

“ISLAM CAPTURED”

PROJECT REPORT

Submitted to the faculty of

The University of Houston – Clear Lake

By

Asmaa Syed

In partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

In


Digital Media Studies

April 2009


We the undersigned, certify that we have read this project and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the Master's Degree in Digital Media Studies.

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Asmaa Syed

Master's Project Proposal

Digital Media Studies

Coffee Table Book

Goals & Objectives:

In a post 9/11 world, misconceptions and fear about Muslims are rampant. The media and so called 'experts' in the news bombard Americans daily with concocted terms such as "Islamofascism" and "jihadists". How does this affect our society? As a Muslim who has been born and raised in the United States, I would like to think that most Americans can see through the brainwashing and fear tactics that politicians use to justify a cause for war or invasion. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. In my opinion, most people are unconsciously sucked into the "Islamophobia" jargon and without proper education, start to believe it.

This, of course, is the fault of Muslim Americans themselves who, by and large, have done nothing to educate Americans or clear up misconceptions about Islam. It is easy to blame others for anti-Muslim sentiments in the world but self accountability and responsibility are paramount to eradicating this problem. Each Muslim must ask him or herself what they have done to teach people the truth about Islam because if they don't, the media will surely take on this role. Thus, it is related to this paradigm that I decided to work on a project that would serve a higher purpose and fill a great void in America.

My project is to create a hard cover coffee table book that would give information and insight into the lives of Muslim Americans. This book would serve two purposes: firstly, to educate people about the basics of Islam and secondly, to show a glimpse of

how Muslim Americans live. This book would be a photo documentary with text explaining and elaborating on different topics (and pictures) within Islam such as prayer, the veil, mosques, etc. I would take most of these pictures and write the text myself.

Research, Sources, & Method:

In order to make an effective coffee table book, I will research best selling books of this nature. I will also look closely at different photo books to get an idea of what kind of pictures are visually stimulating and will captivate an audience. I would have to look into different photography sources and texts.

In addition, I will research topics in Islam which I feel are important to cover and often misunderstood such as the role of women, praying five times a day, etc. In order to effectively write the text, I would look into different Islamic books and at the end, consult a religious leader and have him check the text for Islamic accuracy. Yasir Qadhi, a PHD candidate in Islamic Studies from Yale, would be an ideal candidate for this job. I will try to use him as my source since I know him personally.

I would also need to research how I would bind and print the book. I will need to look into the various sizes that coffee table books come in and what would be a more economical and effective size for printing and binding. In addition, I will have to look into the kinds of paper that these types of books are usually printed on.

I am still researching what dimensions of the book will be, depending on printing costs and what I find to be the standard among good coffee table books. The number of pages will range from 35 to 50 depending on the amount of pictures I am able to capture. I plan to mostly use my own images (about 75 %) and the rest will be different stock photography images which I will legally obtain permission to use. Each page should have

some text explaining a picture or concept. Overall, I plan to have at least a few paragraphs of text (if not more) per two page spread. I plan to use a mixture of photography skills, public relations writing, Photoshop, Illustrator, and Desktop Publishing to create this book.

The entire purpose of this project is for it to someday be used by people so I would like to get in contact with different publishers to perhaps print this book and put it out in the market. This would also be a part of the research phase. In addition, I would need to study marketing techniques and figure out to brand and market this book to the public.

Utilization:

I hope that this book will be used by Muslims to give to their co-workers, neighbors, teachers, etc in order to educate them about Islam in a subtle and graceful manner. I also hope that one day this book can be in American bookstores in the culture or religion section for Americans to purchase directly.

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Islam Captured: Artist Statement

Asmaa Syed

Spring 2009 Graduate Project

It has been said that the value of a person's identity is that, with it, comes purpose. I take on many identities in life. I am a daughter, a sister, a wife, and a mother. Above all else, however, I consider myself a Muslim. It is my faith that identifies me and if I were to take on any label, it would be a person who submits to God - *a Muslim*. Thus, my religion defines my very purpose in life. It is this purpose to submit to and worship God, to the best of my abilities, which further accentuates my other roles as a wife, mother, and daughter. My entire existence, without a doubt, revolves around my faith as a Muslim.

