

Episode One: “Welcome to the Hyphen”

CUE INTRO SONG, SAJDAA BY NASHITA HASAN

MAS: I remember sitting in his basement, staring at the photos of his family plastered over the walls, the beautiful Arabic calligraphy of Muslim prayers from the Qur’an, the holy text of Islam, and the platter of Pakistani treats next to his fresh cup of chai. The smell of his chai filled the room, I couldn’t escape it even if I wanted to. In the background, you could hear his wife moving in the kitchen- the sound of dishes being put into the sink, the beeping of a microwave, and her light hum as she stirred a *patelee*¹ (*pot*) full of lentil curry. I snapped back into the interview, carefully wording my next questions: what was life like before 9/11- in Elgin, and did you ever experience any sort of discrimination before it? He, Dr. Mumtaz Siddique, my first ever interviewee, took a deep breath while rubbing his palms against his jeans- the audio etched inside my brain- cueing his response.

MS: “No, no, no. There was- they were extre-- [Pause] Extremely polite. Nobody ever--you know-- discussed. Those times were a very nice time. Nobody cared about--We’re all human beings. We were all treated equally”²

MAS: I left that interview feeling inspired and hopeful. It had been 20 years since the events of September 11, 2001, that not only shook the United States but Muslims globally. Since September 11, the experience of Muslims living the United States changed, like experiencing discrimination and racialization from the hands of the media, politicians, and even strangers on the street, fearing for their lives, prompting name changes, the removal of the hijab or shaving of traditional Islamic beards, and excessive patriotism.³ I expected to hear more about that from Dr.

¹ Urdu term for pot

²Siddique, Mumtaz. Oral history interview conducted by Muskaan Siddique, October 17, 2021, *A Community of Our Own Podcast*, 2021.6:47-10:11.

³ Ewing, Katherine Pratt, and Marguerite Hoyler. “Being Muslim and American: South Asian Muslim Youth and the War on Terror.” In *Being and Belonging: Muslims in the United States since 9/11*, 80–104. Russell Sage Foundation, 2008.

Mumtaz Siddique, a South Asian Muslim in his community and my father. And while I did learn about the intense isolation and scrutiny South Asian Muslims were facing, I also heard stories about suburban solidarity- people supporting their Muslim neighbors before September 11 and beyond in Elgin, Illinois.

At the time, *A Community of Our Own* was a semester-long project focused on this singular oral history to research the impact of September 11 on Muslim identity. But after that interview, I knew I wanted to interrogate more narratives by including more voices.

Cue instrumental music

Welcome to the first episode of *A Community of Our Own*, a podcast case study on the evolution of the South Asian Muslim experience in a northwest suburb of Chicago, Illinois called Elgin. This limited podcast series acknowledges that the events of September 11th transformed the experience of South Asian Muslims in the U.S. in the suburbs. This transformation is evident in the widespread Islamophobia and violence Muslims faced along with the shifts in behavior of South Muslims like the taking the hijabs off, name changes, and the decrease in attending Islamic sites like mosques.⁴⁵ Despite this, the South Asian Muslim population in Elgin, Illinois, turned this horrific moment in history into a method of further integration into society through community engagement and solidarity.⁶

A Community of Our Own builds primarily off of original research from five oral histories and local newspaper articles from the *Elgin Daily Herald* and *The Courier News* along with U.S legislation. There simply are not any accessible texts on South Asian Muslims' response to 9/11 in Elgin aside from the local newspaper articles and small margin mentions in

⁴Peek, Lori A. *Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans after 9/11*. New Delhi: Social Science Press, 2012. 88.

⁵ Islamophobia is the intense hostility, prejudice, and discrimination towards the religion of Islam and those who practice it.

⁶Integration here refers to the increased presence of South Asian Muslims in Elgin society. Elgin area Muslims joined the popular community through their visits at City Council and dialogue events.

