of patriotism on the national landscape created an uneasy feeling for me in the local context. As Michelle Byng states, it was the attacks of September 11 that have connected "Muslims and Islam to terrorism within the geographical borders of the United States" (Byng 2008:659). These events and headlines are produced on a national scale but have resonance in a local context. Despite the insistence of President Obama and former President George W. Bush that Islam and Muslims are not the enemies of the United States, the dominant

discourse concerning Muslim Americans remains negative and reawakens in me a fear of a backlash of discrimination and hostility. An August 2010 Pew Research Center poll entitled “Public Remains Conflicted over Islam” confirms that almost 40 percent of Americans have a negative view of Islam (Pew Research Center 2010). The *Economist* magazine conducted a similar poll in August of 2010 and also reported that nearly 54 percent of Americans had a “somewhat” to “very unfavorable” opinion of Islam (R.M. 2010). The intelligence policies regarding national surveillance on Muslims has further rendered Muslim American life as suspicious, while “the war on terror continues to sustain Islamophobia” (Kundnani 2014:267).

The stereotypes surrounding Muslim Americans not only center on misconceptions about Islam and Islamic practice, but the images of Muslims are gendered. The prevailing discourse in the media and in the War on Terror focuses primarily on the Muslim man, who is perceived through the trope of violence as the terrorist, without reason and uncivilized. The conception of the Muslim woman pushes the opposite extreme of passivity and submission. Often perceived as uneducated, veiled, and docile, the Muslim woman needs to be saved from Islam and its violence. Further, she lacks agency, and her silenced voice allows others to determine her identity (Abu-Lughod 2013). The national landscape obscures the diversity of experience of Muslim Americans, rendering individuals and communities as indistinguishable.

On a personal, immediate level, the local story was the same. In 2011, my son in fourth grade in a public school was repeatedly teased by a classmate and called “Mexican” as an ethnic slur. When my son corrected the other child by stating he was not Mexican, but that his father was born in America and his mother in Pakistan, he was mocked and told he was a terrorist and that his grandparents were responsible for 9/11. This confrontation occurred quietly and without the teacher’s notice in an affluent, well-educated, predominantly white suburban neighborhood of Philadelphia. As soon as I learned of the incident, I informed the teacher who, shocked and sympathetic, assured me the school principal would contact me immediately and address the situation. However, both the principal and the school district superintendent failed to recognize or acknowledge the incident as one of intolerance, with racial, religious, and ethnic overtones. What is compelling in this situation is the homogenization of all Muslims as terrorists by a 9-year-old, but also how very little most in the United States know about Muslim American life.

In this essay, I consider how Muslim Americans are shaping their lives within a local, intimate context yet alongside a broader hostile socio-political climate, a time that Gottschalk and Greenberg define as Islamophobia, a period where “long-simmering resentments, suspicions, and fears manifest themselves most directly in conditions that appear to affirm many Americans’ darkest concerns” about Islam (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008:6). This work focuses on a gendered analysis of one community, and examines Muslim American women’s agency in their daily life. Through fieldwork with women from one suburban Philadelphia mosque, I explore the multiple Muslim identities in the United States and the ways in which the imagined versus the lived experience of South Asian Muslim Americans are enacted. Here, the local, the South Asian Muslim American community in Philadelphia, is juxtaposed and mapped in opposition to the national discourse of Islam in America.²

This is particularly critical to examine since the War on Terror collapses differences along cultural or ethnic lines in spite of research delineating ethnic, racial, and class differences (Haddad and Lummis 1987; McCloud 2003, 2004). As a result, Muslim identity has been crystallized and mapped, transformed not only as a religious ideology, but also as the homogenized Islamic “other” in the national landscape, eclipsing ethnic identities and class disparities in the local and immediate. As Ong suggests, such essentialization marks difference and generates an identity, and in this case, a Muslim American identity, that is subject to “negotiating the often ambivalent and contested relations with the state and its hegemonic forms that establish the criteria of belonging” (Ong 1996:738). To be Muslim in America post-9/11 is to be understood as fundamentally alien, an outsider, a problem who lives not only in the national imagination but within the localized space of neighborhoods and communities. To be a Muslim woman in America post-9/11 is to be understood as veiled and backward, oppressed and without a voice. In reality, within their local landscape, immigrant Muslim American women are actively shaping distinct Muslim communities vis-à-vis class, education, and place of origin. Despite the stereotypical images, Muslim American women are constructing an identity that not only connects them to their places of birth, but also remains firmly rooted in the United States. For all immigrant Muslim Americans, consideration of daily practice and expressions of folklore traditions, either religious or cultural, strengthens the ways in which they make sense of their uniqueness in the United States, but also holds implications for being misunderstood and feared by the larger non-Muslim society.

The largest wave of South Asian migration to the United States occurred after the passage of the Hart-Celler Act in 1965. In the midst of the Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War, faced with the Medicare and Medicaid Acts, the United States lifted previously restrictive quotas on immigration, allowing for skilled workers and students to begin their lives in the United States. South Asians came primarily from India and Pakistan, seeking education, employment, and better opportunities for financial security. Those that arrived in the period between 1970 and the late 1980s fulfilled the immigration requirements and generally represented a group with English-language ability, higher levels of education, and upper middle-class status. The US Census data from 2010 records 3.4 million South Asians living in the United States, with the highest populations in New York, California, New Jersey, Texas, and Illinois. Philadelphia also has witnessed strong growth in its immigrant population, with Asians accounting for nearly 40 percent of the total immigrant community. Affordable housing and job opportunities made Philadelphia a desirable place to live for many Asian Americans and South Asians in particular. For example, within this specific South Asian American community, several engineers from South Asia came to the Philadelphia area to work at the Limerick nuclear power plant. In addition, those who were trained as dentists in Pakistan moved to Philadelphia to enroll in the foreign dental certification program at the University of Pennsylvania.

