



CROSS ROADS

MEETING AT THE
MUSLIM NARRATIVE

CROSSROADS:

Meeting at the Muslim Narrative



MUSLIM STORIES AUS

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Dedication

*To everyone who could make this
possible*

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Acknowledgement

We acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land and pay our respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging..

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MUNA

Mental Health

It all started when I was a teenager. I left an Islamic school to go to a public school. Although I tried very hard to fit in and mingle with the crowd, I realised I needed to take my religion more seriously.

I went all in. I was obsessed, overzealous and dove into it head first. I remember that in the first few weeks, it was so beautiful and rewarding that it felt amazing to nurture that connection with Allah (SWT). I was extremely sincere in my practice and did everything in my power to do the best I could. It was such an imaan high. After a while however, I started to become very OCD when it came to all my religious rituals. I would spend hours perfecting my ablution and think

everywhere was impure which stopped me from going to certain places. I would pray one prayer over and over again, to the point where it was time for the next prayer.

At the time, I did not think I was exhibiting obsessive-compulsive behaviour. It is only now that I can truly recognise that I had a lot of its symptoms and tendencies.

I went to Sheikhs and a lot of them told me it could just be OCD and therefore not to take things too seriously. However, as a result of my obsessive-compulsive tendencies, my mind turned my Islamic rituals into a burden, which made me stray away from Allah (SWT). I believe that this was because I did not receive the help that I needed initially.

During year twelve and the first year of university, things started to get better as I started to gain more religious knowledge and connect to Islam in the right way. This I attribute to the help of the friends I met at university who stuck by me during a really difficult time in my life and helped strengthen my faith. The imaan high was something I began to miss. Eventually, I remember doing more research into the afterlife and Day of Judgment and it kind of became another obsession. I began very obsessed with the signs of the Last Day and Isa (AS) and spent time seeking that knowledge and talking about it to everyone.

After this period of time, I began experiencing my first psychotic episode. It was back in January 2016 just before university started. Prior to this, in 2015, I was studying biomedicine. It was a very demanding course and on top of that, I was putting a lot of pressure on myself to try to reconnect with the Quran and religion. I have always had a lot of negative self-talk and tried to become a perfectionist in all aspects of my life and the stress became a contributing factor to making my psychotic episodes a lot more prominent.

After this first year, I had a psychotic episode. I was demonstrating a lot of paranoid behaviour. I truly believed that people were after me and I felt that it was my duty of care towards the people around me to warn them of the signs of the Day of Judgment. I became very erratic in my behaviour. As a result, I was admitted into hospital. I fully remember the paramedics demonstrating ignorant behaviour when they came to pick me up. I remember one of them saw me in my black jilbab running around on the streets and said that I was just doing what I was doing for attention. The same paramedic also said something to me that I will never forget. He told me someone dressed like me should not be behaving this way, indicating that he did not believe that I was actually sick.

I was admitted into Werribee Mercy Hospital where they conducted their examinations; I was admitted into the mental institution. My experience there was extremely traumatic. I was the youngest person there and everyone around me was mostly elderly. The doors

wouldn't lock or close properly which made me even more paranoid because when I would sleep, people who were not mentally well would come in, causing me a great deal of anxiety. It was not the best place to be at all.

After this, I was transferred into a youth mental health facility – Origin in Footscray. Origin helped me heal a lot by connecting me to people, who were my age and who were also suffering with mental health issues. The support and staff at the facility were amazing and Alhamdulillah I was on the road to recovery.

My father, who lived in Perth at the time, came to visit me at the mental health facility and it felt amazing to just be able to connect with him at that time in my life. My mother and family were also very supportive of my recovery. I had escaped the institution twice – which is very scary to see how easy it was.

Soon after I was discharged out of Origin as I had gotten better. I had great hopes of starting university fresh. I even changed to a different course (Bachelor of Radiography and Medical Imaging), nevertheless within two weeks of my course, I had realised that I was not ready to handle university stress. So, I applied for intermission and took the whole year off studying. It took me a while, but eventually I was able to overcome that initial hurdle.

In that year, I unfortunately did not believe that I had ever gotten sick. I grappled with the fact that I had just had a psychotic episode and just thought it was stress induced or had something to do with the metaphysical world or spiritual forces. I just thought I'd be fine if I had prayed and practiced my religious rituals, which is something most people in the community were telling me to do. I decided to stop taking my medication, as I did not believe that I was sick and had a negative association towards anti-psychotics as well as medications associated with mental illnesses.