South Asian-American or Muslim-American advocacy websites like in the Council of American Islamic Relations (CAIR). This occurs because many historians still feel that September 11, 2001 and its consequences live in recent history. Recent history is a subset of history just as Medieval history is but the former refers to the past 15 to twenty years. The issue with recent history is that it lacks the proper resources to encourage more historians- novices and alums- to employ it. Pulitzer Prize winner, Dr. Heather Ann Thompson signals that often historians of the recent past face more and unusual dilemmas because of the scarcity in secondary sources and primary sources. Recent history tends to grow out of the accounts of eyewitness testimonies apparent in this project.⁷

Another reason I recorded oral histories especially with my oldest interviewee, Salma Khan, is with recent history some of the most valuable sources have time-limits demarcating their fruitfulness before expiring. Memory is a fickle thing and as we get older, it sometimes chooses to lead us astray. Salma Khan is the last living elder from the period of Elgin's creation of a South Asian Muslim community able to participate in this project physically and mentally. I wished I was a few years older so I could have begun this thesis sooner and record the live histories of those other cultural giants for the South Asian Muslim community to use in the future for their own research and projects. *A Community of Our Own's* original research is the first step in Elgin's budding archive of materials on its beloved South Asian Muslim population.

Moving forward, during my initial research I realized the majority of the research on Muslims after 9/11 focused on metropolitan areas as well as areas in close proximity to where those terrorist events took place- leaving the suburbs, especially in the midwest, often neglected.⁸

⁷Thompson, Heather Ann. "Writing The Perilously Recent Past: The Historian's Dilemma ." *Perspectives on History* 51, no. 7, October 1, 2013. 12.

⁸ Clark, Mary Marshall. "The September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project: A First Report." *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (2002); Tindongan, Cynthia White. "Negotiating Muslim Youth Identity in a Post-9/11 World." *The High School Journal* 95, no. 1 (2011):75; Gillum, Rachel. *Muslims in a Post-9/11 America: A*

Fundamental texts like Katherine Pratt Ewing's *Being and Belonging: Muslims in the United States since 9/11* investigate the Muslim narratives in locations such as New York City, New York, Dearborn, Michigan, Houston, Texas, and even Chicago, Illinois.⁹ Additionally, other pre-existing literature emphasizes the experiences of Arab Muslims or lumps the varying ethnic groups together. It fails to acknowledge the differences in experiences based on ethnicity, class, race, and other social identities, failing to attend to what critical race theorist Kimberlee Crenshaw defines as intersectionality.¹⁰

Before I get ahead of myself, Muslims in this text means individuals who practice the religion of Islam. Islam is an abrahamic monotheistic religion- the youngest of the three. Islam believes in Allah (an Arabic name for their God) and sees Arab leader Muhammad (peace be upon him), as the messenger of Allah- termed as the Prophet.¹¹ According to sociologist Lori Peek, Islam is the fastest growing religion in the United States .¹² Connecting to this project's purpose, 3 out of 10 Muslims in the United States are Asian- "including South Asians" as the Pew Research Center stated in its 2017 survey.¹³

South Asian Muslims account for a large population and voter base in the United States despite its scholarship's deficiencies. According to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, the term 'South Asian' refers to individuals who (narrator says quote in recording)"originate in the countries of the South Asian subcontinent, that is, India, Pakistan,

Survey of Attitudes and Beliefs and Their Implications for U.S. National Security Policy. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2020.

⁹Ewing, Katherine Pratt. *Being and Belonging: Muslims in the United States since 9/11*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2011. 4,

¹⁰Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Policies." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* 1989, no. 1 (1989): 139-167.

¹¹ Alkhateeb, Firas. *Lost Islamic History Reclaiming Muslim Civilisation from the Past*. Oxford, UK: Hurst, 2017. 24.

¹²Peek, Lori A. *Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans after 9/11*. 7.

