

Art & Design



ANCESTRY,
MODERN DAY ROYALZ
BY
manal mirza

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illustrating identity and faith

reflections from Muslim illustrators

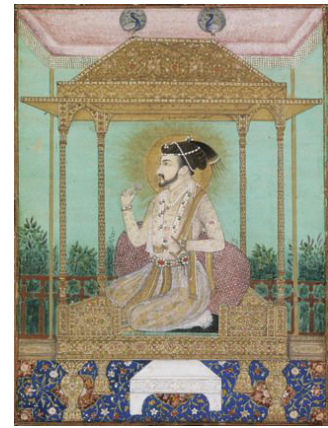
STORY BY

joy vanides deneen

ILLUSTRATIONS BY MANAL MIRZA
FROM THE BOOK *LITTLE PEOPLE, BIG DREAMS: MALALA YOUSAFZAI*

Illustration has the power to not only illuminate a text but provide new perspectives and stir emotions. For those who are part of historically underrepresented and marginalized communities, illustration can be used to express themes of identity, reclaim narratives and challenge negative portrayals in Western media. No group is a monolith, and with Muslims making up nearly a quarter of the world's population, there are countless diverse stories that need and deserve to be told. **Manal Mirza, Hatem Aly** and **Fahmida Azim** are three examples of Muslim illustrators who are exploring themes related to their faith and cultural identity, drawing from the past and present.





Pulling from the Past

Reference paintings for Manal's Modern Day Royalz series date back to the 17th century and include "Oval Portrait of Shah Jahan" (for "On the Train"), "Shah Jahan on the Peacock Throne" (for "Ancestry") and "Nobles of Shah Jahan" (for "Squad").

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Showcasing Strength

Born in the United States to Pakistani parents, Manal Mirza is a freelance UI/UX designer and illustrator based in Chicago. Her parents both went to art school in Pakistan, and she was always surrounded by art. Upon graduating from Columbia College, Manal began working a corporate job but also wanted to express her creative side. Every day after work she would illustrate and post her work on social media. “I was able to connect with the illustration community and other South Asian artists who were so welcoming and so excited to see other South Asian and Muslim creatives doing work,” she says. “It just grew from there.”

Fueled by a desire to take control over the narrative and push boundaries, Manal’s bold work showcases strong Muslim women. Her subjects are often wearing hijabs and beautifully patterned fabrics, and placed in scenarios not portrayed in the media. Her subjects exude confidence and strength, usually looking directly at the viewer. “This is how I see Muslim women: the women I grew up with, my friends, my cousins.”

She shares how she speaks to herself and other women in “Mirror Queen.” The piece depicts a woman looking into a hand mirror, with the words “Don’t be afraid of people” written in Urdu in the background. “Being a South Asian woman and a Muslim woman, you’re always scrutinized for something,” Manal says. “People are going to say whatever they want, so live your life. Try to look on the bright side of things and keep doing what you’re doing.”

While Manal’s work is quite contemporary, a number of her pieces have roots in the past. She first discovered South Asian miniature paintings hanging in her uncle’s home in Pakistan and was inspired by the tiny yet



TOUTES MARIANNE. DOCUMENTARY FILM POSTER ILLUSTRATION BY MANAL MIRZA

highly detailed works of art. These paintings flourished during the 16th to 18th centuries, when the Mughals ruled over an empire extending through India, Pakistan and Afghanistan. The paintings featured royalty as well as casual scenes. Manal decided to create the series Modern Day Royalz, integrating floral patterns and halo imagery from various miniatures to visually link her ancestry to the present day. “Our descendents are royalty, and we come from a rich cultural background,” Manal says. She wanted to “use our identity for empowerment, versus how Western society shows us just as immigrants. I like to showcase the subject as someone who looks like they have a sense of authority. They don’t scream royalty because they aren’t wearing a crown, but they have that attitude.”

It is entirely appropriate that Manal’s debut as a picture book illustrator would centre around the story of another strong Pakistani woman: activist and Nobel laureate Malala Yousafzai. The book is part of the best-selling series Little People, Big Dreams, by Maria Isabel Sánchez Vegara. Manal’s signature round and freckled cheeks are ever present throughout the brightly coloured pages, with her aesthetic adapted for a younger audience.