During the time I stopped taking my medications, I had various other stressors in my life. My father passed away and so I experienced a lot of heartbreak and fear about the future as I had a lot of time to think about these things. I isolated myself and withdrew from a lot of my friendships and was very alone.

Then, I decided to change my degree for a third time and decided to pursue studying education after spending some time at a primary school. 2017 felt like a fresh start, as it was a new year and new degree. I even wanted to be more active and become reconnected with people again, rekindling my friendships.

Things were going much better and I had convinced myself that my psychotic episode was something from the past and that it was just a mishap. Eventually, I had another psychotic episode. This one was a lot more intense than the last one. I remember being paranoid and running around my neighbourhood exhibiting

really psychotic behaviour. I was messaging people on their phones and social media about hallucinations I was having regarding the afterlife. I remember calling people. I called the police on my mother, as I believed that she had locked me in the house even though she didn't do that. I ran out of the house in the middle of the night and I took a train to New Port while my mother was worried sick and had called the police to inform them that I had ran away and that I was mentally unwell. While I was in New Port, I bumped into a drunk man and a woman that was with him. I told them things that I cannot even fully recall. I called my mother using the woman's phone and my mum told her about my health condition.

Soon after the police came and drove me to the hospital as they knew I was sick. I went back into the mental ward. Even on the mental ward, people were afraid of me because I was a Muslim. They felt as though something bad was going to happen because I was there, but when I interacted and had more conversations with them, the situation changed. I was in the institution for a while. I would only allow certain family members and friends to visit me, as I was very ashamed. I remember my mother being very worried about me and I didn't understand why. I thought I was normal and everyone else was wrong and that there was something wrong with them.

I went to a Raqi who told me that I was possessed by the devil. He hit me to rid me of the devil. That was a

very traumatic experience in my life (May Allah forgive him). Eventually, I went to the hospital and got the help I needed.

People in the community were telling me to stop taking my medications and do more acts of worship. When I went back to the hospital, there was a psychologist that really helped me. It was then that I realised I needed to take my medicines as there was healing in my medication and my counselling. I have been consistent with my medication ever since.

I was officially diagnosed with schizophrenia in 2017. In my first episode I was diagnosed with schizoaffective disorder and then in 2017, I was diagnosed with schizophrenia.

When I was in my psychotic episodes, I had no realisation that I was sick. I have vague memories of some of my actions but all I know is that when I was sick, I did not know I was sick. I found that there is a lot of ignorance towards mental illnesses, even in the medical field. The paramedic, who was supposed to be there for me and help me, told me that I was doing it all for attention. I remember even recently, when I went to get more medication, I went to a different doctor than my usual one. When he discovered I have schizophrenia he said ‘oh really? But you look so normal’ – which feeds the narrative that you have to be dishevelled and odd looking to be schizophrenic.

In terms of stigma in the Muslim and also the wider community, it is more widespread and prevalent. I know many elders in the community who completely disregard mental health issues, which was something I've had to deal with for years.

However, even amongst all the insensitivity, I had tremendous support around me. One day I was talking to my psychologist and I was telling her that my issues stemmed from black magic and that it was not a mental illness and she was very culturally sensitive to it. She said to me 'Muna, why can't it be both?' I know now that it was a chemical imbalance in my brain, but the fact that she was so culturally sensitive to my religion and did not just reject black magic, it was a vital step to my healing process. She really worked with my faith and religious beliefs. She even offered to bring in a Sheikh and discuss my issues.

I now acknowledge that I was sick and that was that.

My friends all accepted me after I went back to them and were always there for me throughout my sickness. Some people would say that their parents were hesitant of them visiting me at the mental hospital.

I think the main stigma that I had to get rid of first was the one towards my own medication, and myself. The internal shame and guilt I had towards myself. I had to realise that it was just a trial amongst many other trials in my life and I had to practice self-love again. The trial

taught me a lot of major life lessons. One of them was when people made me feel as though the devil possessed me, as I was not a good enough Muslim. I felt very guilty and ashamed but seeing my schizophrenia as a trial has made the recovery process a lot easier and took the burden off my shoulders.

Some things that were rather difficult for me to recover from were the things I forgot I did while I was having my episodes. When I had to face the world after all the things I had done, especially when I had to face the people who were not my friends or immediate family, it was difficult particularly after I had come to the realisation of all the things I said and all the messages I had sent to the random people on my friends list. It took a lot of strength to move on from that, as my feelings were valid, but not necessarily warranted. I realised there was nothing to feel guilty about as I was sick and was not in the right mindset, and moreover had no control of my actions.

