

Subaltern Speaks Season 2, Episode 2 Transcript

Christina [00:00:05] Welcome to episode two of the second season of Subaltern Speaks.

My name is Christina Shivtahal and I am your new co-host for this season. Subaltern Speaks is a podcast created by the Multi-Faith Centre at the University of Toronto for spiritual study and practice, where we explore the legacies of colonialism across religions and spiritualities of colonized peoples otherwise known as the “subaltern” in Post-Colonial Studies. Joining me today is Karimah Rahman to discuss Muslim Indo-Caribbean representation and solidarity and what it means to be a part of the Muslim Indo-Caribbean diaspora in Canada. Karimah self-identifies as Muslim Indo-Caribbean descendant of indentured labourers from Trinidad and Guyana. Karimah is the founder of the Muslim Indo-Caribbean Collective and Muslim Indentureship Studies Center. She is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Policy Studies at X University, formerly known as Ryerson University where her focus is the intersectional marginalization, lack of representation and anti-Muslim racism towards Muslim Indo-Caribbeans as well as the marginalization of Indo-Caribbeans and Indentured Diasporic, Indian and South Asian spaces. Karimah is also a published author with works ranging from academic to spoken word. Her publications are featured in *Two Times Removed*, an anthology of Indo-Caribbean Fiction, as well as *Spoken Loud*, a faith-based medley of Muslim poetry and spoken word. Welcome Karimah, and thank you so much for joining me today. How are you doing?

Karimah [00:01:44] Thank you for having me, and I really appreciate this opportunity to be able to share this space with you, to be able to have these really important discussions. How are you doing today?

Christina [00:01:54] I am doing well. Thank you so much. I'm coming up on the end of the semester. So I'm really excited to get through the rest of the semester. But yes, thanks again for joining me. Today, in today's conversation, you know we seek to unpack Muslim Indo-Caribbean representation and solidarity in Canada. And to give our listeners an understanding of this representation, let's first jump into how representation is established. So with that, can I just ask who are Muslim Indo-Caribbeans? And how did Muslims arrive in the Caribbean and Canada?

Karimah [00:02:34] So before I answer my question, it's also important to ground ourselves and acknowledge that the foundation of Islam in the Caribbean region can be attributed to the labour of Black Muslims, both enslaved and free Black folks who were the first Muslims in the Caribbean. So with that understanding now that it's important to ground ourselves in unpacking what the term Muslim Indo-Caribbean is before addressing anything else. So Muslim Indo-Caribbeans can be defined as those who self-identify as both Muslim and Indo-Caribbean simultaneously who are at the intersection of both these identities. And it's usually within the context and positionality of descending from Musalman (Muslim) indentured labourers displaced by British, French, Dutch and Danish colonization from Hindostan, or what we consider Present-Day South Asia to the Caribbean since 1838, or descended from indentured labourers who are not Muslim or they themselves more recently chose the path of Islam. So not all those who do self-identify with being Muslim Indo-Caribbean descended from indentured labourers. There are cases of those who left Hindostan to the Caribbean, with agencies such as business owners, traders, sailors and merchants such as in the case of Barbados or most recent migrants from South Asia India, post-partition, so after 1947, who self-identify as Muslim and are located in the Caribbean or their descendants. But since indentureship is such a big part of this history and unpacking that idea of displacement, and a colonial displacement specifically with indentureship, we need to understand

this context in the Caribbean. It's important to note that approximately half a million South Asian Indian indentured labourers who were displaced to the Caribbean, and I choose to use the word displaced rather than arrived or arrival. And I'll explain this a little later on. So Hindus are approximately 85 percent and Muslim indentured labourers, according to the research of Afroz (2000) has it listed as being around approximately 16 percent. So Muslims were composed of many intersectional identities, positionalities and lived experiences. And if I break that down a little bit further, approximately 85 percent were from northern India, mainly northwestern provinces and the Bengal Presidency under the British Raj, mainly present day Uttar Pradesh and Bihar regions, spoke Indo Aryan languages such as Urdu, Bhojpuri, Awadhi, etc. and boarded the ships at the Calcutta port and referred to as Kalkatiyas. Approximately 15 percent are from southern India, the Madras Presidency under the British Raj and mainly Present-Day Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh spoke Dravidian languages such as Tamil, Telugu, Malayalam and bordered at the Madras, as well as Pondicherry ports and referred to as Madrassis in archival documents, which not many know is problematic racial slur for southern Indian. When we are looking at Muslim indentured labourers and their descendants, a majority of them are Sunni of the Hanafi madhab of fiqh (school of jurisprudence). There are Shiite, Sufi and Ahmadiyah minorities as well. But these Muslim Indo-Caribbeans then engage in another form of migration from the Caribbean to other locations, and that's really important to notice with saying that Canada, the United States, Europe such as England and France, and to a lesser extent,