In addition to exploring my own heritage, my motivation to work with the South Asian Muslim American community stems from factors that make their lives and experiences in the United States compelling, and from the fact that little is known about their daily Muslim life. A complex tension exists regarding the manner in which

South Asian Muslim Americans create and maintain their ethnicity and the manner in which they are perceived. National misconceptions about Islam and immigrants directly impact the local perception and understanding of Muslim Americans and the manner in which they choose to practice and identify with Islam. For many non-Muslim Americans, Muslim means Arab (Haddad and Lummis 1987; McCloud 2003). The consequences of such misconceptions about the South Asian Muslim American community give rise not only to an oversimplification about Muslim Americans as they navigate their lives in the United States, but more significantly, they homogenize the diversity of languages, nationalities, cultures, and practices of various communities. It is critical to examine closely the complexities of life for Muslim Americans post-9/11, allowing for the possibility of deeper understanding. The folklife of Muslim Americans not only reveals the multiplicities of traditions, but also serves to emphasize the shared experiences of immigrant life on the United States.

One significant example of a shared experience within the Muslim American community for women is a Quranic study group. To examine South Asian Muslim ethnic and religious identity, I worked closely with a group of women and attended a weekly Quranic study circle, or *dars*, that reflected the practice of personal negotiation of immigrant life. Whereas the national discourse on Islam misunderstood, vilified, or largely ignored Islamic practice, the localized, immediate context centered on women who shared stories and experiences about their faith and their experiences in America. These weekly intimate gatherings were ritualized in customary sacred procedures, with 10 to 15 women gathering together in the home of Hafsa to read and study the verses of the Quran.³ The meetings include the religious procedures of handling the Quran, veiling the head, performing prayers, and proper recitation of the verses in Arabic. The weekly *dars*, or lesson, centers on the Quran, but for this small group of South Asian women, the gatherings also delineate a space in which conversations can occur about community and family life in the United States. These meetings appear to focus primarily on Muslim ritual and practice, but a closer look reveals a discourse about the struggles of first-generation immigrants. The women relate their experiences within a South Asian cultural frame, sharing food and customs that include traditional clothing and language. Fundamentally, though, the conversations and the narratives shared are the narratives of Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's "culture shock," the stories recounted about the trials of creating a life anew in America (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1978). In the space of the *dars*, the dialogues also center on the issues and the struggles of living an ethnically South Asian and religiously Muslim existence in an American society as the women establish a life and raise their children in the United States. As the women negotiate their multiple identities of wife, Muslim, immigrant, mother, and friend in their everyday lives, the *dars* structures their collective efforts and aspirations. Moreover, as previously noted, these dialogues and issues are situated within the context of post-9/11 United States, in which the political and social milieu misunderstood Islam and was wary of foreigners. These narratives may not have focused on the trauma of 9/11 exclusively, but for the women, the conversations do contain a certain urgency of protecting their South Asian and Muslim heritage in the United States for their children and future generations.

What began solely as a study of a religious practice transformed for me over the course of a year. For me as an observer, the lessons discussed and the experiences

shared were unexpected outcomes from attending and observing the dars gathering.⁴ The inquiry shifted into an analysis of complex relationships situated within a religious format and set against an ethnically charged backdrop, ultimately reflecting the contradictions and challenges of Muslim American life. Islamic culture, frequent travel, social practices, language, and cultural dress intermixed with American children, voting privileges, homes, and employment in the United States substantiate their status as both a diasporic and a local community. The site of South Asian Muslim community life in suburban Philadelphia in the local context positions them as skilled and educated individuals, culturally linked South Asians, and American citizens. The claim to an Islamic legacy connects many of the community's members in a Muslim diaspora on a national landscape. The national space unites everyone as Muslim, yet it simultaneously erases differences and largely promotes misunderstanding and fear.

The spheres of home and mosque intersect through the dars as a practice of ethnic identity. The dars is intrinsically a social event, one that involves both the religious and the personal, and what is spoken as well as what is written. The gathering connects the women as South Asians, as Muslims, and as immigrants in the United States. These narratives offer a glimpse into South Asian Muslim American life, highlighting the issues the women confront on a daily basis as they navigate their religious and cultural past with their current lives in the United States. These discussions and the experiences shared did not always relate to religion; rather, these discussions often conflated South Asian cultural and social values and customs with Islam. The women at the dars share a specific cultural and religious referential frame as upper middle-class Muslim women from South Asia living in America. The experiences and stories revealed at the dars contain similar cultural and social expectations that are specific to their lives as mothers, wives, and friends. By attending the dars, the women gain religious knowledge since they are learning about Islam, but they are also learning about their Muslim life in the United States. The knowledge of culture and religion offers an opportunity for social connection, and it creates a local space for the group to demarcate an identity as South Asian Muslim American women.

