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From the Subcontinent to Darien, Local Author Becomes TV Scriptwriter, Later Faces Social Media Mob

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Years after she left her job as a scriptwriter for the prime-time television series "Quantico," Darien resident Sharbari Ahmed recently found herself a target on social media.

It was made up of Twitter and Facebook users who were outraged that the show had a recent episode in which Hindu nationalist characters plotted a terrorist act that would be blamed on Muslims.

Ahmed, a Muslim who came to the United States from Bangladesh when she was an infant, hadn't even been working with the TV program for the past two seasons. Yet she found herself being attacked online, with more and more Twitter and Facebook users piling on with retweets, "likes" and comment after comment accusing her of attacking Hindus.

While many Muslims peacefully live in India, as do Hindus in Bangladesh and even Pakistan, there's a lot of tension on the Subcontinent between many members of either religion, against the other.

On Twitter, Sharbari had criticized Hindu nationalists and violence attributed to them in India. She is against violence from any group, she says, including Muslims, and she doesn't support Muslim extremists.

"Quantico," recently cancelled by ABC after the show's third season, had a diverse cast, including a Bollywood star, Priyanka Chopra, and the show's episodes would get broadcast in India about a week after they were on television in the United States. Ahmed had left the show after the first year, after the man who had hired her left. By the third season, the entire script-writing team had been replaced.

She wasn't even watching the show anymore, so one morning early this month, when she first saw a tweet condemning her for an attack on Hindu nationalists in India, she thought someone must have mistakenly assumed she'd written something in the first season that was thought to be offensive. So her first reaction was to ignore it.

But the online snowball was now rolling, and the attacks mounted.

The mob "was attacking both me and Priyanka Chopra," Ahmed said. "I was used to getting attacked for Quantico," she said, but that had long ago died away. This was more intense.

Because she was listed as one of the show's writers on websites like International Movie Database ("along with, mind you, 300 other writers") "everyone decided that I had been the one who wrote it, simply because my name is 'Ahmed'" -- a Muslim name.

After the initial attacks, "the campaign of trolling and intimidation began. I just thought that if I told them the facts [...] they would say, 'Oh, sorry. My bad.' But they ignored that because it was a lynch-mob mentality. They didn't care. They had to castigate somebody."

She wasn't just verbally attacked (although there were no off-line incidents).

"There were a couple of things that were a little scary," she said, referring to online threats. If they only came from the other side of the world, she said, she would have been less bothered by them, but there are plenty of Hindu nationalists in the United States, now. She didn't contact Darien police about the threats, but if it happened again, Ahmed said, she would.

After the attacks started against her, Chopra and the show, [ABC put out a statement](#). The network "apologized to them, and that changed the game," she said. For the worse.

"That started a new wave of attacks on me. I understand it [as a strategic move on the part of ABC] but ... it

emboldened them." She didn't think the network owed an apology to anyone, since the episode, from what she knows of it, was meant to portray a fictional organization, not all Hindus or even all Hindu nationalists.

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She found that it simply didn't matter to many of the people attacking her what she said or what the facts are. Once the ball got rolling, the mob was only interested in venting its anger, in this case, against Muslims seen as victimizing Hindus.

On *Quantico*

Ahmed didn't have any experience scriptwriting on a team for a television show, although she had written an off-Broadway play, *Raisins Not Virgins*, that had been adapted to a short film and nominated in the Tribeca Film Festival. She has published a collection of short stories, *The Ocean of Mrs. Nagai*.

When one of the original producers of *Quantico* was looking for a diverse group of writers, including Muslims (and also Hindus and even Quakers), a mutual friend got in touch with Ahmed, and she was hired.

The show is produced in Brooklyn, and Ahmed would make a two-hour commute to get there.

She found the experience quite a jump from writing her own scripts for the theater, she said.

"In a room I was all alone, writing by myself," she said. Now she was one of a team of scriptwriters, "who all have minds like steel traps, who all are funny and who all have their own ideas." It was their job to "push the vision of the show runner," she said.

She had to learn how to pitch story ideas, "and you have to be quick. [...] I think of all the times I didn't speak up and the pitch that was in my head was spoken by someone else."

When she came up with a good idea, everyone was happy, she said. If not, the idea was quickly shot down.

By the end of *Quantico*'s first season, the executive producer who hired her quit after some creative differences, and the long commute was getting her to the point of burning out, so she left, too. By the third and last season, the show had an entirely different team of writers.

Muslim in America

Born in Bangladesh, she immigrated to the United States with her family when she was still an infant. Her family settled in Chester, where she spent her first seven years.

Then her father started working with UNICEF and was named the "UNICEF ambassador" for Ethiopia, where she spent another five years of her childhood. Later, she lived in Manhattan.

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Ahmed received her bachelor's degree from Marymount College, now part of Fordham University, and got a master's degree in creative writing from New York University.

She's lived in Darien with her son for almost 11 years, after moving here from White Plains ("a lot of taxes for not a great education").

Ahmed doesn't attend a Mosque, but she is a Muslim, and in the past year she was a panelist at a "Meet Your Muslim Neighbor" event sponsored by St. Luke's Parish. "It was packed," she said. "What I felt was the strong sense of community in Darien. A desire to make people feel wanted and welcome and safe."

Some parishioners at St. Luke's helped with Connecticut people opening their homes to Syrian refugees.

"Darien continues to surprise me in these ways. There is a strong sense of community in this town, which is sometimes obscured by the wealth."

Ahmed is currently working on a new novel and just got a book deal from a publisher. She can't say anything about the book, but she did say she was grateful for the help she received with research at Darien Library.