Australia, New Zealand and the Middle East, among other locations such as across the Caribbean to other Caribbean countries, some even staying on for generations in search of economic prospects, upward mobility with Canada as being a very popular destination, coinciding with Canada's more quote unquote liberal immigration policies in the 1960s and 1970s.

Christina [00:6:04] Yes, yes.

Karimah [00:6:05] So this is important to look at how this is correlating at the same time. And then when we look at since 1908, there has been a presence of Indo-Caribbeans in Canada, which isn't very well known in the research of Rahim (2014). We do see that there is a presence of Indo-Caribbeans since that time period numbering approximately 200,000 in 2014. And with the Greater Toronto Area having the highest concentration. Now Muslim Indo-Caribbeans specifically remained a minority wherever they migrated to, and this includes within the migration to Canada and within the diaspora in Canada.

Christina [00:06:41] Right. So within the Indian Diaspora, what does the term twice removed signify and specifically, can you explain what this term means within the context of Muslim Indo-Caribbean?

Karimah [00:06:55] Muslim Indo-Caribbeans such as those in Canada are a community that are considered to be twice removed. It's a diaspora within a diaspora, within a diaspora, a minority within a minority, within a minority and Muslim Indo-Caribbeans experience this double dislocation. So they are a part of a double diaspora leaving South Asia for the Caribbean due to colonialism as indentured labourers and that type of colonial displacement, but then experiencing a second migration when their descendants migrated from the Caribbean. Also, the countries with the largest and overwhelming main Muslim Indo-Caribbean representation happen to be from Trinidad, Guyana and Suriname, and that leaves other Caribbean locations invisibilized, which is reproduced in the Canadian diaspora, and that's really important to acknowledge as well.

Christina [00:07:37] I think there we can also you know include, you know, New York and Toronto as being the main hubs for Muslim Indo-Caribbean representation and not not only just Muslim Indo-Caribbeans, but Indo-Caribbeans period. Let's talk about the term itself Muslim Indo-Caribbean and where this term derives from. Is this a new term in the Canadian context?

Karimah [00:08:03] I don't think it's as overt, that type of representation. I don't think that there has been a lot of mobility around the term Muslim Indo-Caribbean specifically within a Canadian context. And I feel like when we look at Muslim Indo-Caribbeans and the idea of what that that community encompasses, there isn't that much representation within the Canadian context. It's more now knowing that that term exists, and I haven't seen that term ever used. That was something that I basically used when I created the Muslim

Indo-Caribbean Collective because I did see the word Indo-Caribbean thrown around a lot and used in different contexts. But I didn't necessarily see the way that that term Indo-Caribbean was represented as encompassing what I saw myself as being. So that's why I thought it was important to also add the identity of being Muslim to it, because then that adds a different flavour to it, and that starts representing things that are usually unseen, when I just hear the term Indo-Caribbean. And there are different ways that Muslim Indo-Caribbean identity or what may encompass that has survived in Canada. Essentially a lot of the ways that you could see that unfold, I guess in more overt ways is the way that organizations were created, Muslim organizations in Canada and how that was created by what happens to be a lot of Guyanese and Trinidadian Muslims. So, for example, the Taric Masjid is one of the examples of a masjid that was mobilized from the community that happens to be what we understand as being the Muslim Indo-Caribbean community.

Christina [00:09:45] OK.

Karimah [00:09:46] And when we're looking at the term Muslim Indo-Caribbean, it's not a monolith. It's not a homogeneous group. It's not a community or community that is homogenous but comprised of multiple intersectional truths, identities, positionalities, lived experiences based on various cultures.

Christina [00:10:02] I agree. 100 percent. Yes, absolutely.

