

Islam, Gender, Laughter and Happy Ever After?
A Study of Humour as Affect in
British Comedy Representations of Muslim Women.

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Chapter 1: Introduction - Thematizing Religion, Gender and Humour

This thesis topic was born almost by accident out of the experience of watching an ostensibly “serious” documentary, in which a born Muslim woman interviews converts to Islam and is astonished by the devotion with which they enter into their new faith. She is struck by the sacrifices that they make, giving up alcohol and partying, and changing the way they dress. While there is much to be said about this documentary analytically,¹ what struck me most on first viewing was the converts’ senses of humour. Faced with (sometimes) patronising questions, the women joked and bantered their way out of trouble, while at the same time building a friendly rapport with the interviewer. The fact that this surprised me led me to wonder - what are my own assumptions about the sense of humour of religious (in this case, Muslim) women? Where do these assumptions derive from? Who decides what (or who) is funny? In other words, how do dynamics of power influence how humour is expressed and received? This thesis explores these questions by engaging with a selection of comedic material produced by and/or about Muslim women in the British context in the last decade. My research examines both how Muslim women are represented and represent *themselves* through comedy, and how a wider audience engages with these representations in reviews and public commentaries.

1.1 Emotion and religious studies

Having taken a “shortcut” to reach these questions, I began to reflect on how this research interest relates to various academic fields. This research brings us into a complex, interdisciplinary web of religion, gender and humour, fuelled by approaches from cultural studies, affect theory and queer theory. To begin, let us situate this research into humour in the broader field of the study of emotion and culture.

In a 1991 article entitled “Experience”, historian Joan Scott argues that experience is always, in some sense, socially and linguistically constructed. Emotion is something integral to social and interpersonal practice, which we assess and value publicly. For example, we may perform gestures of friendship (in-jokes, physical contact), that *feel* spontaneous, but are nonetheless socially acquired. In my approach to emotion, I am influenced by Sara Ahmed’s theorization of the ‘sociality of emotions’ (2014, 9). In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), Ahmed discusses the work emotions do on individual and collective bodies, how they ‘circulate *between* bodies’, how they ‘stick’ and how they ‘move’ (ibid, 4). Essential to this understanding of emotions in motion is her view that:

¹ See Spoliar and van den Brandt (2020) for a full analysis.

Emotions are not “in” either the individual or the social, but produce the very... boundaries that allow the individual and the social to be delineated as if they are objects (ibid, 10).

These emotions, Ahmed goes on to add, have a history. This history may be personal or collective (or a combination of the two). Giving the example of the role of emotions in feminist acts of “speaking out”, Ahmed notes that the ways women express emotion and the ways they are *heard* are ‘deeply bound up with gendered histories of imperialism and capitalism, in which violence against the bodies of subaltern women is both granted and taken for granted’ (ibid, 170). To cut a long story short, emotions *do* things to us and allow us to do things; ‘to act and be acted upon’ (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, 1), to affect and be affected (Ahmed, 2014, 208). We find a similar line of thought in the work of Gilles Deleuze, a founding affect theorist, who claims that ‘this capacity for affecting and being affected... also defines a body in its individuality’ (Deleuze, 1992, 625). In an article concerning the history of emotions, Monique Scheer identifies a particular Western conception of the self, which distinguishes reason and emotions, both of which are cultivated ‘at certain times in specific social and cultural constellations’ (Scheer, 2012, 200). As a result, emotions ‘change over time’ as norms, expectations and ‘the practices in which they are embodied... undergo transformation’ (ibid, 220). Seen in this way, emotion represents a promising lens through which to explore culturally specific structures of power, inclusion and exclusion.

Until very recently, emotion was a largely neglected field of research in religious studies. There is an irony to this, given that the prevailing response when one tells people from outside the discipline that one studies religion is: “are you religious?” - the implication being that, to be interested in religion, you have to “feel” it. In *Feeling Religion*, John Corrigan brings emotion to the forefront, arguing that ‘A great many aspects of religion can be critically explored and creatively interrelated through a focus on emotion’ (2018, 19). Similarly, in *Religious Affects*, Donovan Schaefer labels emotions the ‘chunky raw materials’ that materialize ‘the contact zone between bodies and worlds’ and permeate lived religion (2015, 67). What I set out here is, of course, a very simplified introduction to affect theory as it intersects with religious studies. In this introduction, I will bring the threads of this framework into dialogue with the intersecting dimensions of my own research; namely, gender, humour, and religion.