Growing up as a Muslim in America, I have always been different. This feeling of standing out among everybody was probably the most highlighted when I started wearing the traditional head scarf in the summer before I started high school. I was the only Muslim girl in my entire high school who covered her hair. Needless to say, I stood out like a sore thumb. My Islam was the first thing anybody saw and everything else about me, naturally, came second. It was hard for people to merely ignore the cloth around my head and the long flowing garment which covered my entire body. Contrary to what many thought at the time, my decision to wear a scarf was completely my own, without any pressure or coercion from my parents. This was the first conscious choice I made which identified me as a Muslim. Thus, these were probably a few of the most influential years of my life. It was during high school when my Islam started to define who exactly I was. It permeated every aspect of my life because I was wearing the "label" of Islam wherever I went.

My faith further enhanced my character and outlook on life during my college years. I met other Muslims raised and brought up in America, who had similar backgrounds and struggles growing up as Muslim Americans. Like me, they were raised immersed in American culture and taught Muslim values by immigrant parents - all meshed into one. This, of course, proved to be quite confusing and challenging at times for us all while growing up. Nonetheless, we managed to take great pride in our faith and realized it was a source of comfort and supreme tranquility in our lives. With age and wisdom, we also began filtering out our parents' cultural biases from true Islam, rejecting a back home approach to our faith that most of our parents had. We strived to live the pure Islam, without cultural influences and nuances. In addition, we felt grateful and honored to be given the comforts and privileges that come with being American. As my knowledge about my faith and my country grew, so did my love for both things and my acceptance and pride for who I was: a Muslim American.

Upon graduating college, like everybody else, I had to enter the real world. As I stumbled into the kitchen on the morning of September 11, 2001, my father said, "Look, there's a plane in the building." I turned around to see what was going on, but didn't give it much thought. I remember thinking, "Oh weird...what a dumb pilot." I went about making my coffee rather oblivious to what was happening. Not until after I was fully awake, and started watching what was unraveling in front of me, did I realize the enormity of what had just taken place. My first thought, after absorbing the tragedy and mayhem of the situation, was, "Oh God, let it not be Muslims." Nonetheless, we all know what sadly transpired afterwards.

I was just hired that week to start my new job at a high school teaching U.S. History. My first day at work was on Sept. 12, 2001. As I walked in, I expected the worse from my students. Surprisingly, my students were friendly, warm, and quite pleasant. They had a lot of questions about Islam, the way I was dressed, my background, and so on. They seemed just as sincere and eager to learn about me, as I was about them. It was from my fellow coworkers, however, that I got the reaction I was not expecting. I received cold shoulders, mean looks, and awkward stares from most of the teachers I was working with. I was confused. They had not spoken a word to me or spent more than two minutes with me, yet, already decided that they did not like me. I thought, "These are educated, professionals, why would they be so backward in their thinking and display such obvious signs of intolerance?" This didn't faze me, however. I was used to being different and I was not terribly hurt or affected, just a bit surprised. More importantly, I was happy with my students and was grateful that they accepted me.

As time went by, however, there was something that began to really bother me. I was beginning to fully understand the backlash that my faith was enduring. As I listened to the radio, I heard people call in and say what they truly felt about me and my faith. I heard comments which made me cringe in disbelief, "We should nuke Makkah". "Lets just send those Mozlems to concentration camps", "We must crush Islam." It is amazing how honest people can be under the cloak of anonymity. I was hearing the same rhetoric (although somewhat subdued) on television, in the news, and of course, on the Internet. The looks and stares never bothered me my entire life, as I was raised to be a confident and strong individual, but what was disturbing me was that my faith was under attack. The leader of the free world, President Bush, I felt, confirmed all these beliefs about

Muslims and Islam and solidified what people were mistakenly thinking. It was now politically correct, and socially acceptable to hate Islam and be wary and suspicious of Muslims. It was actually encouraged, as a duty to our nation. Moreover, if one did not feel this way, he was considered unpatriotic and anti-American. After all, the pundits kept hammering it into our psyche that Islam was at war with America or vice versa. This left me in a bind since I was Muslim and American, both.