¹³Pew Research Center. "Demographic Portrait of Muslim Americans ." Pew Research Center, July 26, 2017. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2017/07/26/demographic-portrait-of-muslim-americans/>.

Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and Maldives. (Afghanistan is not properly considered part of South Asia, although there are close ties.) South Asians are linguistically, culturally, and religiously diverse, with large populations of Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs, as well as many religious minorities” (end quote)¹⁴. The South Asian American Digital archive wrote on its introduction page the following: “According to the 2010 census, more than 3.4 million people in the United States trace their heritage to South Asia, making South Asian Americans one of the fastest growing immigrant groups in the U.S.”¹⁵ In Elgin, Illinois, the majority of its own South Asian population are those from Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh.¹⁶

Muslims in the United States equals to 3.45 millions and Pew Research found that “Among U.S. Muslim adults who were born abroad, more come from South Asia (35%) than any other region” and “About three-in-ten (Muslim) are Asian (28%), including those from South Asia”.¹⁷ Yet there is a limited amount of histories written on South Asian Muslims as the sole actor in 9/11 studies. This negligence pushed me further to capture South Asian Muslim-Americans’ stories before and after the events of September 11. The selection of South Asian Muslims voices are, also in part, due to their connection to our point of interest, Elgin, Illinois.

At this point, you may be wondering what is so special about Elgin, Illinois. Elgin is dubbed literally as “the city in the suburbs” evident in the city of Elgin website and their own

¹⁴U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. *Civil Rights Concerns in the Metropolitan Washington, D.C., Area in the Aftermath of the September 11, 2001, Tragedies*, “Chapter 2: Background on Arab, South Asian, Muslim, and Sikh Communities in the United States”, June 2003.

¹⁵Samip. “An Introduction to South Asian American History.” South Asian American Digital Archive (SAADA), July 30, 2015. <https://www.saada.org/resources/introduction>.

¹⁶“Population in Elgin, Illinois (Community Demographics).” Dwellics, 2022. <https://dwellics.com/illinois/community-in-elgin>.

¹⁷Pew Research Center. “Demographic Portrait of Muslim Americans .”

flag (image located on website under Elgin heading).¹⁸ Moreover, Elgin has both a city infrastructure yet maintains a small suburban atmosphere. Elgin is located both in Kane and Cook county of Illinois only 35 miles away from Chicago, making it a desirable area for those seeking to leave the city. That wish was especially true for South Asian Immigrants in the 1960s and 1970s. Salma Khan, my second interviewee claimed Elgin was kinder to immigrant renters supplying them with opportunities to own land and aid for a significantly cheaper price compared to Chicago apartments .¹⁹ Also during that era, Elgin welcomed immigrants eagerly to help with its economy.

The demographics of Elgin showcases the suburban city’s diversity. The city now is the sixth largest city in Illinois and has a population of: “47 percent Latinx/Hispanic, 57.4 percent white, Black or African Americans 5.4 percent, American Indian & Alaska Natives 0.8 percent, Asians 5.4 percent, Native Hawaiians & Other Pacific Islanders 0.0 percent, Multi 7.4 percent, and Other 24.1 percent”.²⁰ Of that population, 3.89 percent of the population is Muslim.²¹ Additionally, Elgin’s Muslim demography continues to expand into its large Latinx population. The U.S. and World report publicized that the highest number of converts comes from Latino population in the United states and the U.S. embassy website remarked Islam is now the “fastest-growing” religion.²²

¹⁸Elgin Area Chamber. “Our History.” Our History | City of Elgin, Illinois - Official Website. <https://www.cityofelgin.org/2140/Our-History>.

¹⁹ Khan, Salma. Oral history interview conducted by Muskaan Siddique, January 8, 2023, *A Community of Our Own Podcast*, 2023.11:45,

²⁰ U.S. Census Bureau Information. “Demographics.” Demographics | City of Elgin, Illinois - Official Website, 2020. <https://www.cityofelgin.org/103/Demographics>.

