



(Re)Presenting American Muslims: Broadening the Conversation

# Meccan Diplomacy, Madinan Revolutions

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## About The Author



### **Ayesha Mattu**

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Ayesha Mattu is a writer, editor and international development consultant who has worked in the field of women's human rights since 1998. Her first book, *Love, InshAllah: The Secret Love Lives of American Muslim Women*, was featured globally by media including the New York Times, NPR, the BBC, Guardian, Times of India, Dawn Pakistan, and Jakarta Post. She was selected a 'Muslim Leader of Tomorrow' by the UN Alliance of Civilizations & the ASMA Society, and has served on the boards of IDEX, the Women's Funding Network, and World Pulse. Ayesha is an alumna of Voices of Our Nations writers' workshop and a member of the San Francisco Writers' Grotto. Her second book, *Salaam, Love: American Muslim Men on Love, Sex & Intimacy* is now available from Beacon Press.

*On Friday and Saturday, April 11 and 12, 2014, the Alwaleed Islamic Studies Program at Harvard University hosted a two-day workshop (Re)Presenting American Muslims: Broadening the Conversation to discuss the ways in which American Muslims define themselves, and are defined, in the twenty-first century. The workshop brought together a diverse slate of American Muslim activists, artists, scholars and advocates in a constructive dialogue on a wide range of issues affecting Muslims in the United States. In five sessions over two days, the group addressed challenges regarding the ideas of American Muslim identity and representation while encouraging a discussion of the opportunities and a broader view of the communities encompassed in the umbrella term ‘American Muslims’.*

*What follows is Ayesha Mattu’s presentation from Session 2 of the conference that explored the topic of American Muslim Storytellers.*

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## Introduction

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*Love InshAllah* began as a non-fiction anthology and evolved into a community-based website by, for, and about American Muslims, storytelling, diversity, divergence, love and relationships. And this year we<sup>3</sup> are coming out against positive representations of Muslims.

When Muslim communities<sup>4</sup> are under intense scrutiny, and trapped in a reductive national security narrative that focuses on immigrant Muslims and excludes Black Muslim histories and realities, there’s pressure to perform for an outside gaze, to solely engage in “Meccan diplomacy.” The easiest thing to do in this situation is to respond with positive representations of Muslims and platitudes about Islam. But at *Love InshAllah* we want to resist that because only presenting positive stories is as untrue as only presenting negative ones.

Our intention then is to explore the irresistible story instead of the multivitamin story, and in the process to ignite a “Madinan revolution” that focuses not on the outside community but on the needs, challenges and opportunities that exist within our communities. The multivitamin story is the one that you read because it’s supposed to educate you, or be good for you, or simply because it’s positive. It usually ends up being as much of a one-dimensional cardboard cutout as a simplistic, stereotypical negative story.

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# So what makes an irresistible story?

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**First, diverse perspectives.** We often talk about American Muslims as being the most diverse Muslim community in the world. But you wouldn't know it by looking at the leadership and the speakers at local and national institutions, mosques, or conferences. Most leaders and speakers are males, 30+, and of Arab or South Asian descent. The majority of the Muslim community – women, Blacks, youth - is left out of the conversation, and prevented from sharing their wisdom and perspectives.

To counteract that, we must actively welcome and solicit the perspectives of American Muslims across the spectrum of gender (especially including women who choose not to wear the headscarf, or who do not otherwise conform to the “good Muslim woman” stereotype), race, ethnicity, sect, sexual orientation, and religious practice – i.e., those who identify as orthodox, secular or cultural Muslims.

The diversity we tout to outsiders must also be embraced *within* the community. Our strength lies in our diversity and divergence, but without exposure to and knowledge of it, we cannot build on that strength. Highlighting this diversity and divergence is the best way to complicate our representation and forestall stereotypes about Muslims as a whole.

**Second, writers and artists who share their stories with truth, vulnerability, and complexity.** That includes messy, imperfect, mistake-laden life journeys of transformation, which reveal our full humanity to ourselves and others within Muslim communities. Without this essential ingredient, any story we tell about ourselves or our community will fail to impact the reader or listener, generate healthy debate, or move us closer in understanding to one another.