Karimah [00:10:04] So one other quick thing that's really important to mention is that when self-identification of being Muslim Indo-Caribbean, it's based within a wide range gamut of what each individual believes being Muslim, Muslimness and Indo-Caribbean, Indo-Caribbeanness is and what these identities mean to them based on their multiple intersectional positionalities and lived experiences which are so diverse and nuanced in Canada, and that needs to be emphasized that even within the context of Canada, it is very diverse and it's very nuanced. This is very personalized to every single person's lived experiences and all these identities, they're not a dichotomy, where one must choose one or the other, and loyalty or authenticity should not be lessened in identification with multiple identities simultaneously. And no self identification is quote unquote more Muslim into Caribbean than another.

Christina [00:10:48] Can we go back to the reference about Indian Arrival Day and the misuse of the term? Why is it important to identify the migration of Indians to the

Caribbean and elsewhere during indentureship as displacement rather than arrival?

Karimah [00:11:04] As I said earlier, I choose to use the language of how my Muslim, how my South Asian, Indian, indentured and laboured ancestors were displaced to the Caribbean rather than language of arrival or arrived. And this is the reason, the same reason why I don't celebrate Indian Arrival Day. And I think it's important to have this conversation that it's problematic to think of Indian Arrival Day as the first day Indians quote unquote arrived in the Caribbean. And when used in this context, what does arrival even entail and how do we know it has been achieved? So when we unpack arrival critically, we never truly arrived. Instead, we are in a process of constantly learning, unlearning colonial harm, decolonizing, resisting the violent history and intergenerational trauma that we experienced. So instead of celebrating this time, we should radically unpack indentureship's intergenerational, intersectional intergenerational trauma, how violence of indentureship is reproduced in our day to day intersectional lived experiences, and how it impacts mental health, indentured diaspora and Indo-Caribbean community.

Christina [00:12:04] Wow, these impacts to identity are crucial to understanding Muslim Indo-Caribbean identity and emphasizes the importance of having these conversations, so thank you for being so thorough in your explanation. One of the reasons I chose to do an episode on Muslim Indo-Caribbean representation was to highlight what you what you've just reiterated, what you've just stated, is that identity differs and it differs based on, you know, not just race, class and gender, but geographic location. It it differs based on having one parent, having two that were descendants of indentured. And one of the things I really wanted to highlight is that irrespective of the intersectionalities that creates, that are that are systems of power relations of oppression, it's important for all of us to understand and bearing in mind, I don't specifically identify as Muslim Indo-Caribbean. I do identify as

Indo-Caribbean as I was born in Guyana, and my family is predominantly Muslim, although I have a Hindu last name and was raised in a Christian Christian home. So, you know myself, even individually, I have various intersectional identities, but I think it's important to just acknowledge for our listeners that if you have, if you identify this way or if you identify in another way, it doesn't mean you're less less of, Muslim Indo-Caribbean and I really want to highlight that for our listeners talk to, you know, just to reiterate the point that all identities are relevant to the Muslim Indo-Caribbean representation and identity in Canada. I know that we just touched on Canada a little bit because I really want to just make sure we cover the Canadian content. But to cover the Caribbean context, as well as being, you know, people, women from the Caribbean, rather. In the Caribbean, Islam is represented by Indian, Syrian, Lebanese and African populations for the most part, which which based and as well as in Canada. And so those it varies identification as a Muslim. What do you think might be some practices that are specific to the Caribbean in terms of Islam? And how might those cultural practices or spiritual teachings and or interpretations differ based on geographic location? So, you know, you could jump into whether it's the Caribbean or Canada, but I'm interested to know how you how you feel they differ and how they might be similar?

Karimah [00:14:56] If I'm just going to take one example, Qaseedas, where religious songs of praise are sung by Muslims, this has evolved into a very unique Muslim

Indo-Caribbean musical art form that should be recognized and represented as

Indo-Caribbean form of music just like how bajans and chutney and tassa and tan-singing are recognized as being Indo-Caribbean. So Qaseedas were a musical tradition that were brought to the Caribbean by displaced indentured labourers from Hindostan rooted in Urdu. The tradition of

Qawwalis, ghazals, Na'ats that were popularized during the Mughal period in India, and over time, Qaseedas have developed into a unique Muslim