²¹ “Population in Elgin, Illinois (Community Demographics).” Dwellics, 2022. <https://dwellics.com/illinois/community-in-elgin>.

²² Italy, U.S. Mission. “Muslim Americans Celebrate Ramadan.” U.S. Embassy & Consulates in Italy, April 19, 2022. <https://it.usembassy.gov/muslim-americans-celebrate-ramadan/>; Allaudeen, Aquilah. “Numbers of U.S. Latino Muslims Growing Rapidly - US News.” U.S. NEWS. U.S. News & World Report, July 2, 2020.

Elgin's diversity shaped the supportive community that exists now noticeable in its own community enrichment programs. The Gail Borden Public library hosts a variety of cultural events and exhibits detailing the different cultures present in Elgin. Back in the 1970s and 1980s, it co-sponsored the Interfaith group of Elgin alongside the Elgin Community College.²³ Recently, on May 4th of 2023, it hosted an event from its Global Neighbor series titled, "India & Pakistan" where South Asian neighbors taught the community about their roots, culture, and values through food, music, dress, and Q&A's.²⁴ Moreover, the city on weekends hosts protests against the banning of immigration and other restrictive practices towards undocumented individuals since the 1990s. The Daily Herald newspaper captured during the George Floyd protests and call for police reform in 2020, denizens utilizing cacerolazos- the spanish term for this form of protest in which activists bang pots and pans to call attention.²⁵

Elgin was the first within its neighboring suburbs to have not only a mosque but also an Islamic school- known as a *Madarsa*. Elgin, a city first "founded in 1835", had its "first religious boarding school as a muslim one" known as the Islamic Institute of Education according to the Courier News in March of 1996. South Asian Muslims in the Elgin area founded and run the two Elgin mosques, the Islamic Community Center, and the Islamic Institute of Education (IIE). I'll be discussing the manifestation and creation of these integral Islamic suburban sites in the next episode. An article from Elgin's Courier News also mentions the large Muslim population in the area and estimates "250 Muslim families worship at the ICC of Elgin" by 1996.²⁶

²³ Khan, Salma. *A Community of Our Own Podcast*, 2023. 16:25.

²⁴Staff. "Events- Global Neighbors Series: "India & Pakistan." Gail Borden Public Library District - Elgin, Illinois, 2023. <https://gailborden.info/?Itemid=250>. Flyer available for viewing on Website !

²⁵Courier News, "Islamic institute finds a home in Elgin after rebuff by Gilberts".Elgin Gail Borden Newspaper Archives, September 1996.

²⁶Ibid.

As I mentioned earlier in this episode, previous research on this topic (Muslims in the U.S.) focuses on larger metropolitan areas like Chicago and New York or particularly Arab-Muslims.²⁷ However, this project makes a few different interventions into the literature. Not only does this project focus on an overlooked Muslim ethnic identity- that being South Asians, but it also takes a magnifying glass to the suburban city of Elgin and its surrounding suburbs at times. Other historical literature also prioritizes male perspectives and places them as the focal point of the matter but *A Community of Our Own* pays specific attention to the female perspective. I will admit my insider status in this community made way for me to gain this exclusive perspective.

My position as an insider to this community exposes my long history with Elgin, South Asian Identity, and Islam. Insider in this context means an interviewer who has a personal background and affiliation on the topic which Jois Stansfield discusses in his article titled, “Reflections on Being an Oral History Insider”.²⁸ There are critiques of insider status within history where people discredit historical work due to potential bias thus destroying objectivity. However, in the year of 2023, historians should accept that objectivity in scholarship is a myth and a mechanism for academia to remain elitist, white, and inaccessible. My status builds a platform of visibility.²⁹ I am proud to be born and raised in Elgin, Illinois by two South Asian Muslims immigrants now naturalized citizens. I spent summers at the Islamic Institute of Education and attended Eid prayers at the Islamic Community Center. And due to my closeness, my interviewees felt more inclined to share intimate details of their past.³⁰ Plus as a Muslim woman myself, many of these women felt comfortable talking about their experience with the

²⁷Gillum, Rachel. *Muslims in a Post-9/11 America*. 171.