Something that was very healing for me was therapy. It was very important for me to realise that it is a form of shifa and healing.

I don't want to give this too much gravity and attention because it was just something that happened to me, it's not my whole life. I actually did not know what I had until my mother and sister forced them to, but they said it was just a label. Putting people under labels can be beneficial as it can give them an idea of what is happening with their life and guide them to seek help

accordingly; however, it can sometimes be very problematic. It can be debilitating as people can put you into a box of what they believe it means to be schizophrenic. As cheesy as it sounds, “I am not my schizophrenia.”

I feel like now I can really reflect on the past. One of the really good things that came out of it was that I became closer to my creator in a healthy way. One thing I always struggled with is tawakkul – trust in Allah. A lecture I went to in the past spoke about how everyone has weak spots and Allah always tests you with it to strengthen you. I was always worried about the future all the time. When I would stop worrying about one thing, another thing would happen. Of all the things that happened in my life, that experience showed me the power of dua.

My intention for sharing my story is to let Muslims who are suffering from mental illness know that they are not alone and that having a mental health illness doesn't make you a bad Muslim nor does it mean you have low imaan - it just means that Allah (SWT) is testing you and that this test that you have so much anger and frustration towards, is a blessing in disguise and perhaps a means for you to enter his paradise and earn his pleasure and love. I also want Muslims to know that seeking a cure for our mental health illnesses are important but that as Muslims we should see our health holistically. Just as Allah (SWT) has put shifa in my anti-psychotic medication (Alhamdulillah), there is

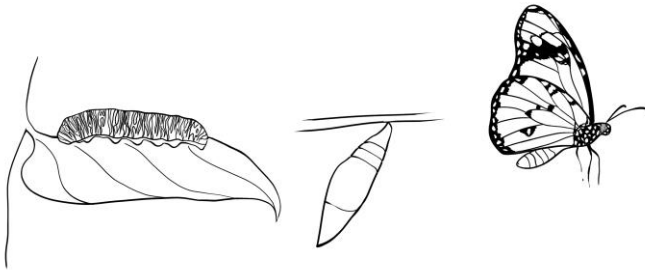
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also healing and shifa in seeking therapy and maintaining a spiritual routine (i.e. morning and evening adhkar, Salah, Quran etc.).

The reason why I didn't write my name is not because I am ashamed of my mental illness or because I do not want to be associated with it, but because I acknowledge that I am not the only one who will be at the receiving end of the inevitable backlash and ridicule that will follow as a result of publishing this story. My beloved mother will most likely be tormented and belittled by the men and women in her community and as much as communal approval and validation is not something that is of utmost importance to my identity and me, it is to my mother. In Shaa Allah, with the fullness of time our communities will not only accept those who suffer from mental health illness, but have honest conversations about breaking down the barriers and stigma associated with them.

Another reason why I refrained from using my name is because I do not want to be put in a box and be associated with a label that unfortunately conjures a negative image in a lot of people's minds. I don't want people to just see me as the "schizophrenic" girl. You and I are so much more than that. Yes, we should not be ashamed of our mental health illnesses, but we also should know that we are not our illnesses. Our illnesses are just a small part of our life journey, and whilst (In Shaa Allah) these often painful experiences with mental health illness have allowed us to grow in so many ways, we are more than just our labels, and that

we should have complete trust and hope in Allah (SWT) that he will make a way out for us, In Shaa Allah. I once read from a medical article that the more someone believes in a particular kind of label linked to their illness or hardship, and the more they internalize it as a fixed medical condition, the harder it is likely to be for them to change.





NAZEEM HUSSAIN

An Interview

I have always been a comedy nerd. In my family we have always joked around, and told a lot of stories to one another. It has been an integral part of my upbringing. In particular, my mother was a huge storyteller, thus we grew up listening to a lot of funny stories from her and making each other laugh in day-to-day life. In the meantime, I also grew up going to Madrasa and a lot of Muslim Youth camps, and part and parcel of those sorts of community events was a huge part of my upbringing. We used to talk a lot about identity and the absurdity of growing up different in Australia, and the various types of challenges we all

