

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

Muslims of Metropolis: The Stories of Three Immigrant Families in the West

Carnegie New Leaders

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Introduction

DEVIN STEWART: I'm Devin Stewart, from the Carnegie Council, and I'm here with the Carnegie New Leaders.

I'm also here with Kavitha Rajagopalan, who is the author of *Muslims of Metropolis*. It is essentially about three Muslim immigrant families moving to the West. You have loosely defined the West.

Kavitha, first of all, give me a little taste of one of these stories. One of them takes place in New York. Tell me about that story.

Remarks

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: The families come from three different parts of the world. Just to let you know, the primary focus of the work was to show the true complexity and diversity of the so-called Muslim world and to essentially show that, if we talk about the Muslim world, it's such an incredibly diverse place, with so many different layers of identity, that, in some sense, we would say "the Muslim world" does not exist.

In complement to that, we wanted to examine the fact that there is this idea about the West, but each of these Western countries has its own political history and its own infrastructure and its own value system. Therefore, we could claim that they don't exist. So if you don't have a West and you don't have a Muslim world, how do you have a conflict between these two things that supposedly don't exist?

That was the base premise.

One of the stories that I followed—

DEVIN STEWART: So you are illustrating that tension through these stories.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: Yes, just to show you, if you just follow a simple narrative of one family,

all of these categories that we hold so dear, these social categories and political categories that we as policy analysts and thinkers on these subjects are very likely to cling to, we find that these different categories ultimately don't really describe the length and breadth of even one single life, let alone an entire community. So in trying to understand this tension between individual and collective identity, I followed these narratives.

One of the families that I followed was a Bangladeshi family. The father was from a fishing family in the countryside, near this area called Kishoreganj, far outside of the city. He, over the course of his life, found himself being an economic migrant several times over, first to the city itself during the time of Bangladesh's independence war with Pakistan. Of course, at the time of partition, Bangladesh and present-day Pakistan were both Pakistan, East and West Pakistan. For many people in Bangladesh, they felt that they had been colonized, not once, but twice over, first by this British colonial identity and then by this Urdu nationalist identity.

So the independence war was very visceral for them, and I show how the family was affected by that personally. My main character, Nishat Islam, was born on the heels of this war. She was actually the first child who was born after the war, and they nicknamed her "Happy" in the family, because in some ways they didn't believe that she would ever have a happy existence.

DEVIN STEWART: Is that normal, to be ironic like that?

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: No. I think their family was particularly flip. I think they were just very playful.

The father didn't have as much to do with his children's upbringing, because he, after they moved to the city, ended up moving to the Gulf, as so many people did. He was an engineer in Qatar. Actually, we find that even though he studied to be an engineer, he was a very poetic soul, an artist by nature. When I would visit their apartment in Queens, it often seemed like I was visiting kind of an outsider art gallery. He was compulsive with the art. You could see mounted on the wall, all over the house, these little filigree napkin holders, very sweet Victorian kind of art, ladies reclining on chaise longues, in this little Bangladeshi immigrant house.

I think because of his artistic nature, even though he had a lot of professional training and a very extensive social network, he just didn't really have that kind of business "bloodlust," if you want to say it in that way. Because of that, when he came back from the Gulf and stayed in Bangladesh, he set up a business there.

I don't know if you are familiar with this, but in many countries in the world, if you set up a business, all of a sudden you find that you have tons and tons of relatives coming out of the woodwork who need jobs. So he had all of these so-called cousins and family friends who came, and a lot of these guys, I guess, got together and sort of fleeced him. Because of that, he found himself bankrupt, with three daughters and a son who were on the verge of going to college, and he had no means to support them. So he decided to make this rational decision to come to the United States, and in doing so, he decided to bring his most clever and his most savvy child with him, his third daughter, who was one year away from graduating the university. She was attending with honors, getting all kinds of acclaim.

He thought to himself, "Well, I'll bring her with me. It'll be fine. She's very smart. We'll send her to school. I'll work. We'll send some money home. She'll be in school in America, then she'll get an

American degree, and she'll marry an American citizen, of Bangladeshi descent of course. And everything will be perfect."