FROM THE BOOK LITTLE PEOPLE, BIG DREAMS: MALALA YOUSAFZAI



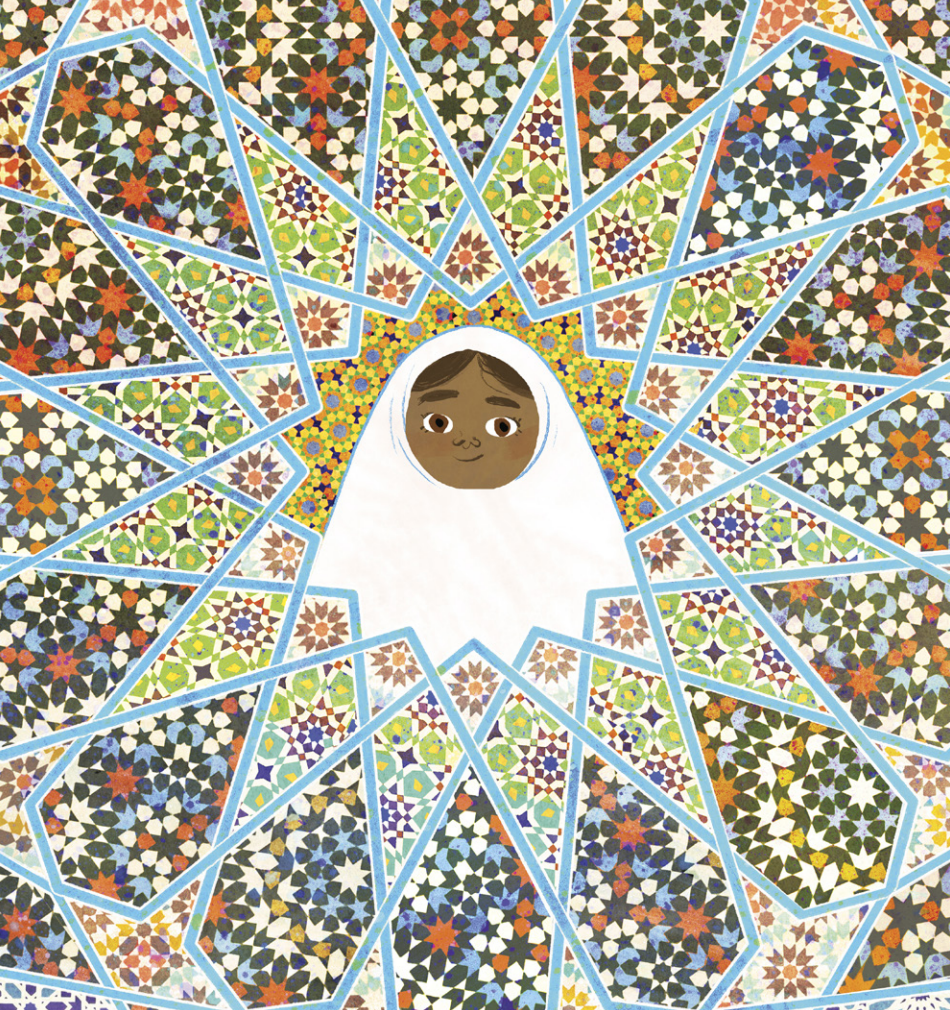
THE PROUDEST BLUE



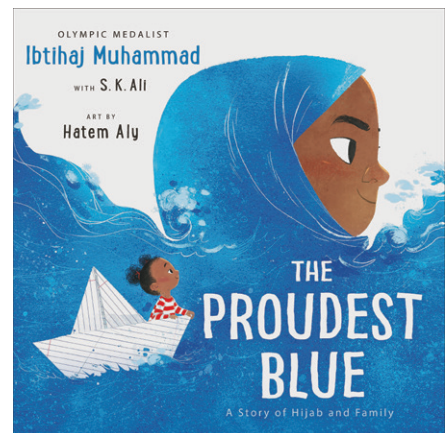
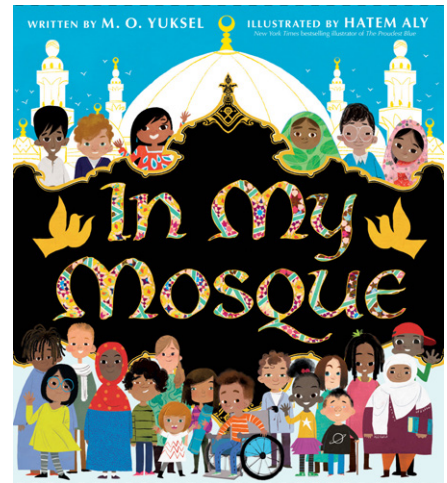
Patterns in Islamic Art

“Repeated patterns and motifs are common in Islamic art and can be found not just in mosques around the world, but also in general culture, such as books and architectural identities. Patterns, whether geometric, vegetal or calligraphic, were a way to communicate a spiritual yearning while avoiding the usage of live creatures as much as possible. That method of limitless shapes within shapes in a single abstract design that is contained but expanding was a means to express a sense of oneness or unity within divergent shapes. This is the major reason I created [this] page, largely patterns with a tiny child putting it all together in context with the text.” —Hatem Aly

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IN MY MOSQUE



IN MY MOSQUE





Creating Visual Intimacy

Born in Cairo, Egypt, Hatem Aly has always loved to draw and convey stories. According to his official bio, as a child he would “imagine shapes forming on the mosque’s carpet if he stared down long enough, which then swiftly disappeared and transformed into beautiful patterns when he looked up. He is pretty much the same as a grown-up, too.” Hatem received his bachelor of fine arts from the University of Helwan and now lives in New Brunswick, where he works as an illustrator and cartoonist.