faced. Therefore, often times I would find myself in front of the madrasa class or as the role of a youth leader just casually cracking jokes about the day, or racism at school, and how people don't understand a lot of the things we go through. This was my entryway to comedy. It started out at a community level, and then a bunch of my friends and I started doing a show called Salaam Café on Channel 31, which was a comedy show where we talked about the life of being a Muslim in Australia. Through this, it became very apparent that people really enjoyed us talking really light heartedly about life, not as a Muslim spokesperson, but just as average Muslims. I decided to continue doing this as a stand up comedian, which led me to enter a competition called Raw Comedy. It was an open mic competition held by the Melbourne International Comedy Festival. I went through a few rounds and so did my friends Aamer and Mohamed, and from that we started a comedy show called Fear Of A Brown Planet. We toured for 7 years and our careers kind of took off from there. Even though I had finished university at that point and just continued comedy on the side, comedy became busier than my 9-5 job in tax. Hence, I started juggling, yet it never felt like I was juggling two professions. Since part of my expression as a Muslim was often through comedy, it was never like I do comedy and then I do 'Muslim stuff.' It was pretty much one and the same, as I started doing comedy in the Muslim community and Muslims were often the audience I had in mind when I was performing. As young Muslims, it was very much a part of the Muslim

culture to always be joking around in a light hearted way in the face of some pretty uncomfortable situations that we experience day to day. If something has happened to me, I'll talk about it. The thing that's always the funniest to me is what I can relate to. Making random, disconnected political points that I myself can't connect to personally, my audience tends not to find the funniest. Therefore, when performing, I always find that if I can relate something political to my life personally, or an experience, or someone who I know personally, it's always funnier if that idea can be expressed through a personal story. I try to talk about everything and don't think about it too much, except whom the target of the joke is. Ethnicity amongst ethnicity, Muslims amongst Muslims, we always make fun of each other. You could say it's part of our culture.

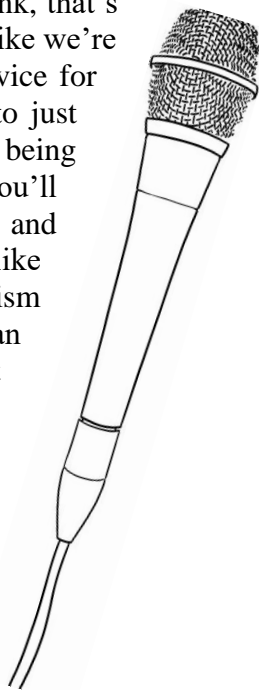
The challenges were just like when you start anything new. You're the new kid on the block so comedy, just like any other industry, there's a lot of people, there's a lot of different ways you're supposed to do things. I suppose I came to comedy from a pretty unorthodox place: from the Muslim community. This had never been done in the Australian comedy scene before so, it was very new having to bring an audience to the comedy world that hadn't ordinarily been serviced by Australian comedians. Consequently, with this came challenges. Often times the places I would be performing at were nightclubs, which had alcohol; therefore trying to find places where they would not serve alcohol during shows was a challenge. Being able to perform content of television that spoke on racism

was not necessarily the material they would typically broadcast on Channel 10. Suddenly, we had to argue for different sorts of material to be aired. Basically, when you're starting out in any industry and you're doing something a little bit different, there will always be people to tell you what is and is not the way to do things. And yes, you have to take that advice, but always with a grain of salt because you have to create the path if there isn't one for you. When Aamer Mohamed and I were the very new kids on the block, we had to prove ourselves to the people who didn't really believe we had a place there.

We've made a lot of mistakes in attempt to be non-offensive in an Islamic context. It's not like there had been a million Muslim comedians that had come before us so we had to learn a balance of speaking our truth, being entertaining and not picking the wrong targets. The general rule in comedy is to punch up and pick the right targets. I think that's the same in Islam. Social justice means that you are speaking truth to power – this is an Islamic value. So, those two ideas are pretty consistent. But, mistakes happen and you have to keep up with good communication with those who know more than you and sometimes that happens after you've messed up, or sometimes before you think you're about to mess up. You just have to speak to people who know more, seek their counsel, and know that you don't know everything. At the end of the day, I'm no Islamic authority; I just always try to surround myself with people who know more.