But, of course, when he comes here, he faces a different reality. He comes right after the [1996 immigration reforms](#). He comes as an undocumented immigrant—a conscious choice that he made. He finds, of course, that the only kinds of jobs that he can land are these deeply off-the-books factory gigs that pay maybe two, three bucks an hour. So, of course, he doesn't have enough to pay his basic living expenses, let alone support his daughter for college. So she ends up working as well.

DEVIN STEWART: What were some of those jobs? Did you get into the stories of the actual jobs?

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: What she ended up doing, interestingly enough—she has this strange tension. She grew up in a household that encouraged her to think and to study and to pursue education, but she was also very sheltered in many ways. She was always accompanied back and forth. Here, for the first time, she is living the life of an adult, which means, on some level, she is experiencing this kind of mental autonomy that she never had before. But on the other hand, she's much more restricted than she ever; her field of vision is now narrowing, so to speak.

So she comes here and she's looking for jobs. She ends up working at a bar. A girl from a traditional sheltered Bangladeshi family is working at a bar. There she meets a man. This man happens to be of Pakistani descent, and on top of it, he is undocumented. But she says to herself, "This is America. It's not really a big deal, what happened in the past between our peoples. Here we have a new identity. Here we have a new society. And this is fine."

But then, of course—

DEVIN STEWART: Do we have a name for this character?

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: Yes, he is Muhammad.

He is a little bit younger than she is. He's very savvy. He has been here since he was 15. So he knows all about how to live as an undocumented person, and he has pretty much built up for himself a really strong middle-class life. She uses that to convince her father. They are married. They have a very sweet little unrecognized marriage ceremony in someone's living room in Queens.

One year after their wedding, 9/11 happens, and two years after that, special registration happens. First, her husband is deported, detained and deported, and then her father is detained and deported. She, meanwhile, has two kids.

This is the question I always pose. You are a traditional Bangladeshi woman. You are married. You have no college degree. You know the only jobs that you can get pay no more than three or four dollars an hour. You know that you have two children to support. If you were to hire a babysitter, it would cost you at least \$10 an hour. What is your decision? You go home, right? You follow your husband home.

But she doesn't. Nishat does not. She stays here and she becomes a community organizer. She starts working with a social justice and immigrant-rights group. She stays here a full two years after her husband has left, under the shame and scorn of her community and his regular calls suggesting that she's a whore and she's cuckolding him all over New York, and how could she bring this

dishonor on their family. But she stays. She says, "One day this will work out." And when she decides to leave, she decides to leave immediately after *W's* reelection. That's when she decides.

DEVIN STEWART: That was the nail in the coffin.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: That was the nail. So that's the story of Nishat.

DEVIN STEWART: Do you want to talk about the rest of the story in New York or do you want to bring us to Berlin or London?

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: Berlin was fun for me because I had lived in Berlin for about two years, all told. The reason I started out in Berlin, just to give you a little bit of context, is that I had originally gone there to study Turkish political identity in Berlin. As we know, in Berlin, often they speak of their huge minority issue. Really, when you think about it, in terms of sheer numbers, the minority population is much smaller than we would picture here. Something like, 12 percent of Berlin's population is so-called Turkish.

But when we talk about Turkish people, we are talking about people who primarily came as guest workers and who came during the guest-worker treaties of the early 1960s—1961 with Turkey, to be specific. All of these people who were coming were coming from the southeast of the country, the part of the country that Kurds refer to as Northern Kurdistan.

I don't think we can speak about it in concrete terms, but it's fair to surmise that the Turkish-German population is at least significantly Kurdish. What's very interesting about that is that you have an opportunity to look at layers of identity. Somehow, in the German-Kurdish experience, you find this kind of perpetuation of these—to be very strong, ethnic-cleansing techniques or methods that were established in the new Turkish Republic.

My character that I study—her father came as a German guest worker, but he came to Western Germany, and because of that, she was surrounded by a guest-worker community that was from Spain and Italy and Greece, but not Turkey. Because of that, she did not face the same pressure that the majority of Kurds faced in Berlin, for example, to pass as Turkish or to integrate as Turkish. So she developed this very, very strong Kurdish identity and then she became a feminist. She became the first person in her family to go to the university. She became an ardent feminist.

