

Sadaf Majeed interviewed by Luz Hidalgo
March 17, 2020
Bryant Park, NY

Luz Hidalgo: My name is Luz Hidalgo and I'm interviewing Sadaf in Bryant Park on March 17, 2020. Do you give me permission to record this oral history?

Sadaf Majeed: I do.

LH: Where did you grow up?

SM: My first memory was in London and then, when I was six, I moved to Islamabad in Pakistan. I grew up there and then when I was 9, we moved to the United States and I've been living here since.

LH: How long have you lived in this country?

SM: I've lived here for about 10 years.

LH: Why did you leave your country of origin?

SM: My dad, he got a job here. And also, he wanted us to have a better education, and like access to more resources.

LH: What do you miss about your country of origin?

SM: I miss a lot of things. But, I guess, what I really miss is my cousins and all the things I've missed out on like weddings and stuff like that.

LH: What did your friends and family say when you told them you were leaving?

SM: When they found out we were leaving; they were really sad as expected. But they were happy too, because like we were going to a much better place. But as soon as we left, they were crying at the airport. I was really young at the time, so I didn't really understand what was going on. I was just happy because like I thought I like considered it a vacation. So yeah.

LH: What were your expectations of the United States?

SM: I expected a lot of racism to be honest. Like I was scared to go to school here because I had heard you know rumors about Muslims not being accepted into their society. But I was proven wrong, many people were accepting of me.

LH: When and with whom did you come to NYC?

SM: I came to New York City in 2010 with my parents and my brothers and sisters because my dad got a job here and this is where we wanted to live.

LH: How did NYC meet, and fail to meet your expectations?

SM: I was pleasantly surprised. They fell my expectations because I thought more people would be like against me, the way like not a lot of people would accepting of me because I was Muslim, but I was surprised, people were very welcoming.

LH: How were you received upon arriving in your neighborhood specifically, and the United States more generally?

SM: To be honest, I don't really know anybody in my neighborhood but like, there was our landlord. We were really close with him and he welcomed us really warmly. He didn't like to discriminate against us or anything, he was very friendly.

LH: How did you adjust to a new language and/or culture in NYC?

SM: It wasn't really that hard because before living in Pakistan I used to live in London so, I already knew how to speak English. The culture, I mean it's not that different. I suppose it is different, but I would watch a lot of Television like American television shows, so it wasn't a hard transition.

LH: What new opportunities were available to you upon your arrival in NY?

SM: New opportunities? I would say better education and more access to resources. And also, more freedom to do whatever I want as in like what I wanna study, where I wanna go.

LH: Were any opportunities were denied to you because you were an immigrant?

SM: No, not that I recall. Well, actually when I was applying for colleges and I applied for some scholarships as well, most of them, they wanted you to be a citizen and I didn't qualify for that so yeah.

LH: Where have you lived in NYC and why?

SM: Since coming to New York City, I've been living in the same place, in Queens. We've been living there for 10 years now, we haven't moved. Our landlord is a really good person and we just really like the neighborhood, like there's like a little bit of everybody from a lot of cultures there.

LH: What was the hardest part about your move to NYC?

SM: The hardest part about my move to New York City was leaving behind all of my extended family, and also, leaving behind my best friend. We lifted. Our houses were like right next to each other and we went to the same school. We had been friends for like years since we were little girls, and we would go to school together. We would do our homework together. Play together. I didn't realize how hard it would be to leave her. Yeah.

LH: Have you seen your friend after you moved here?

SM: I've gone back to Pakistan a few times, but I haven't really crossed paths with her because I feel like we've grown up and grown apart.

LH: What's your favorite part about living in New York City?

SM: All the different things like the different destinations, the different people. There are so many things to do in the city, is just you can never be bored.

LH: How has your neighborhood changed since your arrival?

SM: When we first came to my neighborhood, there were a lot of white people. Yeah. There were a lot of white people and as the years went by the neighborhood became a little bit more diverse. They were Arabians, they were more Hispanic people and more desi people as well.