One of his books includes the bestselling *The Proudest Blue: A Story of Hijab and Family* (written by Olympic medalist Ibtihaj Muhammad with S. K. Ali). This empowering picture book tells the story of the first day hijab for the eldest of two Muslim sisters. It is an exciting and significant rite of passage, and yet for the girls it is also a day of whispers and bullying. The story is told from the perspective of the younger sister, Faizah, a creative and smart little girl who looks up to her older sister. To accompany the lyrical text, Hatem created dynamic and moving imagery that highlights the brilliant blue of Asiya’s hijab and relegates the bullies to faceless shadows. Shifting between reality and dream-like sequences, Hatem “tried to give [Faizah] time to observe reality while also allowing her to process all of her ideas and feelings in order to create an opinion about what was going on and find her place in it.”

Hatem’s most recent picture book, *In My Mosque* (writ-

ten by M. O. Yuksel), is warm, welcoming and features 10 different mosques from around the world. His detailed colour illustrations are the result of extensive thought and research. When he received the manuscript, he admits that he grew anxious. “I’m familiar with mosques and all of the terms in the book, but I was concerned about how I could make it visually intimate,” Hatem explains. “You rapidly realize that, like languages, accents and cultures, things can be incredibly diverse even within the same category. I had to ‘leap’ from one mosque to the next throughout the book, so I wanted each page to stand out as much as possible. This presented some challenges, not only in terms of how to make it intimate in a subtle way while remaining authentic, but also in terms of how to incorporate my own experience.” Hatem began to sketch a few spreads, starting with the Al-Hakim mosque in his hometown of Cairo, as well as mosques in Uzbekistan and Turkey (where the author has roots). “As I sketched, I included more mosques and I found myself adding pigeons to a number of scenes. I’ve always noticed pigeons, as well as cats, outside various mosques, so it seemed natural to include them throughout the book, and things began to take shape nicely.” The final illustrations were rendered digitally, using scanned textures. At the onset of the pandemic, Hatem’s wife had been commissioned by their public librarian friend to sew masks. He scanned several fabric swatches to use as clothing patterns and textures throughout the book. “These fabrics were used in combination with other patterns I made on multiple pages, and they make me smile every time I see them.”



I've got angst about that and I need to get it out. On the other hand, I want more reasons to celebrate and enjoy being alive, because that's how we move forward."

One cause for celebration is Fahmida's award-winning debut book *Muslim Women Are Everything*. Written by Seema Yasmin, the book features 40 Muslim women and gender-nonconforming Muslims of past and present, through essays and dynamic portraits. Fahmida researched each subject to "figure out how they see themselves and want to be seen by others" and ultimately come up with "a cohesive way to honour them." For contemporary women like Brazilian thrash metal guitarist Gisele Marie Rocha and Malaysian pop star Yuna, there is a wealth of imagery and information available. However, creating a portrait of Fatima and Maryam al-Fihri (founders of the world's first university) proved particularly challenging, as the sisters lived in 800 AD Fez, Morocco. "I went around like a detective," Fahmida says, "piecing together what they might've been like back then. I looked into what people of their class and status would've worn, looked up manuscripts from that time in museum archives, gathered motifs from the architecture of the university and library they founded. For their faces, I decided to pull from a mixture of features from popular Moroccan idols, because I didn't want to leave it up to my imagination to decide what is or isn't considered ideal in their culture."

Taking Back the Narrative

At the age of six, Fahmida Azim moved to the United States from rural Bangladesh and grew up in Virginia and Washington, DC. "Growing up, I lived under shaky circumstances," Fahmida shares. "[This was] mostly due to my dad going bankrupt during the financial crisis and being denied better job opportunities due to his Muslimness in a post-9/11 DC. There were never enough resources to go around and that really shaped the direction of my life." Fahmida wasn't able to participate in extracurricular activities due to the prohibitive expenses, and because her family didn't have health insurance, anything involving athletics and risk of injury was out of the question. "Almost by default, my longest go-to activities usually involved reading and drawing," Fahmida says. "Being able to make my own images meant I wasn't at the mercy of anyone else's image of me."

Fahmida graduated from public art school in 2016, and while she previously worked in traditional mediums, she has moved to fully digital illustration. Her work explores themes of autonomy, identity and culture, blooming from "some mix of spite and joy; revenge and self-care. On the one hand, so much human cruelty is excused depending on the census boxes we're born into.



In addition to her book, Fahmida has created powerful editorial illustrations for publications such as the *New York Times*, NPR, *Vice* and the *Intercept*. Fahmida says that these projects have given her "the chance to see how public perceptions are made and reinforced or subverted through mass media. Being able to contribute my perspective has given me back some small amount of control over how people like me and my family are seen in the media." ¹



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