In Berlin, they have all of these—they call them *weg's* (phonetic), these living communities. She moves into these lesbian, man-free spaces in Kreuzberg. She's living with women with Mohawks, very, very strong-willed feminists, and says she will never marry. But then, of course, the thing that ends up happening—

DEVIN STEWART: She goes to Queens.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: She falls in love. She doesn't go to Queens. She goes to the Turkish-Syrian border and falls in love with another Kurd, but a stateless Kurd from Syria. This is one of the lines that she said: She decides that she will move mountains for this man. Then she ends up actually having to do pretty much that.

She is taking on two countries that are notorious for bureaucracy and inattention to individual circumstances in many of these systems, two countries that absolutely had no interest in allowing a

stateless Syrian man to migrate freely. But by the sheer force of her will, she manages to secure legal migration for this man. For the first time ever, a stateless person from Syria gets legal migration, under the [Schengen treaties](#), to Berlin.

DEVIN STEWART: Those sound like two love stories. Maybe the third one is a love story as well. But I just want to give you an opportunity to talk about Turkish as your entrée into why you wrote this book—or you had sort of a cultural faux pas and it sparked this, "Oh, my God, I have to go write this book." Maybe you want to tell us about that.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: When you first start to talk about migrant communities, it's very easy to fall to the same lens—the Turks in Germany, the Algerians in France. You are going to go to the same communities over and over again. I was studying this Turkish lobby formation, essentially looking at a community that for about 40 years had been seen by the German populace at large, and also had been seen within itself, as a foreigner community, and watching that community transition, through institutional means, into an immigrant community and some of the many different things that were coming out of that.

So I was looking at the formation of political identity, lobby formation, particularly within the [SPD](#) [Social Democratic Party] and Green Parties in Germany. I decided to start learning Turkish, because many of the people who were there—the first generation did not speak German, were actually encouraged to not integrate. I was interested in learning a little bit of Turkish kind of as a point of entrée.

So I took some classes, really stressing myself out to learn this crazy language, and learning it through another crazy language. So I was really focusing and concentrating. I had met Sukriye, the main character, the Kurdish character, through a university project that she was doing on this Kurdish minority community, marriages practices among this Kurdish minority community, called the [Yezidi](#).

Just a little backstory on them. They are an ancient religion, kind of a combination of Zoroastrianism and Mithraism. They have a very rigid caste system.

We were looking at marriage practices. I was working with her on this idea of minority-minority identity and some of the tensions that come in the diaspora from those issues.

So I was just trying to work with her and win her over a little bit as an interview partner. One day I went to meet her—this was maybe the second time we had met—in a coffee shop and I greeted her in Turkish. Up until then, everybody had been, like, "Oh, you speak Turkish! Oh, we're all one people. It's all love." But, no. Literally, as soon as I spoke to her, her face fell eight stories. I have never seen someone react that way to anything. She said, "We are Kurds. We do not speak Turkish." Speaking Turkish to her symbolized not just a mild faux pas, but a rejection of her nation and that ongoing war that the Turkish state had waged on the expression of the Kurdish language.

She was very, very instrumental in helping me understand about Kurdish national identity and linguistic identity.

Just a little aside to that. I'm sure many of you are aware that there are several Kurdish dialects. It's very interesting. Their identity is so pegged to this language that itself isn't a unifying thing.

DEVIN STEWART: You are showing the unifying experience of love. I want to get to London. But I

also want to hear about how you grappled with identity and how it sort of pushes back to peace sometimes. Wrap up the three and get us to the experience of London. I'm especially curious to know if there were parallels to the other two cities.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: The only parallel, I guess, the only sort of touch-point I was looking for, the only bridge, was a point of contrast. I was interested in finding communities that contrasted with the mainstream idea of what that community was supposed to be. Then I was interested in finding—

DEVIN STEWART: Which community was that?

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: For example, in London, when you think about Muslims, you are largely talking about Pakistanis, more recently Bangladeshis. That's mostly because of Monica Ali's work, *Brick Lane*. People are now aware of the Bangladeshi community there. But up until very recently—and, I would say, still—British Muslim identity is dominated by, specifically, the [Muslim Council of Britain](#), which is dominated by Pakistanis.