Indo-Caribbean expression due to many not having any formal or classical training by an ustad or teacher in this art form. So I learned to sing in Urdu from my mother, who won Qaseedas singing competitions in Trinidad and who comes from a musical family where many members would sing Qaseedas. And Urdu, along with Arabic is significant in Muslim Indo-Caribbean identity. When I think of the sound of Qaseedas sung at Qur'an Sharifs, Mouloud functions when I think of Qur'anic recitations, when I think of my father singing, saying his niyyah or intention when performing namaz or prayer in Urdu or the recitation of the Tazeem, 'ya nabi salaam alaika, ya rasul salaam alaika, ya habib salaam alaika...' as being examples of being a unique Muslim Indo-Caribbean expressions of identity. And these Qaseedas have been a method of colonial resistance, ancestral remembrance, knowledge production by my Muslim and indentured labourers, and a form of oral history, cultural memory, continuation of Islamic traditions, a connection with Allah and being able to deeply connect with my Muslim Indo-Caribbean identity as a form of healing and wellness through an Islamic lens in order to use knowledge from my community and tools from my own community and ancestral knowledge to decolonize mental health rather than relying on Western or Eurocentric and colonial understandings of mental health. So it's important to look at how did this one act could lead to so many other forms of healing and a source of colonial resistance and knowledge production among women as well, specifically as a sign of resistance against patriarchy by using their agency to promote singing amongst themselves and also in mixed public crowds. So in the same way that the Hindu maticoor dig dutty cultural events are viewed as being a site of resistance against patriarchy rich in Indo-Caribbean music, Qaseedas need to be seen as such as well, and at the same time

Christina [00:17:26] with the equivalent is what you're saying

Karimah [00:17:29] that it's another very important act of resistance for those women and to acknowledge our Muslim Indo-Caribbean identity is not limited to also Muslim overt religious expressions. Instead, Muslim Indo-Caribbean identity is a wide gamut that just happens to include these expressions, among others.

Christina [00:17:46] Right. Being mindful of the time, I think we have maybe room for one more question, Karimah, and it really encompasses, you know, some of, your work in the community and I'll ask you specifically. But I think it's important to to acknowledge that indentureship and the, I call it, the forced migration, I call it the relocation because that is what it is and the creolization of cultures, languages, foods, spiritualities and religions translate into these mixed social and cultural relations for Muslim Indo-Caribbeans in the Canadian, in the diaspora in Canada rather. And I think it's it's truly important to to acknowledge again the different intersectional identities and that prayers in one religion as a form of resistance or different forms of resistance, rather and female empowerment are equally important within Islam within the Indo-Caribbean identification. So again, we could chat for a really long time. But I just want to ask you specifically about community and what community means to you. You are, I know that you are, an accomplished spoken word artist. Talk to me a little bit about what the community means to you. And how do you connect with community, to not just in your positionality as an academic and public educator, but to, you know, for your personal social relations. I know spoken word can be very holistic in terms of processing a lot of the trauma, the generational trauma that I think sometimes is really avoided. And sometimes it's not really understood that we carry the trauma of

our ancestors. So how do you, how do you connect with community and what do you do to unwind?

Karimah [00:19:53] OK. These are all really important questions, so I'll start off with what does community mean to me and then I'll talk a little bit more about how I connect to it. So it's important to note that I'm talking from the lived experience of growing up in *Joe-Jog-Gay* which is colonially known as Québec, Montréal. And I've always had questions of who I am and where I come from, while surrounded by French speaking white people and being one of the few people of colour. And I think this question of who I am and where I come from is something that's very popular among those who are either born or were migrated to Canada at a young age. So that's really important to talk about in the Canadian context. The strong hatred towards me for who I am and other Muslims like me for simply being Muslim. It really pushed me closer towards the identities that resonated with me and made me, me. And created a longing for community for me. And I think that's where community really started to be important for me, is this longing for this community and this this space that I could be me or be more me than I could ever be before. And one thing for me is that when I was younger, I was never silent, and as a child, I kind of made this decision to follow the path of my ancestors and those who walked before me. So every opportunity I had, I kind of this was not, these are the words, these are the words that I learned now for what it was that I did when I was younger. So I did resist colonization and thinking that my ancestors did not resist and sacrifice for me to assimilate or feel the shame, rejection of my soul and self that whiteness tries to cast on those who are colonized for simply existing. So when I do resist colonization or whiteness in each action I take, I think of the sacrifices of my ancestors and their resistance each time I choose to assert my Muslim Indo-Caribbeanness and counter what whiteness imposes on me. And so much of this resistance is deeply linked to my Muslim Indo-Caribbean identity. And I get my strength from my community, and that's where I look at community. I look at community as being the strength because I was not physically in India, I was not physically in Trinidad,

