Muslim Americans face compromising identity when their names are altered for convenience.

What’s in a Name?

BY KIRAN ANSARI

IN “ROMEO AND JULIET,” SHAKESPEARE ASKS: “WHAT'S IN A NAME? THAT WHICH WE CALL A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME WOULD SMELL AS SWEET.”

Apparently he wasn’t a Muslim living in the West where a Muslim name can arouse suspicions during airport screenings, result in fewer job interviews, or taunts from school bullies.

When Abeer Najjar transferred schools in fifth grade, someone asked if they could call her Abby. Having been teased about her name for what seemed like an eternity in the eyes of a child, she agreed.

“A part of me didn’t like it, but a part of me thought it would be so much easier,” Najjar said.

Najjar and her siblings were born and raised in the United States. They attended public schools and lived in mixed neighborhoods. Several other children had “weird-sounding” names but “A-heer” often stood out. Looking back, the now 26-year-old feels what used to be annoying actually shaped her personality and armed her with comebacks. She doesn’t want to live as Abby for the rest of her life, so sometimes she chuckles along and at other times she has a witty response.

TO KEEP OR TO SHORTEN?

In college, Abeer reverted to her given name using the opportunity to reintroduce herself. She still got the occasional puzzled face or smirk, but for the most part felt many college professors actually were accommodating and asked how to pronounce her name.

It’s not just Muslims who have different names. Many ethnic communities struggle with multi-syllable names that are even harder to pronounce. The issue, however, is some Muslim names come with extra baggage that raises red flags.

Whenever there is a terrorist attack anywhere in the world, Muslims wait to hear the names of the suspects. While the perpetrators could belong to any faith group, the Muslim community is always on edge during such times.

To prevent their children from being teased, some Muslim families may choose “easier” names, like Sarah or Adam, that can blend seamlessly into society. Others may Anglicize their given names, turning Yaqub into Jacob, for ease or to assimilate. Muslim professionals, especially those who engage more with the public, such as car dealers and brokers, change their names entirely because it’s easier for customers to relate with a Dave rather than a Dawood.

Dr. Asma Mobin-Uddin, a physician and author, says Muslims should not second guess why people change their names and should respect their decision, realizing there might be deeper reasons.

She urges parents to not make a big deal, if their teenage children go through a phase where they shorten their names to fit in. As children mature and approach young adulthood, they naturally may become reattached to their given Muslim name and develop a new appreciation for it.

“A name is intimately connected with a person’s identity,” Mobin-Uddin said. “In my children’s book, ‘My Name is Bilal,’ Bilal’s name is a metaphor for his Islamic identity. Bilal initially doesn’t like the way his name makes him feel different from his classmates. But he grows to value it and gain strength from it. I really want kids to be at a place in their hearts where they can cherish their Muslim names as symbols of their Islamic identity and not wish to hide them. But kids have to get to this place themselves. We as adults cannot force this acceptance on them. We can only encourage them.”

Some Muslims argue people should use good judgment when shortening names. Mohammed, for instance, is one of the most revered and popular names among Muslims because of its association with Islam’s last Prophet. It is a common enough name for people to recognize and pronounce, therefore it may be considered disrespectful for someone named Mohammed to go by “Mo” instead.
Yes, it can be annoying at times, but if it’s any comfort, Muslim American kids should know that they are a part of a nation where you can have a very different name and still get elected to live in the White House — twice.

CHOOSING A BABY NAME

Mobin-Uddin believes it can be tough on children who don’t have a choice about having a name that may come with extra baggage. She encourages parents when naming their child to first choose a name with good meaning to reflect the guidance of Prophet Muhammad (Salla allahu ‘alayhi was sallam).

The Prophet said: “You will be called on the Day of Resurrection by your names and the names of your fathers, so have good names.” (Abu Dawud)

She also urged parents to avoid names with negative sounding transliterations in English, and to have a native English speaker read out the name to see how they would pronounce it. At times, a simple spelling tweak can make all the difference.

Having her own name often misrepresented as “asthma,” Mobin-Uddin says even though parents should make a conscientious decision, they cannot be prepared for everything. For instance, she has had people ask her why she named her son Hamza, when Muslims are not fond of pigs and don’t eat ham.

While Muslim immigrants with traditional names don’t have much of a choice, naming a child “lihad” in 2013 poses obvious reasons.

“Osama” next door doesn’t fit the stereotype. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, minorities now make up about one-third of the population and are projected to become more than half (54 percent) of the population by 2050. Foreign sounding names are more commonplace today, and it’s up to Muslim families to decide whether compromising their identity and giving up a rich tradition of naming children after prophets and their companions is worth it to assimilate into American society.

While it can be a nuisance at times, American Muslim children can take comfort in being part of a nation where one can have a different name and still get elected president — twice.

Kiran Ansari is a writer and entrepreneur in Chicago. She has been asked to go by Karen since its easier for others, but she prefers to stick to her given name, because that’s easier for her.

CHOOSING A NEW NAME

When Madhu Krishnamurthy embraced Islam in college 17 years ago, she learned that it was not necessary to change her name and so she didn’t. It wasn’t until a few years later when she started wearing hijab — head covering worn by Muslims — and began attending Islamic gatherings and lectures that she realized her name confused people and that she would have to explain her conversion story to absolute strangers. The obvious clash prompted her to adopt a Muslim name she uses in Islamic circles.

“When I haven’t officially changed my name and gone through the hassle of all the paperwork, I am now used to responding to two names,” Krishnamurthy says. “After researching many Muslim names and their meanings, I decided to go by Madihah in my Muslim social circles, partly because I liked the meaning — praiseworthy — and also because I had a childhood friend by that name and she was called Madhu at home. It just seemed to fit.”

Having a “different” name can be an opportunity to break stereotypes. If someone has a generous neighbor who always shares steaks when he grills and helps shovel the snow, he is showing by example that the “Osama” next door doesn’t fit the stereotype.

Electronically, ISNA can receive your donation each month automatically from your bank account or credit card, saving you postage and time.

Be a key that opens the door to ISNA’s long-term financial stability:

Donate through EFT! www.isna.net/donate