I get criticism from everybody. I just got a tweet saying, “All he does is make fun of white people and make fun of Muslims.” The criticism just depends on whom you speak to. Comedy at the end of the day is fairly subjective. You may or may not get the intention behind a joke. Sometimes, my punch line may not be explicitly clear to everybody, but people who know my sense of humour will get it just like when you mock your friend and its done out of love. You’re not always going to understand someone’s sense of humour and I don’t really mind if a minority of people completely misunderstand my intention. It hurts when it comes from people, who I intend to stand up for, but often, that intention is going to be misunderstood and maybe that’s my fault. Maybe I could have been a bit clearer and a bit more explicit. Sometimes though, I feel like you lose the joke if you spell it out too much. Comedy does require you to be able to understand sarcasm and different tones which is often lost if you spell it out too much. As long as my intention is right, I know the point of the joke I try to make and my target is right, I think it’s acceptable. You should always be open to criticism. Comedy is always walking that fine line between what’s acceptable and what’s not acceptable – the joke is always on that boundary. When coming up with material, my intention is never to make jokes about a routinely humiliated community, like Muslims and the brown community – anyone that is ordinarily picked on. It is to make jokes targeted at broader oppression or how unfair things are. If I am making jokes about Muslims, those jokes are targeted at us, for us. When

we are at Muslim events, we joke about ourselves all the time, that's just what we do and how we make each other laugh. Just because those jokes are told in front of white people, it doesn't mean that we can't now share a joke amongst ourselves. It's annoying when people center white people all the time, like we have to care about what they think before we care about what actually makes us laugh. If making jokes about our community is what we normally joke about, why should I care about how a racist interprets that? They're not my audience and I don't care about what they think. It's not my job to try to put myself in the mind of a racist. I don't care about what they think, that's on them. I feel like sometimes we act like we're always seeking their approval. My advice for young aspiring comedians would be to just get up on stage and be funny if you like being funny. Don't think about it too much. You'll have people who like what you do and you'll also have people who don't like what you do. Just remember that criticism is someone's passing thought, but it can tend to stick with you longer than it should. In the early stages especially, criticism can really weigh an artist down. Therefore, just take criticism in the way that it should be taken which is to consider it, think about it for a bit and then let it go, and persevere.





SAFIA

I went to an Islamic school most of my life. My mother was a stay-at-home-mum and my father was a taxi driver as most Somali fathers are. He worked hard to put my siblings and I through school. Since I'm the oldest of eight children, I was always made to be responsible and grew up quickly in terms of maturing as a result. In high school, I was very outgoing and loud, I was friends with a large group of girls. I enjoyed public speaking; I gave a talk at my schools 25th year anniversary and my graduation. In year ten, I started to take my future serious. I decided I wanted to be a nurse and therefore, I put all my energy and time into it. I went to many university open days with friends

and found the university I wanted to attend. I took a brochure and stuck it on my wall as a goal. Every time I looked at it, it reminded me of my goal and what I wanted for my future. I knew through my entire VCE (high school education) I wanted to be a nurse and attend Latrobe University. I pushed myself and whenever I felt like giving up, the brochure would remind me of my dream, thus I became goal orientated. I graduated and received the ATAR (score used for university entrance) I wanted and got accepted to Latrobe University to study nursing. For three years, I became driven by that goal and enjoyed my time studying and at placement. I wanted to be a nurse because I enjoyed helping others as clichè as it may sound and being the oldest I had the urge to look after my younger siblings and others. After graduating I worked in many areas from hospital to doctors office and now I work as a community nurse attending to people in their homes and providing care such as wound care, personal care, medication among many others. I love watching people transform from the first visit to months or years down the line educating them and helping them become independent to lead the best life possible for themselves. Whether it's with the elderly, the children or those with disability encouraging and supporting them throughout the toughest times in their lives is the most rewarding feeling. I enjoy spending time with family and friends, from weekly brunches to movies. I enjoy the nature, going on hikes and long walks. Life is meant to be all about the balance between life and work which is the

hardest at times to maintain, but throughout the four years of being a nurse the main thing I've learnt is compassion and work-life balance.

Q: What advice would you give to other Muslim Australians?

S: During your life you will come across people who are ignorant or just plain mean. It's important not to take it personally. It's usually nine times out ten, which they are going through their own issues. Thus, it's important not to let that ruin your day, week, month or year. Learn to become one with yourself and comfortable with who you are which takes a lot of work, but take care of your mental health just as much as you take care of yourself physically.

CROSSROADS Meeting at the Muslim narrative is an anthology of short non-fiction stories collected through interviews with real Muslims living in Australia. It provides a glimpse into the lives of regular people who just so happen to share the same faith. The focus of the anthology is on Australian life as seen through each person's unique, and often ignored perspectives with an emphasis on family, work, individual struggles, triumphs and introspection on life.