For many Muslim women in the United States, the dars is a popular practice that allows them to ritualize the study of the Quran with a group and to determine its content and style in a small and personal atmosphere.⁵ Yvonne Haddad highlights how mosques in the United States have encouraged Quran study groups for women, and "in some cases old world customs of women's weekly visits have been turned into special occasions for learning about Islam" (Haddad 2000:244).

This dars consists of women who are married and have children. Many of the participants, who came to the United States after they were married, had husbands who desired to further their professional careers and/or academic study in the 1980s. Their migration stories share many of the same trials and tribulations, as they all came as married women with their spouses, leaving behind their relatives, and then having had children here in the United States and raising them without extended family support. Most of the women do not work outside of the home and have school-aged children. Both factors allow the women the availability to attend the dars regularly in the late morning and to stay until the early afternoon.

The women in the dars group, from India or Pakistan, have varying levels of education and tend to have come from middle- or upper middle-class families. Most also

came to the United States fluent in English, having studied the language throughout their education. Their husbands all work in the professional fields as doctors, dentists, or engineers, and as a result, these families possess financial stability. Thus they were able to have options and choice about where and how to live, and they were able to choose to live in affluent neighborhoods and send their children to private schools and universities. Many of the families travel to India or Pakistan every year or every other year to visit relatives. Financial stability and school-aged children also free the women to pursue deeper insights into their religion, since they are not burdened with the financial responsibilities of working outside the home or caring for their children during the day.

Hafsa and the Weekly Dars

Every Monday, Hafsa unlocks her front door and opens her home to the women from the Islamic Society who are able to join in on the weekly dars lesson, their Quranic study group.⁶ The invitation is an open one for the members of the Islamic Society, and while the attendance waxes and wanes, the group usually includes 10 to 15 women. The women enter the home and make their way to the living room. During prayer, and even when one is in a mosque, shoes are never worn, so as they enter, the women leave their shoes at the door. They quietly take their places in a circle on the floor where Hafsa has spread a clean white bedsheet. Encircling the sheet are various pillows for the women's comfort. As the women come into the living room, they cover their heads with a veil, which is part of their traditional clothing ensemble. During prayer and any other ritual practice in Islam, women are required to wear a veil over their heads and to dress modestly, covering their legs and most of their arms in loose-fitting clothing. All of the women attending the dars primarily dress in South Asian clothing consisting of loose pants and a long shirt reaching to the knees and a veil five to six feet long. As they enter, the women place the Quran that they have brought with them on a pillow on the floor in front of them. The dars begins at 11:00 a.m., and, often, latecomers filter in quietly, sitting in open spots in the circle. Once the lesson commences, it does not stop until its completion. When the dars lesson has concluded, the women perform the obligatory afternoon prayer. In ritual prayer, Muslims face in the direction of Mecca, the holiest city in Islam. As they position their bodies, Muslims also demarcate a prayer space around them with the use of a prayer rug. When the prayer is performed as a group, any large rug or sheet can be used to delineate a sacred space. The white bedsheet that Hafsa placed on her living room floor marks the space as one of worship, but the color does not necessarily denote any aspect of Islam. The same sheet used for the dars can also stand in for the afternoon prayer after the dars lesson. Immediately after the afternoon ritual prayer, the sheet is lifted off the ground, folded, and put away.

The room shifts in mood and ambiance as socialization ensues with a wide assortment of entrées served for lunch. Conversations also shift from religious issues to children, food, and the latest designs in South Asian clothes. This shared time following the dars allows the women to connect in a more relaxed and cheerful atmosphere. Even though the women in the group tend to wear Western clothes in their daily lives,

almost all of them wear clothes from South Asia to dars. Any cultural or religious event is a happy occasion for them to have the opportunity to wear clothes brought back from trips to India or Pakistan. Veils form a part of the traditional *shalwar* (loose pants) and *kurta* (loose-fitting shirt) ensemble, and all of the women wear veils around their neck, except while reading the Quran during the dars, when it covers their head. It is important to note that none of the women wear a veil or *hijab*, but they follow the practice of covering their heads during the recitation of the Quran out of respect for their faith. Despite misconceptions that all Muslim women veil, within this community, each woman decides when she wishes to veil. For the majority, who also wear pants and long skirts, veiling over the head occurs only within a religious framework.

After the dars, they discuss everything from their children to fashions and films while they enjoy a potluck lunch. The food generally consists of Indian or Pakistani dishes that the women have made and contributed. Enjoying these dishes also presents a chance for the women to talk about family recipes or share new ways to cook traditional meals. All of the women look forward to trying new dishes and socializing through food.

This Islamic Society dars for women was initiated by Hafsa, and, during an interview, she emphasized that it is obligatory for all Muslims to share and promote their understanding of the Quran with others who may not possess the same knowledge. Because the Quran is written in Arabic and most of the dars members speak, read, and write in Hindi/Urdu, knowledge of translation and meanings of the verses is a highly valued and prized ability. She explained that Mohammed also conducted lessons to the first Muslims on the Quran and Islam, and so Muslims now are encouraged to continue in his footsteps.⁷ Her own upbringing in Pakistan included a tightly knit extended family that shared meals, religious gatherings, and religious holidays together. For Hafsa, culture and religion cannot be separated, and thus the essence of her identity as Pakistani is rooted in being a Muslim. Practicing religion forms an extension of living culture, and, for Hafsa, the dars group became a way to re-enact both identities.