1.2 Emotion-as-practice: religion, power and gender performativity

Essential to the research approach of this thesis is the notion of “emotions-as-practice” (Scheer, 2012), or as ways of engaging with the world and other people. Through the repetition of certain embodied behaviours (e.g. posture, facial expression), we “learn” to manifest emotions in ways that are readable to others, and yet still *feel* spontaneous. For example, when a person experiences pain or distress, they may respond with

‘hunched shoulders... angry words... spewed out’ (Gaddini, 2019, 411). In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler argues that gender and sexuality are not fixed categories but socially constituted, politically regulated and embodied formulations that find expression ‘through a *stylized repetition* of acts’ (1990, 191). These stylized acts include ways of dressing and speaking, but also the repertoire of emotions available and the terms in which these emotions can be expressed. While the categories of gender and sexuality are socially and politically regulated, this does not mean that they are fixed; rather, ‘gender proves to be performative’ (ibid, 31), and this performativity also applies in religious contexts.

Drawing on feminist, political scientific and cultural theory, Sanna Valkonen and Sandra Wallenius-Korkalu (2015) explore how gendered religious control is embodied in Firstborn Laestidianism. Specifically, and pertinently given the topic of this thesis, the authors give the example of women’s laughter in the Laestidian tradition: in this context, ‘a laughing woman transgresses the boundary of what is considered the suitable gendered (religious) bodily subject’ (2015, 9). What is striking here is that laughter, as a spontaneous outburst of emotion, simultaneously illuminates and transgresses the ‘power structures and mechanisms’ that typically govern Laestidian women’s subjectivities (ibid, 3). If people move within their social environments ‘in much the same manner... practiced at the subtleties of movement, posture, gesture and expression that connect them’ with their communities (Scheer, 2012, 202), this gives strong emotions – whether embodied through laughter or some other form – the potential to be highly disruptive. In her study of the “violent conversion” of urban Mozambican women to Brazilian Pentecostalism (2016), anthropologist Linda van de Kamp also notes the potential of emotions such as jealousy, distrust or hope to act as catalysts for change and to disrupt gendered power dynamics. This exemplifies how emotions are ‘not always about the past’ but can also ‘open up futures, in the ways they involve different orientations to others’ (Ahmed, 2014, 202). In this thesis, I analyse humour as an affect with the potential to echo the past but also to “open up futures” by challenging ‘main- and malestream understandings’ of the subject and affect (Bargetz, 2015, 581).

1.3 Humour in religious studies?

Humour is not an affect that has typically been taken seriously in religious studies. However, in a panel session at the 2019 AAR conference entitled ‘Irony, Play and the (Serious?) Study of Religion’, a compelling case was made for deconstructing the imagined polarity between the “serious” study of religion, and the excess and frivolity of humour. This thesis seeks to act as a contribution to this valuable emerging field of study. As one of the panelists, Melissa Wilcox, demonstrates in her ethnography *Queer Nuns* (2018), parody can be serious, playfulness can be political and humour can serve as a mode of religious self-expression. Historically, other scholars have not seen humour in such a favorable light: in the early

twentieth century, French philosopher Henri Bergson wrote that humour acts as a “social corrective” (Bergson, 1911), in that being laughed *at* provokes feelings of exclusion and humiliation which encourage a change of behaviour. Similarly, in *Laughter and Ridicule* (2005), Michael Billig argues that humour functions as a disciplinary mode through which subjects are encouraged to adopt certain norms, and to abandon others. This resonates with Foucault’s characterisation of discipline as a ‘machinery of power that explores... breaks down and rearranges’ the subject’s social position (Foucault, 1975, 138). He adds that “orders of knowledge” are often not explicit, but tacit. This tacit knowledge plays a central role in the formation, and control, of subjects. In “Subjects of Debate” (2011), Sarah Bracke explores the idea of a ‘particular arrangement of secularization’ that excludes Islam, by constructing a dichotomy between the “secular, emancipated us” and the “religious, backward them” (Bracke, 2011, 30). To return, then, to humour, what is deemed “funny” or “unfunny” has the potential to speak volumes about the formation and control of subjects.