As I absorbed all the anti-Islamic sentiments that were being voiced, I came to the painful conclusion that this was the fault of no other than Muslim Americans themselves. As a community we, by and large, have done nothing to educate Americans or clear up misconceptions about Islam. It is easy to blame others such as Sean Hannity, George Bush, or even Usama Bin Laden for anti-Muslim sentiments in the world, but self accountability and responsibility are paramount to eradicating this problem. Muslims must ask themselves what they have done to teach people the truth about Islam because if they do not, the media and other outspoken individuals will surely take on this role. Thus, it is related to this paradigm that I decided to work on a project that would serve a higher purpose and fill a great void in America.

When analyzing the literature and information available to Americans about Islam and Muslims, I was awfully disappointed. Most of the material out there was made by my parents' generation, individuals who migrated to the United States in the 1960s and 1970s. Though their efforts were, no doubt, sincere, they were also ineffective in getting the message across to Americans. They came from foreign countries and their approach in educating Americans about Islam was also of a "back home" style and mentality. Poorly designed pamphlets, packed with lines and lines of rambling text were the norm.

This approach, unfortunately, was not extremely successful in communicating what Islam was actually about. There was a real, urgent need for relevant, professional, and stimulating material that educated people about the true message of Islam and the true nature of Muslims. This was the great exigency that I wanted to tackle, the purpose behind my project.

My project was to create a hard cover coffee table book that would give information and insight into the lives of Muslim Americans. This book would serve two purposes: firstly, to educate people about the basics of Islam and secondly, to show a glimpse of how Muslim Americans live. This book would be a photo documentary with text explaining and elaborating on different topics (and pictures) within Islam, such as prayer, the veil, Muslim Americans, etc.

After deciding what kind of project I was doing, I set out to narrow the list of topics I felt should be addressed. I used various Islamic texts such as “Book of Faith, According to Ibn Taymiyyah” by Dr Mohammed Naim Yasin, “What a Muslim Believes” by Muhammad bin Jamil Zino, “Explaining the Pillars of Faith” by Mohammad Al-Uthaimen, Submission: Faith & Beauty The Religion of Islam by Hamza Yusuf Hanson , and “Islamic Studies Books Series” by Dr. Bilal Phillips to help me choose what the absolute essential aspects of the faith were. I was very careful that I did not misrepresent the teachings of Islam due to my own ignorance or that I did not leave anything pivotal out due to carelessness. I had some difficulty narrowing down my topics to sixteen: Allah (God), Quran, Makkah, Madinah, Jerusalem, Prayer, Ramadan (month of fasting), Zakat (charity), Hajj (pilgrimage), Prophets, Worship, Hereafter, Veil,

Marriage, American Muslims, and Universality. Consequently, I researched the information on each topic.

When writing the actual text, I took most of the information from my own knowledge but also used the above-mentioned books for clarification, if needed. I primarily wanted to include as much of the Holy Quran, itself, in my text as possible. I feel that the beauty of the Quran speaks for itself, and it is the greatest tool in educating people about what Islam truly is. In addition, I used many classical Islamic texts of the Prophet Muhammad's sayings or *hadith* such as Bukhari, Muslim, At-Tirmidhi, and Abu Dawood. I tried to utilize the expressions of Prophet wherever they were relevant, as I feel his words are far better than mine in explaining the life of a Muslim and the core of the Islamic faith.