When Hafsa explains why she began the dars group, she states: "After 9/11, I felt that I was away from my faith. I felt something was missing." Realizing that a deep understanding and connection to her faith was absent from her daily routine in America, she organized a group of her friends from the community mosque to meet weekly to study the Quran. For Hafsa, the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, signified a shift, the creation of a new aspect of her ethnic identity as a Pakistani immigrant in the United States, that of a South Asian Muslim American.

A young, energetic woman in her forties with three boys, Hafsa embarked on her own Quranic studies while still living in Pakistan. The large majority of Pakistan is Muslim, and Islam imbues every aspect of daily life. Whether women gather in homes for social or religious purposes in Pakistan, their lives and actions are circumscribed within a Muslim framework. For Hafsa, religion and culture are not only intertwined, but they are practiced with a daily, habitual rhythm. Thus when she moved to the Philadelphia area with her family in 1995, Hafsa often attended lectures and Quranic recitations at the nearby Islamic Education Center. For a short time, she taught a women's

group on various issues in Islam at the local mosque, but the events of September 11, 2001, altered her ideas of being a good Muslim. These events made her feel that her life up to that moment was not focused on her faith as the primary force directing all of her actions. Hafsa felt that she had been overly concerned about the trivialities of life such as working at a job she did not love and not spending more time with her family and praying regularly. She attributed a wave of religiosity in the community to 9/11, saying: "It jolted us up." The tragic events and the anti-Muslim sentiments that resulted compelled others to learn more about Islam in order to understand and explain many misconceptions to non-Muslims. Several individuals in the community were approached by neighbors and/or work colleagues to clarify Islamic beliefs and practices and to give talks to local churches and organizations. After September 11, 2001, no one felt they could take their religious identity for granted; they needed to educate themselves about their faith. Hafsa was widely regarded as knowledgeable about Islam due to her studies of the Quran and teaching roles at the mosque, but her innate ability to be a leader established her pivotal role in the dars group.

On a personal level, Hafsa, deeply devoted to her faith, made a point to emphasize her love for Islam and her anger about the distortions perpetrated about Islam in the media. At many times during the dars lesson, she was visibly angry or upset from a news report with mistaken information about Islam or Muslims on the television or in the newspaper. Hafsa also felt that many Muslims were practicing just the ritual aspect of Islam, without a deeper knowledge of the faith, so she decided to start the dars group. It began with a small number of friends because she wanted to maintain a level of intimacy due to the sensitive nature of certain topics discussed. After encouragement from her husband, Hafsa opened the lessons to the mosque community, believing that such socialization would be a good idea since, due to migration, "everyone is away from their family." With the inclusion of more women, Hafsa repeatedly emphasizes to everyone, "to open up (their) hearts" and to "keep an open mind." As a result of going to the dars regularly, Hafsa feels, not only are more women praying five times daily and fasting during the month of Ramadan, but they now understand why Islam requires them to do so. She stated that it has also helped with other community issues such as "backbiting" or gossiping, and, most importantly, it has helped those women who previously had not been able to discuss difficult issues to feel more comfortable talking when with the group. In regard to her own personal life, Hafsa commented that she feels her attitude about life in general is more positive and open. She also believes that her relationships with her husband and sons have improved since the dars group began meeting. Other women agreed with Hafsa, claiming that they, too, have felt personally enriched through their regular attendance at the dars. Saira, who regularly attends, stated that her attendance at the dars had indeed helped her maintain her five daily ritual prayers and that she was very thankful for the weekly gathering. Since most of the women had migrated from Pakistan, where performing daily prayers or fasting is intrinsic to everyday life, the gathering links them to their Pakistani past. The dars facilitates a connection to both culture and religion as it was known to the women prior to their migration to the United States.

Hafsa's extensive social connections, combined with her religious study in Pakistan, award her a notable level of respect and authority with the other women in the Islamic

Society. More important is the role that Hafsa plays in the weekly gathering and how she not only initiated the group meetings but continues to host them at her home. It cannot be overlooked that Hafsa maintains an important position in the community, both religiously as well as socially. She is deeply embedded in the network of South Asian Muslim Americans, attending all community events and functions. She entertains other South Asian friends and family frequently in her home, serving traditional food almost exclusively. Hafsa is respected and active in the community socially and through her volunteer work teaching Sunday school classes at the Islamic Society Sunday School. All of these practices are expressions of Hafsa's Pakistani identity—her religious observance, hospitality, and her traditional dishes. She strives to maintain the customs in a similar manner as she would have done in Pakistan.

Hafsa insisted from the beginning that the group meet for the weekly dars lesson in her home, and thus made her home the central and pivotal location. She felt strongly that, for the meetings to run efficiently, a certain degree of consistency had to be maintained not only in terms of time and format of the lesson, but also the location of the dars itself. Because Hafsa was well liked and well respected, this was not a point of contention among the members of the group. Her place in the community and her passion for religious and cultural practices made Hafsa a natural teacher and leader.

As the group sits together and reads over the verses in the private home, issues of religion inspire discussions, which then allow an opening for other topics. In other words, it is within the framework of a religious gathering that the discourse of the dars emerges. The closed space of the dars allows for the meaningful conversations that emphasize a way for women to create connections and interdependence (Tannen 1990). The discourse of the dars reveals the ways that the women manage their roles and identities in a new country with new and changing responsibilities.