Where humour has been taken seriously within religious studies, this approach has predominantly been confined to the study of satirical representations of religion in political cartoons, which have had serious (and sometimes violent) repercussions. In recent years, controversies surrounding satirical representations of Muhammed in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* and French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* have significantly impacted public perceptions of Islam in Europe. Following reprintings of the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons across Europe in January and February 2006, there were international riots, protests and attacks on Danish and Norwegian embassies across the Middle East. More recently, in early 2015, twelve people were killed in an attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris. In communication studies, these incidents spawned a wealth of responses, engaging in debates on freedom of expression vs. freedom of religious belief, and what constitutes “offence” (Klausen, 2009; Liu and Shafi, 2019). This frame of reference seems to have filtered into the ways in which religious studies scholars write about religion and satire, often underlining the potential of visual metaphors to cause harm to believers. As anthropologist Mary Douglas argues, the impact of a joke ‘rarely lies in the utterance alone, but... in the total social situation’ (Douglas, 1975, 93). In this thesis, I follow this train of thought, along with the approaches to humour and religion of cultural theorists Tim Miles (2015) and Kyle Conway (2017), in order to explore dualities within humorous representations of Islam in comedy. On some occasions, humour *uses* stereotypes to get a laugh, while on others, it serves as a tool for communicating “counter-narratives” (Miles, 2015). In *Considering Counter-Narratives* (2004), Molly Andrews writes:

Counter-narratives only make sense in relation to something else... But what is dominant and what is resistant are not... static questions, but forever shifting placements (Andrews, 2004, x).

This description resonates with Ahmed's theorization of emotion as something social that moves and "sticks to us" in various and changing ways. This thesis will start from the understanding that humour operates, as Martina Kessel puts it, 'not only by being subversive or affirmative, but also by constructing or deconstructing identity, disputing boundaries and negotiating appearances' (Kessel, 2012, 16). Whether framed positively or negatively, humour thus seems to fall into the bracket of what Ahmed calls the "sociality of emotions", with the potential to construct and/or disrupt dynamics of power. In "Five concepts of religion" (2011), Linda Woodhead characterises religion as 'the place where a society holds up an image of itself, reaffirms its bonds, renews its emotional ties and marks its boundaries' (Woodhead, 2011, 127). This definition also seems to fit for the category of humour, perhaps a further indication of the potential fruitfulness of humour studies for religious studies scholars, and vice versa.

Within humour theory, there is much support for the notion that humour can facilitate the re/construction or disturbance of power structures. As Oleksandr Golozubov puts it, laughter reflects an emotion whose character is 'dynamic and culturally determined, and depends on the social relations between the person who is laughing and who is laughed at' (2014, 533). Humour can operate on many levels at the same time, and these levels may even reveal conflicting cultural values and ideals. By virtue of its polysemic qualities - its ability to say multiple things at once - a joke often 'pivots on a point of its precarious balance' (Conway, 2017, 27). The methodological implications of this are discussed further in the next chapter. However, it is worth noting here that recent humour theorists have underlined the potential of comedy variously to affirm or contest designations of power (Billig, 2005), and to inspire political action or to mollify the subject (Davis, 1995). Humour scholar Anton C. Zijderveld notes that, while 'Ambiguity is the essence of humour', humour can also sometimes function as a kind of 'legitimizing force, strengthening the authoritative quality of power' (Zijderveld, 1983, 55). Giseline Kuipers' model of 'humour regimes' supports this reading: for Kuipers, there are 'specific discursive regimes' that govern 'non-serious... communicative mode[s] that do not always obey the rules' of "serious" discourse, and can therefore generate *new* discursive patterns (Kuipers, 2011, 69).

1.4 Adding gender to the discussion of humour and religion

As communications scholar Jerry Palmer puts it, 'humour is a fragile thing' (Palmer, 1994, 147), subject to 'the universal law of communication' that 'all messages must be encoded and decoded' (ibid). Moreover, who can "code" and "decode" which messages is subject to particular modes of regulation. Historically, 'Women who tried to gain a democratic share in society have been constantly the butt of jokes', while, at the same time, 'women's possibilities of speaking up humorously have been tightly proscribed... with

