

THE *Current*

August 15, 2017

Jim Logan

Pride and Prejudice

The comedian Ahmed Ahmed remembers when he was done acting. After multiple roles as a terrorist, he told his agent he didn't want to play an evil-doer any longer. "And the phone stopped ringing," he said.

Ahmed recounts the story in an episode of "[The Secret Life of Muslims](#)," an often funny and occasionally sobering series featuring a diverse group of people talking about what it's like being Muslim in America. The videos are intended to squash stereotypes and the notion that Muslims are the homogenous mass of swarthy terrorists perpetuated in the news media and popular culture, said [Mona Damluji](#), an assistant professor in UC Santa Barbara's [Department of Film & Media Studies](#), and a producer of the series.

"Being Muslim has no single meaning," she said. "There are more than [1.7 billion Muslims](#) in the world and just as many individual experiences of being Muslim. Just like any other spiritual identity, it is about so much more than religion: it's cultural and perhaps more than ever it is political. Inflammatory ideas and images that equate Islam with terrorism have a very long history in Western media and politics and are so pervasive that some Americans don't even recognize the absurdity of Muslim terrorist caricatures repeated over and over in Hollywood movies, video games and popular TV shows like 'Homeland' and '24.'

"And then these same images echo in political rhetoric and become even more dangerous," Damluji continued, "because as we have seen they have the power to start wars and instigate hate crimes. I believe that media is not just part of the

problem, but can also play a critical role in changing misperceptions of Muslims and other minorities.”

Directed by Hollywood veteran Joshua Seftel, the series earned an Emmy nomination for outstanding short documentary. The award ceremony is Oct. 5 in New York City. In addition, “The Secret Life of Muslims” was a finalist for a Peabody Award. Originally hosted by Vox.com, all 14 videos are available on the Secret Life of Muslims Facebook and YouTube pages.

Damluji worked with Seftel on numerous projects in the past, including the PBS series “NOVA.” Seftel also produced and directed “The Secret Lives of Scientists & Engineers” as a web series for NOVA. Seftel shared Damluji’s interest in addressing the growth of Islamophobia in this country since 9/11 and reached out to her in 2015 with an idea. “What if we did something like the ‘Secret Life of Scientists,’ but for Muslims?” she recalled him asking. “I loved the idea that this short doc series could do more than just ‘humanize’ Muslims, and instead uplift the voices of real people to call out the fact that the media does such a horrendous job of representing Muslims. At the same time, we could help change the narrative by featuring great storytelling from the point of view of Muslims.”

The series features 18 people, including UCSB alum Reza Aslan (who is also an executive producer), talking about Islam and the discrimination they face — much of it borne out of ignorance. They’re not bitter people, though. Most of them use humor, some of it tinged with incredulity. That’s the way Damluji wanted it.

“One of the first things we talked about was that the series had to make people laugh,” she explained, “because humor is a beautiful way to disarm a viewer, especially those who think they already know all there is to say on the subject of being Muslim. The challenge was how it could be done in a way that allowed us to laugh, but did not minimize the seriousness of the issue at hand. Anti-Muslim racism is not a joke — extreme bigotry is a dangerous phenomenon that can have life-or-death consequences. Yet if you can get someone to laugh it has the potential to break the tension around this very serious topic, and it can really open their mind and bring them in and make them want to hear what else you have to say.”

The videos aren’t all fun and games, of course. One tells the story of [Rais Bhuiyan](#), who was shot in the face after 9/11 by an angry white supremacist who killed two others he believed were Muslims. Bhuiyan, despite his wounds, fought to keep his

assailant from being executed. In another, [Linda Sarsour](#) talks about her successful fight to have New York City schools observe Muslim holy days.

For Damluji, the series' success offers more than the chance for Muslims to dispel stereotypes and challenge Islamophobia. "The show has exceeded my wildest hopes," she said, "and I look forward to seeing what it might inspire and what comes next from other media makers. Young Muslims especially are changing the game and really thinking outside the box to imagine what's possible in today's world of digital media and online sharing."

The series was made possible, in part, by grants from the Ford Foundation, Pillars Fund, New York Community Trust and the Doris Duke Foundation for Islamic Art.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.