I attended the dars meetings, and, as I listened quietly, observing and taking notes over a period of a year, the conversations revealed the concerns shared by the women on a variety of topics all centering around issues of interpersonal relationships and issues of being Muslim in an American society. The main themes of the dialogues engaged included concerns of maintaining religiosity and culture, and also how to sustain these practices with their children. Though there are numerous insightful instances from the dars, I want to highlight a few instances that relate the diversity and the complexities of the issues raised and discussed by the women.⁸

At one of the dars lessons, the verses read in the Quran involved the Battle of Uhud, in which the early Muslim community was able to defeat their enemies not only with their physical strength, but also ideologically with their strong sense of faith. The members listened quietly, and then Hafsa showed a map pointing to where the battle physically occurred. Continuing with the verses on the battle, Hafsa read the next set of lines and began her explanation of the text. As she discussed how Allah asked the faithful to be disciplined in their actions, Hafsa elaborated upon the role of discipline in personal relationships. The topic of discipline led to the topic of the lack of discipline in everyday life, which then led to talk of excessive materiality in people's lives. Hafsa discussed the importance of strength and faith in Allah in opposition to materiality and competition amongst Muslims. She emphasized that, at times of

trouble, such as the current anti-Muslim sentiments in the United States, Muslims should strive to live in harmony with everyone around them.

In thinking about striving for discipline and religiosity, the women began sharing their personal stories of trying to maintain routine in their day-to-day schedules and of attempts at strengthening their spirituality. Questions that were raised included managing their household duties and children's schedules with their rituals and prayers, completing all chores in the morning, and making efforts to raise their level of religiosity in a non-Muslim country. Hafsa and some of the other women talked further about the nature of humans to constantly want material things and the issue of greediness when Allah has already given mankind all that is needed to survive. Frequently during the dars sessions, Hafsa reminded everyone that life is full of *jihad* or personal struggle, and all of the faithful have to continuously strive to become better Muslims.

The issue of faith often developed into the central theme of many dars lessons and ensuing conversations. From the verses on the Battle of Uhud, the women also learned that only Allah knows when their final moment will arrive, and several shared stories of their own close encounters with tragedy. Another dars session focused on faith and, again, the inevitability of death. Hafsa read the Quranic verses and initiated a discussion on trusting in Allah. The commentary and the resultant conversation stressed that, no matter what position or class level one has in society, or how much wealth one has accumulated, one will still have to face death. Prior to entrance in heaven, each person will be tested by Allah. The only way to succeed in passing the test is through consciousness of Allah, knowing that Allah alone is the one God. Applying this to life situations, Hafsa continued by appealing to the group to remain patient when confronted by situations that test their Islamic faith. These tests of faith necessitate *sabr*, or patience, by avoiding arguments or instigation by others.

One woman told the story of her family during the time of the Partition of India and Pakistan. As the nation of Pakistan separated from India, violence erupted in the streets as people moved from one country to another depending on their religion. The speaker's family lived in a predominantly Hindu neighborhood where it could have been extremely dangerous for them, but she attributes their steadfast belief in Allah as their salvation. At another dars gathering, Hafsa once more re-emphasized the significant relationship between faith and patience. The message here reminded all Muslims that they must believe that Allah rewards those who remain faithful *and* patient. Many women shared their own personal examples from their past and from their current daily life that involved struggles with patience, including relationships with spouses.

All of the discussions about faith revealed the importance of a religious identity for the dars members. Muslim identity and Islamic practice play a pivotal role in the lives of the women, connecting them intimately to each other in the United States. Sharing a spiritual connection enabled the women to partake not only in membership of a closely knit community, but to feel less isolated as a religious minority. Disclosing intimate information on personal issues or sharing small talk, these conversations reinforce involvement with each other as community members. Details the women communicate about everyday life form bonds of recognition and intimacy. The dars

conversations reinforce friendships and make the women feel less isolated as immigrants (Tannen 1990, 2007).

Further strengthening their closeness with each other was the ability to talk about relationship issues, which shaped several discussions and the women's narratives. During one of the dars lessons, Hafsa chose to play a tape of a lecture by a popular Islamic scholar on the laws of marriage, and specifically on relationships between men and women, and whom it is permissible to marry. On the recording, the commentary continued on the place of friendships in society and the nature of "secret friendships." The emphasis in the discussion framed the issue as unlawful, despite the widespread popularity of mixed-gender friendships, arguing that in Islam, family life and the home are the most important, especially for young females. The lecture urged listeners to be firm about limiting male-female interactions, and that all young girls should keep strict boundaries around themselves. As the tape played on, many women whispered comments to their neighbors sitting next to them, and when the tape stopped, all the women had issues to introduce. Most of the women were in agreement with the lecture but did not know how to put into practice the limitations of gender relationships with their own children.

One woman, Farhana, was quick to cite the inappropriate manner of dress of many of the Muslim teenage girls when they came to Sunday school. Often, she said, their heads were uncovered, and they wore low-cut jeans and low-cut blouses; in other words, "they were dressing like the Americans." Hafsa agreed and mentioned that she had discussed the issue of clothing with her own female students at the mosque, imploring them to be more modest in their attire. Farhana continued the discussion with the problem of dress in her own home. Her daughter brought her friends home, and according to Farhana, they were often inadequately and inappropriately dressed. This posed an issue since Farhana also had a young teenage son at home whom she did not want to be near her daughter's friends. Although she discussed the problem with her daughter, Farhana felt the issue had no solution. She then warned her own daughter not to dress in a similar manner, with these words: "If you put an ad out, someone will answer it." In Farhana's opinion, dressing provocatively was immoral and inappropriate for her daughter. Farhana was clear in discriminating clothing expectations between the genders.