But one of the most powerful symbolic issues for what they call the Asian community in the U.K. is Palestine and Palestinian liberation, Palestinian identity, the Palestinian nation. I was very interested to see what this was like for people of Palestinian descent. There is, by Palestinian terms, a sizeable Palestinian community in the U.K. and in London, but mostly these Palestinians are very, very upper-middle-class, a professional class of people, and therefore have much less involvement with British politics and with British social issues. Only very recently have we seen the development of this kind of political identity among British Arabs. And that, I think, is, in many ways, driven by the post-9/11 response.

DEVIN STEWART: How is it contrasted to the other experiences?

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: What I did was, I found a character who is himself Palestinian. He is from a minority-minority community, which we are looking at in all of the three places, a sub-community of a minority, and one that somehow causes us to think about this sort of mainstream Muslim identity and one that asks us to examine the migration history of that particular Western nation. He is from a family in Jerusalem, the Nashashibi family. For those of you who are familiar with Palestinian history, that name will be very familiar as well. The Nashashibis were a very, very powerful, noble family that has held leadership positions in Palestinian society since the 15th century. In fact, their family home in Jerusalem, which is now on the Israeli side of Jerusalem, is actually the Israeli Labor Court, just to give you an idea. It's not a small place. Their house is this huge mansion.

They went, essentially, from this level of existence to this level of existence in London. They live in Knightsbridge, a very, very wealthy part of town, in this three-story marble home—a very, very high-status life.

Yet we see, by the same token, that this narrative of alienation that so defines the Palestinian identity has a huge role to play in the identity of my main character, Sharif Nashashibi.

DEVIN STEWART: Carried over culturally.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: Yes—who actually didn't find out that he was Palestinian until he was 11, during the [First Intifada](#). He found out about that largely from the British media.

So you see these kinds of interesting reflections. By finding out about this, he actually—not to give too much away—his father was Palestinian and his mother was actually Syrian Christian. So again we are seeing some little complications to the main narrative.

DEVIN STEWART: They are all complicated. That's one of your points.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: Everybody's is, right? I mean, if you look in your family history or my family history, everything is layers. There's this relationship between family myth and collective myth and real personal experiences.

One of the main points I'm always trying to make is that we constantly think that we have power only to change the future, but we are constantly changing the past as well, to suit where we are now. In order to, I think, tap into this constantly changing feeling of alienation or belonging, we have to find certain collective narratives that allow us to promote social cohesion.

This may sound really naïve or somewhat idealistic, but I really do believe that social cohesion would be greater, we would have stronger societies, if we find and promote ways to build tolerance and empathy. I think you can do that through narrative. You can approach it through policy, but policy only takes us so far.

DEVIN STEWART: Your characters, your interviewees, did they detect your cosmopolitan agenda here? How did they react?

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: One really good story is to talk about the stories that don't make it in. Ultimately, everybody has an agenda. I personally have so much respect for characters that are willing to participate in a project like this, because you really are eviscerating your family history.

DEVIN STEWART: You have to tell us how you found these people, too.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: A lot of that was just kind of sheer coincidence, the same way I found you. One thing leads to another, and one person leads to another—the sort of journalistic technique.

The stories that don't make it really illustrate—I think all of these characters at some point had to realize that I was not going to achieve for them what they wanted. There is always that tension. I think the Kurdish character realized that this book was not going to create an independent Greater Kurdistan, and the Palestinian character realized that this would not lead to the two-state solution, and my Bangladeshi character realized at some point that I would not get amnesty for her.

I think the complications in these stories show us that they have a commitment to getting a message out that you need. Literally, they let me read their diaries. They told me stories they had never told anyone before. This is why I'm always talking about empathy and tolerance. People want to be understood. People want to be identified with. All you have to do is give them a platform, I think. So that's what I tried to do.

DEVIN STEWART: A voice.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: Yes, I guess. This is not a work of advocacy. I am in some ways kind of deconstructing the way that they tell their life stories, not in sort of jargon-y analytical terms, but I am

examining why they say things about their lives and what that really reflects about their identities.

But the character, for example, that didn't make it—I had an excellent story, just in terms of journalism, a totally amazing story. I found this character, a guy running a basement mosque in Midwood, in Brooklyn, underneath a bodega. He was a cool guy. He was reasonably well-read, but he was not actually an Islamic scholar. He was just trying to make an extra buck, so he opened a mosque, in the 1980s, in order to do that. As a result of his desire to make an extra buck, he started this kind of system whereby he would charge these guys in Lahore, his hometown in Pakistan, five grand to be sponsored as **imams** through his basement mosque. None of these guys actually had any religious credentials. He himself actually did not have any kind of religious credentials.