²⁸Stansfield, Jois. “Reflections on Being an Oral History Insider: Subjectivity, Intersubjectivity and Speech Therapy.” *Oral History* 48, no. 2 (2020): 90–101. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48615295>.

²⁹Collins, Patricia Hill. “The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought.” *Signs* 14, no. 4 (1989): 745–73.

³⁰Siddique, Asifa. Oral history interview conducted by Muskaan Siddique, February 5, 2023. *A Community of Our Own Podcast*, 2023. 47:28.

hijab and none wore them in my presence- signifying just how at ease they were. Unlike other research conducted by predominantly men in this field, I extracted confessions from these Muslim women about their own reactions to 9/11- not the ones their male counterparts tried to impress unto them. I know that proximity to this case helped me uncover those hidden treasures within this topic and I am excited to show them to you all in the episodes that follow.

CUE: sound effect- do do do

Moving past the methods' explanation, it is vital for the audience to know the impact of 9/11 and how it molded a new Muslim-American experience. On September 11th, 2001, a series of terrorist attacks occurred in the United States and killed 2,996 people, including the terrorists. Nineteen members of the Islamic extremist group, Al Qaeda, took credit for the following attacks. Two planes flew into the twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City, leading to the complete destruction of one of the towers. Additionally, another hijacked plane went to the Pentagon. A fourth plane crashed into a field in Shanksville, PA. Former President Bush's "War on Terror" immediately marked most immigrants and Muslims in the country as the public enemies creating the war *of* terror for these groups. September 11 not only changed the cultural landscape of the United States but also it "changed the way Muslim people identify themselves and are identified by others," as said by researcher Cynthia Tindongan.³¹

The United States government, then, launched a series of political and legal policies like the Patriot Act which specially targeted those who seemed suspicious and dangerous. However, what was considered 'suspicious and dangerous were those who fit the physical description of what the United States government dubbed the enemy- those with brown-tone skin, dark features, and any and every marker of Islam. This is racialization, "a process by which

³¹Tindongan, Cynthia White. "Negotiating Muslim Youth Identity in a Post-9/11 World":75.

individuals are categorized into racial groups based on their physical appearance” alone.³² The South Asian Muslim community in the United States experienced a large brunt of that turmoil due to the media’s continuous replaying images of al-Qaeda members including its leader Osama Bin Laden who was a South Asian man himself.³³ The United States, though previously having a somewhat even-tempered relationship with South Asian countries, quickly began openly speaking against South Asian countries with large Muslim populations like Pakistan, India, Bangladesh. South Asian non-Muslims were even victims of the backlash following 9/11. In fact, the first death post-9/11 was a Sikh (a minority religion present in South Asian countries and usually associated with the region Punjab within Pakistan and India) man named Balbir Singh Sodhi.³⁴

In oral historian Mary Marshall Clark’s text “The September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project: A First Report,” she describes 9/11 as a (say quote) “a turning point in the nation's history that has clear implications for national and foreign policy”(say end quote)³⁵ She emphasizes that this consensus-- was (say quote)“constructed by those who observed it and had political reasons to interpret it as they did” (say quote) such as the news coverage and legislators.³⁶ Not only did 9/11 heighten national security of the United States, but it also placed any groups previously ‘othered’ in more danger. In this project’s oral histories, one witnesses the shift in Muslim perception in the United States after 9/11 as well as the changes in reality for Muslim-Americans. A deeper academic dive, otherwise known as a historiography, on

³²Thakore, Bhoomi K. “Must-See TV: South Asian Characterizations in American Popular Media.” *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 2 (2014): 149.

³³Ibid, 152.