The issues of dress and morality indicate deeper resistance to what both issues refer to—assimilation. By maintaining a boundary of appropriate versus inappropriate codes, the community instructs the second generation in manners of religion and culture. Such concern for the second generation is paramount since their interactions largely include non-South Asian Muslims. In her study of Jews in Scotland, Benski examines similar issues of assimilation in relationship to the matter of intermarriage. She argues that the community's predominant concern with in-group marriage and outside social mixing reveals insecurity concerning their position in the diaspora. In order to counteract the fear of loss of religion and culture, the community engages in practices that strengthen their family identity (Benski 1981). Farhana's response and the women's agreement with her concerns suggest a collective belief in the delineation of religiously and culturally sanctioned behavior for the second generation.

The migration pattern for the members of the Islamic Society demonstrates similar marks of motivation within the community for leaving, and reasons for staying on in the United States. All of the people whom I met and talked with expressed the same desire for advancement—whether it was for career, education, or lifestyle. When they left their homes in Pakistan or India, they left to search for something more, and frequently many of them thought they would return, but never did. While these new migrants were happy to be in the position of fulfilling their dreams financially, they still faced challenges in rebuilding a life in the United States. The lack of family support and the struggles raising children in a new country led to feelings of isolation. The search for a community, a South Asian Muslim community, spurred many of the first immigrants to build and establish their own space, one that would allow them to practice Islam within the context of South Asian culture.

These conversations reinforce the challenges faced by the women in raising their children with Islamic as well as South Asian cultural values. Living in an American society posed cultural identity dilemmas that the women themselves did not encounter in their youth in South Asia. Within these discussions lay a deep fear of loss—a loss of familiar values combined with the desire to maintain religious and cultural practices in their children's lives. All of this was heightened in the discriminatory aftermath that many Muslims faced in the United States following 9/11. The narratives at the dars indicated that the women recognized the difficulties their children encountered as minorities, and that they wanted to provide them with strong morals and values grounded in Islamic belief and South Asian tradition. In addition, the act of talking through shared concerns created a collective identity that was distinctively Muslim American.

One particular dars meeting focused on the roles of Muslim women. Hafsa's commentary after the Quranic verse focused on how women should follow the teachings of the Quran and not the teachings of any one person. She continued by adding that women should be stronger "mentally and physically" than men, and that women should never complain. Such actions would be emulating the women of early Islam, including the wives of Mohammed. One woman, Saira, asked what she should do in situations at home where she feels that her husband is not grateful for all the things she does for him. She stated that he is always yelling at her. Many of the women offered their advice, and one woman raised an interesting question: "Do we have greater expectations [from our spouses] because we are in a Western culture?" The group all had their own opinions and began talking to the person sitting next to them. Hafsa, in an attempt to bring attention back to the lesson, related a personal story and linked it back to the Quranic verses. Hafsa claimed that her sister often called her to complain about her husband, but that Hafsa never engaged in the same conversation. Her sister finally asked her one day: "Why don't you ever say anything about your husband? Doesn't he do anything?" Hafsa explained to the women that she never complains or talks about her husband, since she knows his positive and his negative attributes. As the women listened attentively, Hafsa went on to say that women, in general, tend to compare their husbands with each other's husbands and with other men. She stated that the focus should be on a man's character, and that women should look at the many ways men and husbands show their love, that they should focus on the good

things their husbands do. Hafsa directed this last comment toward Saira who had initially raised the issue of her husband, and went on by adding that women should be thankful, that this thankfulness delivers patience, and that patience delivers goodness. Such ideals could be applied to all relationships, not only those with spouses. She then refocused the dars back to the Quranic verses. Again, due to Hafsa's position in the Islamic Society and her role as moderator of the dars, the women did not argue or continue talking. They accepted her decision to end particular discussions and return to the lesson at hand.

At one gathering, the dars focused on the Quranic verse allowing men to have more than one wife. Concerned about possible arguments, Hafsa read the verse and immediately after, she stated: "We must stay cool and not attack." Another woman read the commentary on the verse, stressing that multiple marriages were based on the criterion that one must be equal and just toward every wife. Hafsa began the discussion of the verse by comparing taking multiple wives with Western culture. She stated that more than one wife is a better option for men than the issues faced by the West such as AIDS, broken marriages, illegitimate children, and children with no fathers. Hafsa's discussion continued with how the verse addresses the sexual needs of men, which may be greater than for women, and thus prevents prostitution and disease. She offers a fact that there are 8 million more women than men; making it plausible for multiple marriages to occur. A debate began among the women present on the difference between "needs" versus "womanizing." All the comments followed the format of comparing situations to Western culture and society. One woman, Saadia, stated: "I am a typical Eastern woman" and elaborated with accounts of her roles as a stay-at-home mother and "housewife." While she was offering her life as an example of fulfilling Islamic duties, another woman claimed that now "even in Pakistan, men are bringing home diseases—women are getting ovarian cancer." A third woman stated that yeast infections were also on the rise in Pakistan but was countered by someone else who said that these were "Western problems" and not issues of Islam. Hafsa brought the discussion back to the Quranic verse with her statement: "Instead of sleeping around like they do here in the US, men can marry more than one wife." She ended the discussion of the verse through an injunction to the women to know the meaning of this verse and to defend it.