LH: How your culture has been impacted since you been here?

SM: My culture... Well, I haven't really been around a lot of people in my culture. so, I mean I've seen... I guess my family counts as people, but I've been growing distant. But when I first came here, I tried to distance myself from my culture but as the years went by, I've been getting into my culture again you know, the dresses, the music, and everything.

LH: Could you tell me a story about where you grow up?

SM: Okay so this was when I first moved to Pakistan from London and it was my first day of school, I had gone to school with my nails painted. I mean in London that was a normal thing, in outside countries it's not a big deal but Pakistan is an Islamic country, so I guess it was a big deal. And I was standing in line to go into my class and the teachers they usually check the students like if there are uniform is like clean, if their nails are clean, and their hair is tidy and everything. She checked my nails, she pulled me out of the line, and she kept me from class. So, even when I was six, I was just like, "really! you're keeping me from getting my education just because I have my nails painted." so yeah. I didn't really like that.

LH: If you had never come to this country, where do you see yourself?

SM: If I had never come to my country, I'd probably still be living in Pakistan. I don't think I would have gone far because over there it's not really like girls they don't usually like study. I mean they do study is just they're not expected to go far. Even in my family, girls usually they just go to university and then they just like sit at home and get married. And it's just the way it is, and I think as much as I hate to admit it, I feel like that's what would have happened with me. I would have probably gone to college and then, I would have stayed home. I mean it takes my sister, for example, she came here she has a bachelor's degree, but she went back to Pakistan and now she doesn't have a job over there, she just married. And it's nothing wrong with that, but I feel like a woman in my family, particularly, they don't really have a lot of options because I come from a really conservative family so, they don't really expect us to work after we're done with the education. I don't believe... I don't believe that's a good thing; I really do want to change that. But since I'm here, I have more opportunities and my parents do expect me to get a job after I graduate so that's a good thing, I guess...

LH: Do you ever feel like you have to hide who you are being an immigrant?

SM: No, I don't think I've ever. Maybe, when I was young, I guess I felt like I had to prove something to somebody like I would listen to certain music, act a certain way, and try. And I would feel really insecure if my accent were showing but over the years, I've come to accept my heritage. And I'm really proud of my culture and of being an immigrant. I don't think it's a thing to be ashamed off so I wouldn't let anybody tell me that.

LH: Why did you come to the USA instead of another country?

SM: I mean like I said before my dad got a job here but after 4 years we were allowed to leave and go to another country. But we decided to stick to the US because as we all know, the United States is the first roll country and people have come here for centuries because of all the

opportunities provided by all the people here. And it's just... I guess US it's like the American dream like you can get anything here, like you could get education, you can be whatever you want, and I don't think we could have gone that in another country. And we were already living here for 4 years so, it was just we were already used to living here so it was out of the question for us to go to another country.

LH: How does your family remain connected to their country?

SM: My family well... we still eat the food for my country, my mom is always making food from my country. We don't really eat a lot from other cultures, and we still wear the same clothes from our country like we were the traditional salwar-kameez. And my family, we are always like my Dad instead of watching the news for this country he always watches news from our old country, Pakistan. And is also, my parents are always calling our relatives over there and keeping up to date with all, with everything that's going on there so yeah that's how we stay connected.

LH: How your family try to reunite your family?

SM: How they try to reunite... I guess like I said, they would make us on holidays... they would make us talk to our family members even if we didn't want to, and we would celebrate holidays like Eid and partake in Ramadan to stay connected to our family and culture. We would also always be talking to her family members. And every two years we go back to Pakistan to visit our family, so we don't like fully to forget them. They're always in our hearts.