But he just kind of thought, "Oh, this is a little side business. This is the land of religious freedom. It shouldn't really be a big deal. This is New York. Everybody's on the hustle. Not a big deal."

Of course, it wasn't a big deal until 9/11. And then they see this guy with a basement mosque, from Pakistan, who is sponsoring imams who aren't really imams. So, he got swept for sponsoring terrorism, which absolutely, as I understand it, was not his agenda. In the process, his sons were also taken in, who were U.S. citizens.

I just thought this was such an interesting story, about how weird calculations and sort of rational decisions lead you to these kind of strange circumstances. You can find yourself making a series of decisions that logically lead, one after another. But then, instead of just going down the stairs, you find yourself in another county—these steps that take us on these weird journeys.

So I thought that was really great. But naturally, after being in detention for about six months without charge and without an attorney, they decided they didn't want to be exposed any further.

DEVIN STEWART: Identity is often the product of chaotic interactions as well. This is sort of your theme.

But going on to the other policy level—let's just get right to the chase—London, Berlin, and New York, which one did the best job of meeting with immigrant families and people? Which one was the most positive experience?

I know it's a totally unfair question.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: No, it's not at all. This is the one to think about. Up until 9/11, New York was the place. But it was completely by mistake. Immigrant-rights advocates have created certain systems by which New York operates at a rights-based level—and not just immigrant-rights advocates. We have a lot of social justice built into our bureaucracy here in the city and, as a result, in the state. Because of that, when the rest of the country was kind of dragging its feet on a lot of issues, New York refused to screen for status. There were tons and tons of protections and rights in place. Of course, all of that went out the window after 9/11.

So that was there. But I also think it's just the kind of hands-off nature of our government. In a place like Germany, where the government kind of is intimately involved with every aspect of your life—the government flosses your teeth, so to speak—

DEVIN STEWART: Do they say that?

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: No. I do. But because of that, I think in Germany you have this situation where the government has to have its fingers in every orifice, so to speak. Because of that, there is greater room for error. There is greater room for the institutionalization of injustice—well, not of injustice; let's call it the institutionalization of ignorance. You can create structures based on lack of information that ultimately create unjust circumstances. I think that happens in Germany more than anyplace else.

In the U.K., for example, they didn't really have an immigration concept. They had a postcolonial relationship. We are trained in the U.S., and especially in our generation, to think of postcolonial identity in these very sort of predatory terms. But if you talk to most people who migrated to the U.K., they migrated because they felt a sense of affinity or a sense of continuance, that they belonged to a certain place and they had a certain shared cultural identity as members of the commonwealth. That was not the case for Arab immigrants to the U.K. They were not members of the commonwealth. Because of that, their exclusion, even though they wouldn't have seen it as such—they came to the U.K. for certain reasons—their exclusion was more sort of fore-written.

So I guess, to answer your question directly, the place that does the best job is the United States. But—but, but, but—that said, that is because we are a nation of immigrants. But we're not the only one—

DEVIN STEWART: All countries are nations of immigrants. We're just the only one that says so.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: We're the only postcolonial—

DEVIN STEWART: Which country is not a nation of immigrants, really?

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: Absolutely. Migration is the eternal human condition. It's the oldest business, much more than prostitution is, the business of trying to move somewhere and make a living.

DEVIN STEWART: That's a different book.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: Yes, *Migration and Prostitution*.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: I really liked hearing about these stories. One of the things that jumped out to me was that you started out breaking down our idea of what the Muslim world is and our idea of what the West is. In each of the stories that you told, it really seemed to me that the focus was more on culture than religion. I'm curious about the spiritual component of these tensions you are talking about and this interplay between alienation and belonging. So much of the narrative that we are fed about why we should be scared of young Muslims in London—not to say we are overly fed that—

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: Oh, no. We can go ahead and say we are overly fed that.

QUESTIONER: I deliberately do not want to say that we are overly fed that.

