

n i y a f



m o h a m e d

*Growing up, were there assumptions made about you before they even got to know you? Do you think they were targeted only at you or at all Hijabi women?*

Truthfully, I feel very blessed to have been raised in a muslim country and been taught the things I have in a way that makes me deeply understand the reasoning behind my actions. If there were any assumptions made towards me, it wasn't negativity or hate towards the hijab or Islam. Instead, it was kind of the opposite. Most people assume that growing up muslim means immediately wearing the hijab when you get your period. To me, I've learned that that notion comes so much more from culture than the reality of my religion.

This assumption made my 13-year-old self, of course, want to rebel against it. i wanted to be different. So I had my fair share of regretful moments that have taught me big lessons on why I wear it in the first place.

*Did you ever feel pressure to behave, dress, or present yourself in a manner that would make others feel more comfortable or accepting of you? How did that affect your sense of self?*

Our generation of people is so open in some ways that it makes me always want to put myself before anyone else. My needs and self-expectations have to be respected in order for me to feel comfortable. Because of this, I never put too much care into times when I felt like I didn't fit in because of a certain quality of mine, or that I had to act a certain way to make others around me feel better. if there's any extra effort I put into acting a certain way, it's more so to be mindful while wearing the hijab, showing the good that comes with representing an entire religion rather than acting out to grab more attention. The effect this had on me was sort of unique: it makes me deeply analyze people, their actions, their words, and their reactions, trying to understand where A starts and Z ends. I think it's because sometimes people act without a reason behind it, say words without thoughts behind them. At the end of the day, I'm just a curious person.



*Can you describe a moment where you became aware that society viewed you differently because of your appearance, culture, religion, or background?*

Being in an environment constantly surrounded by the same type of people as my background, there was never anything I questioned regarding my outerwear or inner self. It was when I joined university that I caught a glimpse of racism, islamophobia, and prejudice outside of a non-Hollywood scene. It was almost surreal seeing people have something against you without having ever spoken to them. It truly makes me think about how much worse people have it outside of Muslim-populated countries.

*Were there expectations placed on you by both your own community and wider society? If so, how did you balance or challenge those different pressures?*

there are many things that come as an expectation on me from my culture and wearing a hijab was 100% one of them. as i mentioned earlier, i did go through my history of rebellious teen moments, but as i grow older i come to realize that sometimes people forget to tell some lines of a story that we are meant to understand; they forget that we're starting our journey while

they're already in the middle of theirs. Not every detail comes to you on an instruction sheet, but that's the beauty of it. Everyone is on their own path, and in this path, you come to learn things one by one to create your own list of reasons behind your decisions.

*In what ways did media representation, or the lack of it, affect how you saw yourself growing up? At any point in your girlhood, did you feel invisible, misunderstood, or misrepresented?*

Misrepresentation is still the biggest form of communication error ever made in our society. No, we don't take our hijabs off the second we see a cute guy. No, I don't hate my parents or my culture because of my religion. All in all, there are many factors within Western media that make me deeply uncomfortable to think about what possibly goes on in that part of the world. Because of this misrepresentation, it opened my eyes to a different side of film. I started getting into a side of small production films, Turkish films, and many more that not only represent me well, but also include factors where I can learn and absorb more positive qualities and life lessons that will stay with me throughout my life.

*What role did family, friends, or community play in helping you resist stereotypes and stay connected to your identity?*

While some people, like myself, grow out of rebellion, there are still many more people who don't. And the people who don't stop standing on business, and showing that they made their choice and there can't be any changes to it, are those people who resist stereotypes. This comes from no disrespect at all; I firmly believe that this section of "raised Muslims" still has a lot to teach you, they have a lot to share, and it truly deepens my acknowledgement of them and their decisions. As I said, everyone has their own path, and it would be a bummer to not live it out, making your own decisions.



*If you could speak to younger people growing up under similar expectations or stereotypes, what would you want them to understand about identity, self-worth, and belonging?*

I would want to tell them about change, how fast it is, how drastic it can be, how beautiful it can make your life. We always take change in a negative way and fight against it with such a force, but I view it as the opposite. How can you grow without change? Your identity is ever-changing. We could be 100 different people in our lifetime. It's only our core values and traits that explain our real identities. A beautiful person doesn't always have the best soul, and the beautiful soul doesn't always run around shouting about themselves.

*Have you ever felt the need to constantly "prove" yourself against stereotypes? What emotional impact does that have on a person over time?*

There could be a million reasons why not to do something, a hundred people you admire who don't fall under your values, tens of situations that make you want to act differently, but there's only one person who truly makes the decisions. Living on autopilot your entire life truly seems like it would dull your senses and keep you out of reality. The day we start to see new possibilities in front of our eyes, our minds go into a frenzy. My point is that when we live in a world full of options and distractions and time-wasting [activities], we get so desensitized to real matters. As a practicing muslim hijabi woman, I can speak for many other individuals when saying that resistance at some point comes as an ease because of how eye-opening it is when you're not always part of the crowd; your senses automatically work for you with warning. Your ears hear that you shouldn't go in there; your nose smells the rot in people a mile away; your mouth spills the truth before your mind gets a chance to think of a lie. When you know your purpose in life, that's where we see the full stop to a happy ending.