I was not physically in Guyana or around my Indo-Caribbean community. Being in

Joe-Jog-Gay what's colonially known as Montréal like I was not around other Indo-Caribbean people, so I physically hold the strength of this community that means so much to me. These ancestors across these spaces, they guided me and continued to guide me in my day to day life so that I could unapologetically be me, a Muslim Indo-Caribbean. And that's the way that I set it up. That's the way I think of community. And that's the way that I look at it and then how I connect with it is that I have this vision for the future of what I want my legacy to be, and that's simply to make my ancestors proud. And I think of my artistic forms of expression through writing or spoken word as being these mediums of communication with me, my ancestors and future generations, so it becomes a way of immortalizing the journey of unpacking trauma, lived experiences, as well as hope and strength and being unapologetic.

Christina [00:22:53] Yes, yes.

Karimah [00:22:56] So it's, art becomes a way for me to explore who I am, my lived experiences, to share my journey of self identification and art is an expression of decolonization, of reclaiming my multiple intersectional identities and a form of colonial resistance and that's something that, I slowly want to be able to hone in to more and more. And I hope that my spoken word, my writing and I just the way I experience anti-Muslim racism, silencing, invisibilization and marginalization as a Muslim Indo-Caribbean in this Indo-Caribbean and Indentured Diasporic and Indian and South

Asian and Caribbean Muslim spaces, that's what influenced me to make my decision to start the Muslim

Indo-Caribbean Collective and MISC, on the side, while completing my Policy Studies Ph.D. So it's kind of like I consciously and unconsciously code switched in all these spaces. I was never able to express my true, true, authentic self. And I felt like I belonged nowhere yet I'm unapologetically me. I realize the need for a space where I and others with similar identities could be seen themselves and see themselves more thoughtfully represented. And I quickly realized that Indo-Caribbean, Indentured Diasporic, Indian, South Asian, Caribbean and Muslim spaces were not built for me in mind or my intersectional identities or positionalities in mind. So that's why I can't wait for these spaces, organizations, I can't wait for these spaces or organizations to finally represent me one day. So if these Indo-Caribbean organizations or spaces won't or other organizations, then I thought of it as an opportunity for me to also be able to create something that may be important to someone else who may have similar lived experiences. And another really important thing I want to say is that an Islamic lens of decolonization is also at the core of my work and my intentions with starting MICC and MISC and even in my later work and my artistic work, because I realized over the years that I am inherently acting in a decolonial lens when I practice what's at the core of Islam. And that's something that's not said enough that resisting colonization and oppression and to fight against oppression or to stand in solidarity, stand up for social justice with actions is a part of Islam. So these frameworks of anti-oppression are embedded at the core of Islam in the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, Peace be upon him. Yet many do not put this into action or practice, and that's where that gap is.

Christina [00:25:15] I agree a thousand percent and I think, you know, it's very important to to acknowledge that where you don't have where the spaces are not provided for you, you know, in the West, particularly and in institutions of higher learning. That's one thing I really like about the Multi-Faith Centre because it's a representation of all different spiritualities. And it acknowledges that because in many institutions of higher learning, those spaces are not provided for you. But like you said, where where the we carry these various layered identities. And you know, I really commend your work because where this this work in Muslim Indo-Caribbean representation, even Indo-Caribbean representation, there are there are many scholars before us. You know, being a Caribbean Studies student you know familiarizing myself with various scholars that came before me and paved the way for for women like us to speak today. But I think it's important to remind listeners that where the spaces are not there. That, you know, part of surviving and part of holding the legacy of our ancestors is to create those spaces. And if we can create those spaces individually, then that is the importance of solidarity and uniting to to come together and create those, those spaces that represent our unique identities. And with that, I just I just want to say thank you so much. This was a very in-depth conversation. You did give us a lot to think about. I really hope that listeners within the academic and non-academic, rather communities could both appreciate the importance of these discussions, respecting specifically Muslim Indo-Caribbean representation. And I really hope that this conversation connected, you know, many of the students in terms of finding a space here as Subaltern Speaks where you can identify with some of the conversations that we're having because they're really, really important. So I just want to thank you, Karimah. Thank you for your time. Best of luck with all of your endeavors, and I just want to thank our listeners today. Thank you so much for joining me today on the second episode of season two of Subaltern Speaks. Please head to Spotify, Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen to podcasts to tune into our latest episodes. Next month, please join my co-host Yasamin, where she will unpack Buddhism in the West. Until then, be safe and thanks for joining us.