In this interview, Akiedah Mohamed, a young female filmmaker from Cape Town, talks about her work and what being a Muslim means to her in the context of her filmmaking. She argues that in spite of all the usual representations to the contrary, the visual media have a potential for humanizing Muslims in the contemporary world.

**“Muslim” filmmaker**

Sindre: Would you define yourself as a “Muslim” filmmaker, and what, if anything, does being a “Muslim” filmmaker entail?

Akiedah: “Muslim” is such a loaded term in the same way as “Christian” or “Hindu” is in terms of identity. I deal with issues that affect me as a person who is Muslim, you know. That’s the best way I can describe the work that I do. I think the filmmakers and the writers often occupy the space of the outsider in order to see clearly. But at the end of the day, my experience of the world is so limited. My understanding of life, and of religion is only contained in what experiences I’ve had in life. So, I can’t speak with authority, and I don’t want to be seen as doing that.

Sindre: In an era in which the visual representations of Muslims worldwide are often limited to veiled Muslim women and gun-wielding Muslim men, do the documentaries of filmmakers such as Mohamed, which concentrate on the daily lives of ordinary Muslims in a secular context, seem to me to have a humanizing potential. How do you look upon the media representations of Muslims?

Akiedah: Often I think that even our understanding of what it means being a Muslim is quite limited. It’s limited to being in a mosque, or being on a musallah (prayer rug), or being in a prayer, or protesting against the situation in Israel and Palestine, or to being a terrorist. I think that there’s a frail human face to being Muslim that we don’t see in the media, one that Muslims experience in their intimate day to day lives, and this frailty is very important to me because it talks about our limitations and our struggle in a complex modern world. And in that lies the seed in a way, of our liberation, if we can find a way to accept our imperfections, and to make it an acceptable part of our journey through life.

Sindre: From your films I sense a very strong tendency towards representing voices that are, to a certain extent, marginal within the general Cape Muslim community: such as the co-wife in a polygamous marriage, the Muslim living with HIV/AIDS, the Qadari Sufi?

Akiedah: Yah, I think it’s a very conscious decision to explore a wider range of experiences of being Muslim. What you see generally in the public sphere are those who are in positions of authority. They have the voice, and their voice is what is represented as the ideal. Most of the documentaries I have made deal with women because I’m a woman, and there are issues which women face that are gender specific. Also, in terms of literature and in terms of the visual media, women are underrepresented. They make up the other half of the Muslim population. In some traditional aspects of religion women
are encouraged to cast their eyes down, not to speak too loudly, not to draw any attention to themselves in any way. This is seen as an ideal personality—I think that perhaps I’ve struggled with that because that hasn’t been who I was... What I like is that there exists within the Cape Muslim community an acceptance for being yourself. The Muslim women’s voices aren’t silent. They do laugh, they do talk, they do speak their minds.

Creating meaning through the “word”

Sindre: You have started writing poetry in primary school, and was further encouraged in your artistic endeavours by your former Jewish high school teacher. There is a connection between your foster father’s story-telling at weddings and funerals and your own need to express yourself artistically. The desire to integrate words and visuals is most apparent in Tales of the Tukumonis where poems by the Sufi poet Mevlana Jalaluddin Rumi is interwoven with the visuals. Does this point to you being a filmmaker whose inspiration is drawn from poetry?

Akiedah: For me, there’s something that is very, very magical about creating a meaning through the “word.” I always wanted to write. In terms of filmmaking, I'm still finding my feet, trying to understand filmmaking. What excites me about the film media is its ability to connect to people through the sharing of an experience, and perhaps by stimulating them to think about their experience. I think it is important to be able to find ways to share truth, or share ideas. We have lots of experiences of our own reality, or this world, that we don’t share with other people. But the assumption is that our experience of the world is the same as that of other people, but this is not so. The visual media allows me to portray to some extent, or to share with someone, how I’m experiencing this reality. This is difficult in light of the fact that reality or experience is affected by our current emotions or state of mind. This reality is not an absolute truth. It is only one way in order to begin to understand or make sense of our world, and to start engaging in that sort of dialogue.

The human connection

Sindre: Most of your documentaries have been commissioned by the state broadcaster in South Africa, the SABC. Being an independent filmmaker in a developing country where art is hardly the first of the state’s priorities and the limited market is at present saturated with documentary filmmakers is demanding. The independent filmmaker E-Tv, based in Cape Town, hoped to offer some opportunities for independent documentary filmmakers, has not commissioned local documentaries for years. SABC first started TV broadcasts in 1976, and the SABC News in particular lies in how we build that relationship: that’s why words are so essential. The media can be used—as we have already seen—to portray a kind of demonized expression of being Muslim. It can be used that way. So it stands to reason that it can also be used for its opposite. The key, I think, in the humanizing process, is twofold—it relies on how that reality is built up in the media, as well as on people’s relationship to the media.

Notes

1. This is largely true of representations of Muslims in South African post-apartheid media too. This topic is explored in a recent Ph.D. by Gabeba Baderoon titled Oblique Figures: Representations of Islam in South African Media and Culture (University of Cape Town, 2004).