But the narrative is, these people's parents came, things went sour for them, they had the choice to either—again, this is the caricature—they could either become young British teenagers or they could become everyday-at-the-mosque Muslims. It seems that either one of those choices offers the belonging aspect.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: Right, yes.

QUESTIONER: And the choice of whether or not to go for it within MTV or to go for it—these are all really horrible—but you know what I'm saying.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: Yes, I know where you're going.

QUESTIONER: To go straight to the mosque—that's really what I think is really interesting. I would like to hear you talk about it.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: I'm so glad you brought that up. I'm sorry I didn't address that sooner. I was very concerned that I wanted to approach this from a cultural and ethnic identity perspective, largely because I'm trying to appeal to this idea that the migration experience is universal and to try to find a bridge for empathy through that lens. My idea is that even if you are not an international migrant or a trans-border migrant, you are a migrant. Everyone migrates. Everyone leaves home for another home, whether it's your "womb," your mom's house, for your job or for your spouse's house. We all end up leaving and re-creating ourselves several times over. As we get older, it gets harder and harder.

I thought this would be sort of a starting point for bridge building and for connectedness.

Also this comes from a lack in my own experience. I am just not a scholar of Islam. I understand that there are certain differences. I understand there are different communities. But I just have not dedicated myself to the study of theology and spirituality.

But by the same token, I also think that this tension that's also thrust on us, in some ways, between modernity and traditionalism is a false construct. I think you can look in every society in the world and every religious category in the world and find people who either go secular or go fundamentalist. You can use either one to create division. People who go secular are not always the most tolerant and people who go fundamentalist are not always militant.

For example, I identify very strongly as a fairly devout Hindu, but that doesn't mean that I don't like wine, and I eat cheeseburgers. I grew up in North Carolina.

So I just don't see that being devout has to mean being rigid, and I don't see that being secular has to mean being—but that's just my own personal philosophy. I would love to see someone write that book, actually.

DEVIN STEWART: Do your interviewees ask you what religion you are before they are going to talk to you?

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: Yes. Oh, absolutely.

DEVIN STEWART: How did that go?

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: The first thing you always do is try to build a bridge with your characters.

DEVIN STEWART: Rapport.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: Yes, build rapport. I found that just by talking about my parents' migration experiences or my thoughts or even my personal experiences—at the time, I was 23 and unmarried and traipsing all over the world, wearing men's clothes, acting all unorthodox. I'm sure there were a number of people who—I felt, often, that my characters' families had a choice to make. They were either going to treat me like an outsider or treat me as one of them. If they were going to treat me as one of them, they were going to treat me as a daughter. So now I have three new sets of parents, which was a lot of fun.

DEVIN STEWART: Congratulations.

QUESTION: I'm interested in the development of political awareness and how that affected identity and how the two created a greater conception of a place and space and belonging, and also may have brought in other elements, such as religion or culture, and how all these things coalesced.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: I think that is absolutely key. If you just look at it, you'll find that pretty much all of my characters are on some level activists. I think that's because I was sort of toying with the idea of my own political identity a lot when I was working with this. How one develops an identity within a political framework is kind of—it's not something that a lot of people do. Becoming politically active is not a choice that a lot of people take.

So I feel like that is the one place where I didn't really show a lot of diversity in the experience. But I wanted to focus on people who did have that experience.

I think in their cases, you find this really interesting tension between the mythic home, personal experience, the symbolic relationship between personal experience and the mythic home, and the political agenda ultimately comes last.

I don't know if that addresses where you are going.

QUESTIONER: I'm interested in this kind of development of consciousness about the conflict and how the home country which you are in plays a part, and how you see yourself connected to both conflicts and where you see yourself as a citizen and as a participant.

Also, going back to almost this religious kind of identity, you have these angry young Muslims. It seems like they haven't read a verse in the Qur'an, but rather they are motivated by a real political grievance or concern, from which they then emerge as these young angry Muslims.

I was just interested in how that develops.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: I think one of the reasons I was so fascinated by talking about my character is that he is very, very politically aware, but is ardently secular. He identifies as a Palestinian, but is really one-quarter Palestinian. For him, the lack of homeland and the relationship to that land becomes more real, in many ways, than the place that he actually lives and the choices

that govern his life.

