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# **Visibility at the Margins: Navigating Cultural Burdens and Belonging Among South Asian Queer Muslim Women**

**Prof Dr Souzeina Mushtaq**

*University of Wisconsin  
River Falls, USA*

## **Abstract**

This paper examines how queer Muslim women with South Asian roots negotiate culture as both a constraining force and a vital source of belonging. Drawing on ethnographic interviews and narrative analysis, the study conceptualizes “culture” as the moral frameworks, social expectations, and inherited values transmitted through immigrant families or shaped by early life in the Indian subcontinent. The paper first traces the historical entanglement of Islam and South Asian cultural practices, demonstrating how centuries of religious–cultural hybridity have blurred distinctions between faith and tradition. This context provides the foundation for understanding the uniquely South Asian Muslim identity that informs participants’ experiences. The second section explores how religion and ethnicity intersect to form a cultural religious identity that is especially salient for immigrant communities. While religion structures group belonging, it is culture that offers emotional, social, and communal support, and yet also reinforces normative expectations around gender and sexuality. The third section analyzes participants’ accounts of how cultural norms shape their lives. For many, culture provides a sense of continuity and identity beyond religion. Simultaneously, it imposes restrictive expectations in which queerness is framed as pathology, dishonor, or moral failure, producing profound tensions for queer Muslim women navigating self acceptance. Finally, the paper examines how South Asian LGBTQ+ groups create alternative spaces of refuge. These culturally grounded communities offer affirmation often absent in mainstream white LGBTQ+ settings, enabling participants to reconcile their identities without relinquishing cultural belonging.

**Keywords:** Queer Muslim women; LGBTQ Studies; Politics of Sexuality; Sexual and Gender Diversities; South Asian Cultural Identity