It was very crucial that the text was not preachy or condescending in tone or style. I wanted it to be friendly and conversational, something a Muslim could give to his or her co-worker without feeling too awkward, confrontational, or preachy. I have noticed that Muslims nowadays are in an apologetic mode about their faith. They feel embarrassed and get in a defensive mode about their religion. One clear example that recently came up was the horrendous case of Muzzammil Hasan, a Muslim man who beheaded his wife. He was not a devout Muslim by any means, did not even pray or fast (which are the bare minimum requirements of the religion). Yet, when news broke of this despicable crime, I saw Muslim clerics and community leaders go frantic trying to explain that Islam does not condone his actions. I honestly did not see the need to apologize for the crimes of a deranged man who was completely disconnected from his faith. He does not represent my religion. Why do Muslims all over the world feel they have to defend Islam when one

crazy individual does something insane? I did not see preachers or clerics defend Christianity when Scott Peterson killed his wife, nor do I feel that they should have to. Likewise, why must Islam, as a faith, take a beating every time a lunatic does something? I feel that Muslims are in this downtrodden, defensive, and somewhat apologetic mindset where they feel like they must prove to the world that their religion is, indeed, legitimate. With this mentality in mind, I tried to keep the text as soft, and non-confrontational as possible to appeal to the masses. I did not want something that was going to hit anybody over the head, as I feel that would not be effective. Muslims would not use it nor would non-Muslims read it. I also wanted to ensure that the writing for each subject was not too verbose or tedious to read. The text needed to be perfectly clear and concise. I wanted even the most ignorant person about Islam to pick it up, understand it easily, and walk away with a better understanding of what the basics of my faith are and what Muslims are all about.

The most challenging aspect of this project was the photography. I never really took pictures before starting this project. I had trouble finding interesting things to shot and representing some of the concepts I was trying to convey. Abstract areas such as hereafter or worship were quite difficult to capture in a single photo. Nonetheless, I pulled together the little experience I had and some pictures I had take on my trips abroad and compiled a decent set of pictures.

I used many techniques to enhance the pictures for visual effect. Inside Adobe Photoshop. I used the masks, photo filters, brightness/contrast, hue/saturation, levels, and blur tools to create better images. I shaded some pictures with a sepia tone, made some black and white, and left others in their original, vibrant colors. I tried to shot pictures

from different angles and perspectives to keep things interesting and alive. I also tried to include interesting backgrounds, close-ups, and panoramas, and an overall good mix of people with places. I wanted to capture the diversity and flair of Islam by using different faces, coming from diverse backgrounds and colors. Through my pictures, I wanted to humanize Islam and show its true beauty, as I feel pictures truly do speak louder than words. My main goal was to capture the spirit of the Muslim people. Pictures from magazines such as National Geographic or Life served as great inspirations for me. The Muslim photographer, Peter Sanders, was also a great influence when I was picking pictures that I would use. I feel that he does a phenomenal job of representing Muslims in his portraits.

I kept the background and layout of the book simple. I wanted the pictures to stand out, without any distractions from the page. Thus, I made a simple black background in Adobe Illustrator and let the pictures do the talking. I also used Illustrator to create the bar for the titles and added a slight gradient to it for shading. Finally, I placed everything together in Adobe In Design so that it would be ready for print, in a booklet form.

I wanted the book to be an interesting shape that stood out among other texts. The dimensions that I chose for my book are 13 inches wide by 9.5 inches tall. I chose this shape because I am naturally attracted to books that are oddly shaped. I wanted to arouse interest and curiosity in my book from the onset. In addition, I researched other coffee table books for ideas. I found that the most stimulating ones were the ones with an interesting shape, simple layout, and bold, vibrant pictures. Some of the ones I found particularly stunning were "In Focus: National Geographic Greatest Portraits", "Athlete"

by Walter Iooss, "Global Faces: 500 Photographs From 7 Continents" by Michael Clinton, and "Time America: An Illustrated History".

Prophet Muhammad narrated, in a famous saying, "Take advantage of five before five: your youth before your old age, your health before your sickness, your wealth before your poverty, your free time before you are preoccupied and your life before your death." I chose this particular project because I feel that it was a worthwhile use of my time, energy, and good health. I wanted to contribute to something that was needed in society and that would serve a higher purpose for my own soul. As a graphic designer, it is important that my work has meaning and purpose behind it, alongside style and creativity. As a result, my passion for my faith and my love for Graphic Design served as a compelling guide throughout the duration of this project. I hope that this book, "Islam Captured", benefits people and increases understanding among human beings of all backgrounds and religions. I believe that, if given the proper education and tools, understanding and tolerance always prevail over ignorance.