That said, there is a lot that I do to sort of examine this relationship between people of a nation who have no state versus people who are immigrants, but have this homeland to go back to and compare with and the touch-points. I think those of us who come from countries that exist have a certain luxury, where we can choose to either embrace or reject the traditions or the existence of that country. But I think people who come from countries that don't exist—and these are a multitude of peoples who have nations that they feel were never translated into states—those people, I think, have a different choice to make. I don't think the option is theirs to reject that heritage.

So the question then becomes how to embrace that heritage. This also goes to different levels of cultural identity. Cultural identity as we think of it can be determined on a number of different levels. You can access it through language, through family experience, through personal lifestyle choices, through religion, and also through political activism. With religion, what's so interesting, though, is, especially in Islam, this tenet that if you become a true Muslim, then you become a member of a borderless society, a society that is not just international, but is universal. So there's also that tension between the Muslim ideal and the Muslim reality, where most Muslim immigrant communities are extremely national-based and ethnicity-based.

That's starting to change, especially in the U.S. and the U.K. I don't know as much in Germany, largely because Turkish-Muslim identity is still trying to sort itself out. But I think here the political identity of these young immigrant communities, these diasporic Muslim communities that are starting to see each other as brothers in this shared political lobbying effort or this political awareness-building effort—as ambassadors, if you will, to the non-Muslim world, without feeling that there is a conflict in that—that, I think, is a place where this relationship between the immigrant identity, this borderless identity, the Muslim identity, and the national identity, the political identity, is starting to come together.

DEVIN STEWART: It's also seeming to dissolve as well. It would be interesting if we could achieve one world as well, rather than this mishmash of religions.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: Right.

QUESTION: This is kind of a quick question. In listening to your narratives, the thing that strikes me, as also an immigrant, is the huge difference between the civil-law tradition and the common-law tradition. Here in the United States and in the U.K., there is the common law. Where I grew up, which was Canada, there is also common law. Because of the flexibility of that kind of legal system, it seems like immigrants always feel like they can get a fair hearing, whereas when you go to a country like Germany and—I know you maybe didn't look at it—perhaps a country like France, where you have the civil-law tradition, there is not that kind of flexibility, and the laws are more top-down rather than bottom-up.

Do you feel that there is perhaps something to be said about the experience of immigrants in those two different kinds of societies that are built on different legal traditions?

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: This goes to our basic tension. How do you promote openness? How do you promote rights? In a society like Germany and France, even though they have very different, I think, political philosophies, in those countries you have this lag time between reality, the perception of reality, and then the reaction by the state to actually address that reality. We still have that same

lag time here, but our political realities are really not driven by our legal system.

I would say that, as not a legal scholar, that being my primary disclaimer: I am not a legal scholar.

I would like, actually, to leave the opportunity for comment to people who are legal scholars.

But as I understand it, I think the one caveat to that I would like to suggest is that when you have a legal system that is so heavily dependent on precedent, the opportunity for injustices that reinforce cultural norms is greater. If you have a precedent, like *Plessy v. Ferguson* or something, that reinforces or validates a cultural injustice, then you have room for creating a structure of ongoing injustice that I think may not be as possible in civil law.

However, in civil law, you have more opportunity for marginalization; I think a greater opportunity for people who fall outside of the system and are waiting to gain access to the system.

So in a situation like Germany, one of the greatest injustices that happens is, simply as a result of bureaucratic inefficiency, the number of people who are waiting for their asylum processes to finish is absolutely unconscionable. And since Germany doesn't have automatic citizenship rights for children who are born there, for people who are living out of status, their children are then born essentially stateless. You have a problem where a Western country is promoting statelessness, not as an active, conscious injustice, but simply by its inability to respond to the realities of its migration conditions—which I think is just outrageous.

DEVIN STEWART: Kavitha, that was an extremely nuanced, many-layered exposé of *Muslims of Metropolis: The Stories of Three Immigrant Families in the West*. Thank you very much for coming.

KAVITHA RAJAGOPALAN: Thank you. Thank you guys for coming.

Audio

How do Muslim immigrants to the West adjust to their new lives? Kavitha Rajagopalan follows three families on their journey: a Palestinian family from Jerusalem to London, a Kurdish family from Turkey to Berlin, and a Bangladeshi family to New York City.

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