

A Giver of Gifts

Azra Momin gets up close and personal with paper-crafting maven Hafsa Taher.

Hafsa Taher, dreamer and dabbler, creator of beautiful things, is on the phone with me. This is the first time we are communicating without typing. Her voice is chirpy, an extension of her online personality.

"OK," I say. "Describe Hafsa to me - who is she?"

A moment's pause, then "Passionate!" she exclaims. "Passionate, emotional, supportive. I'm passionate about other people's causes. I love helping people out. I strongly believe that helping someone, even if they have a similar business, will not lessen my own opportunities, insha Allah."

This giving nature extends to her business aesthetic. It's not about what she creates, she says, since she experiments with so many art products, but what it becomes in her clients' hands. "Behind everything I make is the experience of giving a gift to someone."

Although Hafsa says she did not intend to cater specifically to the Muslim market, she seems to have carved a niche for herself there, especially with gift items. She makes book tags with Qur'anic reminders, greeting cards, paper rose arrangements and her most popular item, ceramic mugs with witty messages on them. At first, she was writing each caption by hand, then she bought a vinyl-cutting machine to do the lettering. She has now transitioned to a machine that will directly print the captions on to the mugs, making them permanent, although it was a big investment. This growth is a testament to her dedication. With barely two years in business, she has already made great strides in setting it up, especially online.

"I live in my own little online world," she laughs. "I'm a people person - I'm always on social media - checking out the work of other artists, talking to them, helping others."

Google her business name, HafsaCreates, and a whole bunch of pages will pop up. Her online store at Etsy has a regular flurry of orders, and she keeps her social media accounts similarly humming with activity. You can find her regularly on Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest and Instagram, sharing her creations, initiating discussions, asking questions and generally engaging with her audience. This year, Hafsa also has a space in a brick-and-mortar store in Toronto, called Kaamilah.

Founded by Torontonian Farheen Khan, the store is run by the vendors, "We are eight vendors in the boutique and each helps with different facets of the business - from marketing to events. I help out on their social media side and with kids' crafts at events."

Going way back, Hafsa says, when she was little, she rebelled against 'girly' crafts. "Growing up, my sister did crochet, knitting, cross stitch - but not me. Perhaps because it was so cliched for girls to be limited to such arts, I revolted against it - by non-participation," she explains.

Nevertheless, the past 10 years have found her dabbling in crafts off and on, "I made random gifts here and there for friends. Also, I used to craft, paint and make cards with my niece as she was growing up." She made bookmarks for a swap, and this was sort of a turning point that pivoted her into the world of crafting in a professional capacity. "It was something simple. I typed the text in a fancy font and created a bookmark template on MS word. Printed it out, punched a hole in it and decorated it with a tassel." But that simple bookmark put in motion the wheels of her crafting business.

"I still make bookmarks," she says, "But they look quite a bit different now."

Ironically, the profession she studied and practises is in the realm of information technology. "I'm an IT business analyst. I work with businesses and business processes and how they relate to technology." Two years ago, though, she was in between jobs and had a couple of weeks off. Bam! It was just the catalyst she needed, and she launched HafsaCreates.

She is back in IT now, so her day is spent at work as a business analyst. Does she dream of her next craft project while she's at work? "All the time!" says the busy entrepreneur. "After work, when I'm home - that's my HafsaCreates time. Depending on what day of the week it is, Monday through Wednesday is content building, networking, and invoicing type of work. Thursday to Saturday, I'm on a tight schedule to finish my week's orders for Sunday's shipment and drop off at Kaamilah.

I've spent about 100-250 hours every month for the past year or so immersed in my craft business. According to Malcolm Gladwell, if you spend 10,000 hours doing something, you become absolutely awesome at it. So far, I'm about a third of the way there."

That's a lot of time she spends crafting. What inspires her? What motivates her?

"My niece and nephew for sure! And I'm always inspired by artists in the virtual world around me, whose work I follow on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter. My motivation is my passion. When I'm working away, I forget that I'm hungry or that I'm sick. I'm way too engrossed in what I'm doing."





So who is all this work geared towards?

"Well, my target market is women in the 25-40 age group, from the US, UK and Far East Asia. These women are looking for products and gifts that define who they are. They walk into a Hallmark store and find a gift that's related to one part of their lives. Yes, it's a gift for a "mom" - but the mom's a Muslim, and she's called Ammi or Amu, only Hallmark doesn't know that. That's where I come in - gifts and products that you can relate to 100%!"

Hafsa's 'Eid cards are a big hit, for instance, and so are the paper roses she creates in her favourite pastel shades, encased in box frames with Qur'anic reminders etched on the glass. And then, of course, there are the mugs. "No one in the market had mugs like mine. I came up with captions my target customers could relate to, something that would make them go 'Oh, that's perfect for so-and-so! It's just what I need to get them!'"

So she has mugs that say Habibi and Habibti in gold Arabic lettering, or "All I need today is a little bit of tea and a whole lot of duas" with a corresponding one for coffee lovers. There's also "Keep calm and love Jamal (or Jamila)". These are certainly not your run-of-the-mill mugs and they are flying off her shelves, with more sales to look forward to. "I've been at Kaamilah for three months so far - and I'm told Ramadhan and summers are super busy."

Her words of advice to wannabe entrepreneurs?
 "Start small and dream big. Just start. Watch a video tutorial, research techniques, attend a workshop, create something.

Whatever small step it is - it is a big leap towards your goal!"

What's next in the works for her?

"The best part of my business is learning! I love the control I have over it. No approvals or applications required. I create new products within days and sometimes even abandon some if they don't excite me any more. Because of this very reason, I don't know where I'll be in five years. This is my second year in business and insha Allah, I plan to triple my income from last year. I was speaking to a friend the other day, and we were talking about an ideal world - one with no constraints - none at all! My 'job' would be to live with other artists, creating, learning all day. And to give back, I would hire trainers to teach art to the public for free. So they could make art for a living, and be self-sufficient."

"I don't know if that's too idealistic or dreamy. But it's a thought", she muses.

Whichever your social media preference is, you will find HafsaCreates there. Look for her on Etsy, Facebook, Twitter, Pinterest, Instagram and of course she has her own website - <http://HafsaCreates.com>

Azra Momin paints, makes jewellery and illustrates books, not necessarily in that order. In previous eras, her job titles have included interior designer, content editor, freelance writer and teacher. Mostly though, she likes to spend time with her favourite critics, her husband and daughter; read mystery novels and dream about living in an earth ship.