LH: Tell them about your path to citizenship

SM: So we, my family doesn't have citizenship right now, but we're in the process of getting it. But it's really really difficult to get citizenship here, this is probably our second time applying. The first time we applied we had to wait for months before getting like a response and it cost a lot of money, and also, we had to go for the interview where they asked us about like everything and then, we were denied the first time and we applied for the second time. But like after the interview, were not really allowed to... we're not allowed to go anywhere because if we go anywhere but it's no guarantee that we can come back in the country so it was hard for us because my mother's father died and we couldn't go and say goodbye to him, because we were stuck here. So it was really bad, but we can leave you reapplied again, and we were able to go visit Pakistan. I recently just came back from the visit so yeah. We went right away even though I was missing class because we didn't know when we were going to be able to go again because after the interview it's really hard to go back because they might not let you back in the country if you want to return.

LH: What would you change about the current U.S immigration system?

SM: What I would change about the current U.S immigration system will be... I guess to get rid of some of the hardships that undocumented immigrants go through, I mean, face. Undocumented immigrants don't have a lot of access to a lot of things like, health care, and the jobs that they do, they don't pay well for them. They don't have fair wages and they don't get treated right. But since you're undocumented they can't really stand up against them and demand fair wages and fair treatments. Also, what I would change about the U.S immigration system would be that there should be ways for them to get citizenship. I don't know... to make it easier because they have children that are citizens, so yeah.

LH: How has the politics of the last decade impacted your experience of an immigrant in the United States?

SM: I wouldn't say I've been impacted first handed but... I mean, since Donald Trump has come into his presidency, he's done some things like the travel ban which have raised some concern in my community. I've been worried about my role as an immigrant in this country because I've been worried that- what if you know... he decides to do for everybody where I go to, and also, the travel ban I've had some friends after from that. My friend's father had been stuck in his home country and he couldn't come here because of the travel ban at that time so yeah.

LH: Would you go back to your country?

SM: I mean, yes, I would go back to my country for a visit. I just came back from a visit, we usually go like every 2 years, but like to live there permanently I don't think I could really assimilate myself into the community over there because their culture and Community is really different from what I'm used to. For example, when I was last there, I had to wear a burka when I was in the village, and I really did not enjoy that so I don't think I could really live there. And also, I don't think they're a lot of opportunities for women there to get a job because I'm interested in Psychology and there aren't many roles over there that could really satisfy me because it's just over there it's not women usually don't work. They do work but it's more of other jobs like teachers, nurses, and that's not really of my alley I mean and yeah. I just don't think I would fit over there so yeah.

LH: Have you experienced racism?

SM: I feel like I haven't experienced racism but more of ignorant people. Like when I was in Middle School, they would be stupid comments like on Halloween, "Oh- what are you dressing up as like a terrorist or something like that," it's just like that like ignorant comments from ignorant people. I don't think I've ever like experience full-on racism and I'm really thankful for that. I think it's because I've surrounded myself with people who are not like that. Like even in my high school, it was really diverse and people they knew not to do that. But I feel like the only time I really felt racism, was probably when I was young. When kids would make these stupid comments about my culture, about me being Muslim... yeah. And because of those comments, I was actually afraid to wear a scarf or a hijab, and I really wanted to- my parents wanted me to wear a hijab, but I didn't because I was afraid because of these stupid comments. They made me feel like if I were a hijab people would avoid me or something like. And- but I overcame my fears, and I did wear a hijab. It wasn't for me and I stopped wearing it the' so yeah. But I do feel like a part of me not wanting to wear the hijab did stand from those bullies that would make those stupid comments. But eventually, I did get over it but looking back at it that was probably the main issue of me rebelling against my parents but yeah. As over the years, I've become more comfortable in my identity as a Muslim and I've tried not to let ignorant comments get to me. And in the future, I do hope to become a better person from what I've learned.

LH: What would you say to those kids that called you a terrorist?

SM: I guess. I would say, I hope that you've grown out of that phase and that you're more educated now. And that wasn't the real you, that was just an ignorant you. And if not then... I don't think I'm allowed to curse over here, so yeah.

LH: Thank you for letting me interview you. Do you think I missed asking you any question?

SM: You asked everything.

LH: thank you so much for your time.

SM: You're welcome.