What is perhaps most compelling are the ways in which the dars and the discussions represent an entanglement of Islamic law and the cultural and social practices of ethnicity. The discussions of the two previous examples, the first one of Saira feeling unappreciated by her husband, and the second, the conversation surrounding the Quranic verse about multiple marriages, reinforce the dialectic nature of the dars and exhibit the negotiation of ethnic identity. The narratives position this discourse outside of Hafsa's living room to the broader spheres of the local mosque community and the larger American society.

Saira's question about her husband and the subsequent responses from the group and from Hafsa summed up the actions that Muslim women should engage in, and the attitude with which they should do them. As faithful women, they should be patient and thankful in their relationships with their husbands and with their friends and relatives. Similarly, women's roles are again discussed in the other example when

Saadia states that she is “a typical Eastern woman” since she remains at home for her children and is a “housewife.” Both examples have varying degrees of evidence from Islamic law, but more importantly, what both examples possess are strategies for negotiating situations in America as a South Asian Muslim. The examples are understood within a particular cultural, social, and class referential frame—that of the upper middle-class, educated, Indian/Pakistani woman. The question that a woman asks Saira—are her expectations of her husband greater because she lives in the United States—suggests that the concern has little to do with Islamic law and more with positioning the expectations of one identity in contrast to another. Saadia’s comment also subsumes the “typical Eastern woman’s” role under Islam and posits Eastern culture versus Western culture. The discourse surrounding women’s roles indicates the expectations of adhering to South Asian ethnic norms in opposition to the West. Shared conversations on gender responsibilities assist the women in easing difficult situations for each other. The frame of reference remains an identity that is distinctly South Asian and Muslim even while negotiating new lives in America.

In the second example, surrounding the verse on multiple marriages, nearly all of the discussion centered on the contrast with “Western culture.” Issues of sexual disease, illegitimacy, and adultery are understood in terms of “us” vs. “them.” The discourse of the South Asian Muslim women critiqued the “other” in order to locate their own ethnic identity in the American framework. Marking the differences in cultural and social reference points enabled the women to strengthen their beliefs in a way of life that they frequently felt was becoming a distant reality. This distancing between their lived reality and their past, for first-generation women, particularly affected their relationships with their children, many of whom were born and raised in the United States. The women utilized the differences between societies and cultures in order to stress their expectations of their children—concerning family, education, and religion.

Sharing similar experiences of parenting, familial obligations, and practicing faith with their friends eases a sense of isolation that many of the women may feel. The gathering offers the women a space in which they can negotiate the tension between the social and cultural norms of their birthplace and of their current life. In one sense, the attendance of the dars unites the women within the community vis-à-vis their role as practicing and knowledgeable Muslims. In another sense, the relationship also substantiates their beliefs as a group in opposition to American culture and society. This additionally offers the women an opportunity to reaffirm their Muslim identity and strategize ways to maintain religious and cultural values among their children. The role as wife and mother is defined through ethnicity. The discourse the women engage in suggests that adhering to one’s own ethnic and religious roles in opposition to the West facilitates resolution of challenging issues. The space that the dars group creates for its members affirms that “women are more concerned with the shape of the social networks, with their connections to people in those networks, and with their ability to understand and influence people” (Tannen 1993:34). Most importantly, the discourse of the dars reflects strategies for the negotiation of how to live an ethnic life *and* the solidarity with which to confront it.

The impact of the dars on the lives of the women can be noted in many key respects. On an individual basis, there is the foremost and perhaps most evident manner in how

the dars has affected women's religiosity. Many of them stated that they feel closer to their faith and practice Islam more regularly. The increase in religiosity also assisted in a sense of reconnection to South Asia, where Islamic customs are part of the daily routine. Within the group, the dars has fostered relationships amongst women who may never have had any social connection otherwise. According to Hafsa, because the women gather together weekly, there is more opportunity for them to see each other with regularity and to know each other personally. Distances between homes in the United States might otherwise impede social relationships. The women also share the same migration experience and the same socio-economic background, enabling them to further disclose their personal stories together during the dars. It is the narrative and the shared space, food, dress, and language—collectively experienced—that binds the women together, maintains continuity for the group, and creates a collective identity. The living room of Hafsa's home and the conversations articulated on the white sheet constitute a space of religion and ethnic identity, deliberation, and understanding, all within a setting of empathy and support. Choosing traditional South Asian foods and dress within this gathering and yet enjoying current fashions in the United States display the women's agency in determining their layered identity. Food, dress, and language emphasize cultural identity and are enacted with enthusiasm as expressions of the women's South Asian American folklife.