³⁴Karwowski, Sophia. “Remembering Balbir Singh Sodhi, Sikh Man Killed in Post-9/11 Hate Crime.” StoryCorps, September 13, 2018.

³⁵ Clark, Mary Marshall. “The September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project: A First Report.” *The Journal of American History* 89, no. 2 (2002): 569.

³⁶ Ibid, 569.

five crucial texts in this field of study is available on the exhibit website under academic resources.

We already know September 11th, 2001, remains a dark, tragic memory for the United States. While many in the United States joined together through calls for patriotism and solidarity in the face of the September 11th events, some also began targeting black, brown, and immigrant communities as outsiders and threats to the nation. Unfortunately, the consequences of 9/11 impacted the South Asian and Muslim populations and contributed to the racialization of these groups. Following 9/11, South Asian Muslims in the United States struggled with identity, isolation, and discrimination after mainstream media flooded their screens with Islamophobic and anti-immigrant sentiment. The word ‘Muslim’ and the appearance of brown skin, beards, and turbans became synonymous with terrorism. The “War on Terror” essentially became the “War of Terror” for South Asians, Muslims, and immigrants in the United States.³⁷ Life was never the same for these groups of people and instead of giving up, they rose up to fight against stigma and educate their neighbors and community members evident in this case of Elgin!

As this episode nears its end, the importance of this project lies in increasing visibility and validating the experiences of South Asian Muslims in the United States. This project showcases the evolution of South Asian Muslim experience post 9/11 and how Muslim-Americans and South Asian-Americans exist and operate within society. *A Community of Our Own’s* first episode title ‘Welcome to the Hyphen’ even refers to the liminal space of the hyphens between Muslim-American and South Asian-American.³⁸ Marginalization forces the

³⁷Clark, Mary Marshall. “The September 11, 2001, Oral History Narrative and Memory Project: A First Report. 12. Peek, Lori A. *Behind the Backlash: Muslim Americans after 9/11*.78.

³⁸A liminal space can be thought of as a hallway with two doors just on either side. The hallway is a transition space where one can go from one room to the next. However, for individuals with hyphenated identities, these metaphorical doors are locked, trapping the individual in the hallway where they must construct their own ideas and beliefs of what is behind each door and act as if they are in both rooms at once. Another example of a liminal space is a doorway. For more information on liminal spaces and hyphenated identities see: Phillips, Prasad D. “Navigating Hyphenated Identities:” *Interconnections of Asian Diaspora*, 2022, 187–206.

hyphen between Muslim and American. The hyphen is a “result of racialization and these racialized experiences” as said by Bhoomi Takore in her work ³⁹ Finally, the project provides a platform for South Asian Muslim-Americans and engages in the politics of solidarity.⁴⁰

This research podcast examines the resilience and strength of South Asian Muslim women both prior to, during, and after the events of September 11th. *A Community of Our Own* traces the change over time regarding the behavior and treatment of South Asian Muslim-Americans in Elgin. If you’d like to know more, there is an accompanying website attached to each episode’s description showcasing the original interviews I conducted with Muslims in Elgin, Illinois, and other primary sources documenting the life experience of South Asian Muslim-Americans in Elgin before and after 9/11.

Cue: sound effect

MAS: That concludes our first episode of *A Community of Our Own*. This episode could not have been created without the encouragement and care of the University of Illinois’ History department. A special thanks to my thesis advisors, Professor Ramirez & Professor Mathisen, and my history honors thesis cohort for their unwavering support and kindness. I am eternally grateful to all the interviewees in this project. Thank you for trusting me with your memories, stories, and legacy.

CUE: SAJDAA BY NASHITA HASAN

END OF EPISODE ONE

³⁹Thakore, Bhoomi K. “Must-See TV: South Asian Characterizations in American Popular Media.”150.

⁴⁰ Politics of solidarity is a practice in which in-groups, typically those privileged in society, join and support the activist efforts of outgroups.

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