

World, This Is How I See You Now

On a sweltering day in the United Arab Emirates last March, I intently listened to a representative at the Jumeirah Mosque in Dubai explaining to a jumbled assortment of tourists why she wears an *abaya*. With eloquence, she demystified common misconceptions about the motivations behind her outfit of choice and the *hijab*, *niqab*, and *burqa*, gracefully answering naïve yet genuine questions concerning Islam. Afterward in Istanbul, I continued to explore magnificent mosques and masterful museums dedicated to Islamic arts, sciences, and history. Ten months later, a suspected member of the Islamic State killed ten people only 250 meters from my hotel.

I was born into a Christian family and raised in a noticeably white Christian community, in an environment rather unexposed to religious and ethnic diversity. By all standards, I was privileged; I lived in an affluent neighborhood and attended an acclaimed public high school. Reflecting on these formative years, I realize how little I considered the demographic uniformity of people in my life. I came to blindly adopt the political and social opinions associated with my family's faith, interpreting my experiences through the prism of privilege. I knew nothing of Islam, which would later become a controversial local and national issue.

I cannot pinpoint a moment wherein I experienced a revelation of sorts and dramatically transformed my worldview. Instead, the metamorphosis of my perspective – while certainly dramatic – occurred over time as I received a liberal arts education at the University of Washington. As an International Studies major with minors in European Studies, African Studies, and French, my professors and classes consistently exposed me to new structures of belief and understanding. I discovered a rich diversity that was previously foreign to me. I

rapidly consumed literature about feminism, world religions, human rights activism, histories of discrimination, and more. My education explicitly encouraged and indeed necessitated open-mindedness, self-reflection, and curiosity. Consequently, my worldview became more nuanced and informed, less narrow and predetermined. Moreover, my education advocated experiencing different cultures, which led me to Dubai and Istanbul last year.

These skills gained and values instilled by a valuable liberal arts education significantly shaped how I understand Islam. Even in a liberal locale like Seattle, the influence of Islam is still controversial, especially with the presence of migrant communities from East Africa. Unquestionably, Islam has taken center-stage at a national level, a focus propelled by fear of the Islamic State and motivated by ignorance and intolerance, evident in the alarmingly rhetoric of certain presidential candidates. In addition to poignant classes on the Middle East and the history of Islam, a particular project I undertook this year was greatly impactful. This autumn, I interviewed six women from the UW Muslim Students Association about feminism. These incredibly articulate students granted me insight into their experiences as Muslim women. In turn, I share their stories of empowerment and agency, and confront Islamophobia. These interviews, inspired by my liberal arts education, challenged and redefined how I saw Islam – and, consequently, the world.