Thus a weekly gathering of Quranic study and prayer for a small group of South Asian women has become, over time, an expression of ethnic, religious, social, and cultural identity. The discourse of the dars reveals the dynamism of ethnic identity creation and practice as it relates to women, immigrants, and Muslims in the United States. Further, the discourse of the dars also signifies one example of a shared identity for its members that unifies them in the immediate local context and articulates their multiple identities—all within an American context. The women's group in Hafsa's home has the privilege of English-language ability, financial stability, and education, contradicting the imagined homogenized Muslim "other" as alien, foreign, and unas-similable. The nuanced reading of the dars allows for an intimate look into immigrant life, uncovering the continuous negotiation of several identities—wife, mother, daughter, and friend. The struggles and experiences shared as immigrant women resonate with other immigrant communities. The women actively engage in shaping their futures and possess full agency in their lives. All of the narratives underscore the women's struggles and their resiliency. These women navigate multiple locations and issues, determined to participate as active agents of change in their lives. Ultimately, while the dars group is unique within certain immigrant norms, the women also confront the same life issues as do all women living and working in the United States.

Misunderstandings and misconceptions of what it means to be a Muslim woman in America persist in obscuring the diversity of the South Asian Muslim American experience. A deeper understanding through the exploration of folklife practices of one community of women is critically important to resisting the discriminative national rhetoric of Islamophobia. A close examination uncovers an identity that is complex and layered, while challenging Muslim women's stereotypes of passivity and submissiveness. Simultaneously, this work shifts the focus of the pervasive national

discourse of Islam as “the other” to a local and intimate view of a gendered, South Asian Muslim American identity. The consideration of a specific community in the local context reveals the complexities of daily life in the United States and challenges Islamophobia on a national front. An intimate folklife study reminds us that Muslim American identity is central to the landscape of the United States, situated within its contours, not on the periphery.

Notes

1. All of these headlines were featured as part of an article focusing on US reaction to the event in the *Guardian* newspaper from the UK.

2. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is home to nearly 200,000 Muslim Americans who are members at approximately 41 mosques. The numbers grow if one includes the outlying suburban areas. Philadelphia is notable not only for its large population of Muslim Americans but also for a rich Muslim history that includes both African American Muslims and immigrant Muslims from the Middle East and South Asia. What is interesting and notable about Philadelphia's mosques is that many of them are primarily ethnically based—that is, nearly all the mosques have ethnic-specific communities that founded the mosque and whose members constitute the majority.

3. The tradition of the dars has its roots in Islamic education, emulating the teaching tradition exemplified in classical Islamic schools, such as Al-Azhar in Egypt where the students sit in a circle around the teacher as he gives his lesson. This method is also referred to in Arabic as *halka*, or circle, in which the “ancient custom: the students were grouped in a ‘circle’ (*halka*, literally, ‘circle,’ extended to mean ‘course’) seated on the mats (*hasira*) of the mosque around the teacher” (Jomier 1960:817). While *halka* has a broader definition that can also incorporate the study of or the discussion of any religious topic, dars in the South Asian context usually implies the study of the Quran. Lessons and inquiry in this format have ranged from the academic and mosque setting to lessons conducted in private homes. For the women of the Islamic Society, the dars offers not only religious instruction, but also an opportunity for socializing. The potluck lunches served immediately following the afternoon prayers were characterized by their informal and festive atmosphere.

4. Acquiring access to the dars gathering each week and securing the trust of the members allowed me a privileged space on a corner of the white bedsheet that substituted for a prayer mat. This privileged space was given to me since my mother was an important member of the dars gathering and a close friend of Hafsa. My mother is a very well-respected member of the Islamic Society. Not only is she an admired, well-liked, and active member of this mosque, but since we have lived in the Philadelphia area since 1976, she also knows and has relationships with a large portion of the suburban South Asian community, both Muslim and non-Muslim. Therefore, my position within the community is first and foremost that of her daughter, and as her daughter, I received considerable support from all of the members of the dars group. With my ability to converse in fluent Urdu/Hindi, I was able to maintain dialogue in interviews and to follow conversations during participant-observation sessions, which additionally provided a level of familiarity and intimacy.

5. The word *dars* comes from the verb *darasa*, “to study,” and means literally “lesson.” Islam, based in Arabic, is a monotheistic faith requiring its adherents to follow the five “pillars”: belief in one God and the prophet Mohammed, ritual prayer five times a day, fasting during the month of Ramadan, almsgiving, and the pilgrimage to Mecca. The Quran is considered as the word of Allah (God) revealed to Mohammed over a period of 22 years. Muslims also believe that the preaching of the Prophet Mohammed is a continuation of the beliefs as laid out in the Old Testament and in the Torah. Because the Quran is the last word from God and because it deals with a wide variety of issues in daily life, it is mandatory for every Muslim to read the Quran and to understand its message. The dars format is therefore an ideal method for studying the Quran as a group and for learning how to practice and live one's faith.

6. While there are other dars groups within the Islamic Society, I chose to focus on the gathering at Hafsa's home primarily because it was the first dars organized in the community, with the largest atten-

dance, and one that met regularly on a weekly basis. The longevity as well as the consistency of the group and their meetings indicates the important role the dars plays in the lives of the participants. The dars is a central and influential aspect of their religious and ethnic lives and has been since 2001.

7. Here, Hafsa specifically referred to the practices of Mohammed that are recorded in the Hadith collections. The Hadith detail the sayings and actions of Mohammed and his followers in the early years of Islam, and Muslims are required to duplicate their actions. The significance of the Hadith is secondary only to the Quran, which Muslims believe are the direct words of Allah or God.

8. I should note that, because all of the women in attendance were born and raised in Pakistan and India, most of the conversations and discussions of the dars were spoken in Urdu.

9. Personal communication 2007.

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