There is a lot of fear in Muslim communities about this type of honesty, although personally and historically it is always these types of honest stories – from the time of the Prophet (saws) onward - that we connect with the most deeply and which have the ability to transform and inspire us to become something *more*.

**Third, constantly challenging ourselves to be more inclusive.** It's easy to say that we value diversity, but much harder to put in practice. It is an evolving goal, one that is continually broadened and refined based on experience and resources. As individuals and organizations, we can always be more inclusive. Some important questions to ask ourselves at every step and convening include: Whose voices are missing? Who is being marginalized? What perspectives would deepen our understanding? Who do we need to make space for, pass the mic to, and amplify the voices of?

An integral part of that process includes addressing privilege – male privilege, South Asian/ Arab privilege, and class privilege particularly – and means that individuals and communities that benefit from privilege must make space and give up some of their privilege so that other perspectives may be heard. This is often difficult when a community sees itself as under attack or is on the defensive. Yet, it must be recognized that even within a community that may be maligned, race, class, gender, and heterosexual privileges are still at play.

<sup>3</sup> “We” refers to the editorial board of LoveinshAllah.com, including Ayesha Mattu, Nura Maznavi and Deonna Kelli

<sup>4</sup> We use “communities”, recognizing that there are multiple American Muslim communities, often segregated by race/ ethnicity/heritage, sect, class, religious practice, etc.

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# Recommendations

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The Muslim community has been in an outward facing, defensive posture for too long. It's time we turned inward to face each other, look each other courageously in the eye, and begin addressing critical intrafaith issues. The goal is not uniformity, but the unity and strength that comes from knowing and respecting one another, and realizing that our differences and disagreements are healthy instead of frightening or destabilizing. One of the most powerful ways we can begin to know one another is through listening to each other's stories and perspectives. By connecting to one another at the heart-root, we move from being strangers to friends to family/community.

## **Recommendations include:**

Amplifying female, youth, Shia, LGBT and Black voices across the board on speakers' panels, boards of directors, organizations and websites, and to recognize and address any increased training and mentorship required to do so.

Encouraging Muslim men to recognize their privilege and to refuse to convene or speak on panels that are all-male; to actively give up power, space and privilege so that others may speak, share their stories, and teach from their wisdom and experiences.

Supporting women whose experiences may confirm stereotypes of oppression and who are silenced in the community rush to present only positive narratives.

Amplifying the voices of those who identify as working class but are invisible in the depictions of our community as solely made up of doctors, engineers and lawyers.

As a women-led and-created platform, at *Love InshAllah* we know that much more work needs to be done in terms of Muslim men recognizing the toxic, violent masculinity and male entitlement that they are steeped in negatively affects their lives and relationships

While we are addressing these issues at *Love InshAllah*, we need a community-wide effort to challenge gender norms so that men and boys can begin to see love, relationships and family as intrinsically connected to their identity and well-being.

In making these recommendations, we recognize that storytelling is only one aspect of addressing these issues and that community-based organizations, mosques, and other institutions have essential roles to play. Although art and literature have long been neglected within American Muslim communities, the critical necessity for the creative arts has become clear over the past few decades and we are seeing a surge of Muslim artists and writers.

Art and literature are not just reflections of the world, they have the power to effect, re-create, shape and move the world in different directions. InshAllah, it is our hope and desire that the irresistible, honest, and diverse stories of our communities will be an integral part of igniting this revolution of connection, openness, and complexity.

## Institute *for* Social Policy *and* Understanding

ISPU is an independent, nonpartisan research organization specializing in addressing the most pressing challenges facing the American Muslim community and in bridging the information gap between the American Muslim community and the wider society. ISPU conducts objective, empirical research and offers expert policy analysis on some of the most pressing issues facing the United States. In addition, ISPU has assembled leading experts across multiple disciplines and built a solid reputation as a trusted source for information about American Muslims and Muslim communities around the world.

ISPU scholars provide insight into the major debates taking place across the country. They offer context-specific analysis and recommendations to journalists, policymakers, and the general public through reports, policy briefs, articles, op-eds and books. ISPU disseminates its publications through a variety of channels and holds regular congressional briefings, policy events and academic conferences.

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