lasting constraints remaining even today' (Kessel, 2012, 11). Furthermore, Kalviknes Bore observes, in the past 'women's use of humour tended to be confined to the private sphere' (Kalviknes Bore, 2010, 140). This observation calls to mind the more established discussion of the dynamics between gender, sexuality, religion and secularity. In *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference* (2013), Linell Cady and Tracy Fessenden identify – and contest – the idea of a binary between “backward” religion and “progressive” secularism. This distinction is often formulated alongside the notion of the public sphere as a masculine domain and the private sphere as a ‘space for women’ (2013, 9). In the context of humour studies, Sander Gilman notes that “laughing at oneself” has come to be regarded as a ‘hallmark of modern, [secular] subjectivity’ (Gilman, 2012, 53). This also has the inverse implication that ‘not having a sense of humour is associated with (strict) religiosity’ (Kuipers, 2011, 76), a trait, in turn, typically associated with femininity (Cady and Fessenden, 2013). To challenge the notion of gender equality as intrinsically linked to secularism, historian Joan Scott notes that ‘at the originary moments of secularism... women were not considered men's political equals’ (Scott, 2009, 5), but rather were excluded from active citizenship on the grounds of ‘incontestable biological difference of sex’ (ibid, 4). One might argue that women have also been excluded, along similar lines, from humorous discourse.

In this thesis, I scrutinise this understanding of religiosity and femininity as two intersecting strands of identity typically associated with “lacking a sense of humour.” More specifically, I follow Kuipers' observation, in an insightful article entitled “The politics of humour in the public sphere” (2011), that a ‘discourse of humourless Muslims’ (Kuipers, 2011, 75) prevails in Europe and the USA, and that ‘There is a parallel here with another category said to lack a sense of humour: women’ (ibid). This applies in particular, she adds, to Muslim women, whose lives are supposedly ‘guided by religion, tradition and hierarchy, who never laugh’ (ibid, 76). When situated in this way, performances of humour by and about Muslim women seem a fruitful field for further research. This thesis contributes to that field by analysing public performances of humour by and about Muslim women in British comedy entertainment. More specifically, this thesis examines the ways in which stereotypes concerning Muslim women in British public discourse are variously confirmed, contested and reformulated through comedy performances.

1.5 Case studies: situating this project

This thesis focuses on three recent cases within the British context: two TV sitcoms and the work of one stand-up comedian. The first sitcom, *Citizen Khan* (henceforth *CK*) (2012-2016), depicts the everyday lives of the loud-mouthed, self-proclaimed “community leader” Mr Khan, his wife and his daughters Shazia and Alia. While the show's central protagonist is Mr Khan, its comedy often derives from the ways in which Mr Khan's wife and daughters deal with his delusions of self-importance and authority as the “head of the

household”. At the same time, the ways in which these women speak up humorously seem to be limited to certain topics deemed relevant by the show’s (male) authors; namely, domestic tasks, marriage and clothing. This calls to mind Kessel’s observation that the ways in which women can express humour are ‘tightly proscribed’ (Kessel, 2012, 11). The second case is *Man Like Mobeen* (henceforth *MLM*) (2017-). Again, this sitcom centres a male protagonist, Mobeen, who seeks to live a “good Muslim life” after having been embroiled in drug dealing and other criminal activity in his teenage years. As its title suggests, the show engages extensively with constructions of masculinity in Islam. However, one of the show’s main threads follows Mobeen’s struggles with raising his much-younger sister, Aqsa, in the absence of their parents. In *MLM*, Aqsa is represented as an outspoken and heavily sarcastic character, who has her older brother wrapped around her little finger. Aqsa subverts some norms associated with Muslim women in the British context and affirms others (Kessel, 2012, 16).² I find *MLM* and *CK* suitable case studies for comparative analysis for several reasons: the shows are both set in suburban Birmingham, produced and aired by the same broadcasting company (BBC) within a few years of one another, and focus on a male protagonist within the private, domestic sphere, where his main companion/s are female relatives. However, the shows differ starkly in some respects with regard to their representations of Muslim women, as my analysis in chapters 4 and 5 will show.

My third case study in this thesis will be the work of stand-up comedian Shazia Mirza. As I will explain further in the next chapter, I find it worthwhile to engage with both TV comedy and stand-up comedy, as humour can operate rather differently in these two contexts. Shazia Mirza is one of the few “high-profile” Muslim women in stand-up comedy in the UK, and has been active on the comedy circuit since 2001. In this thesis, I will briefly trace the shifting ways in which Mirza has represented herself through her comedy and the various thematic directions her work has taken in the past two decades. However, in order to focus my analysis, I concentrate primarily on Mirza’s 2016 set *The Kardashians Made Me Do It* (henceforth *TKMMDI*), a controversial show inspired by three teenage girls leaving Britain to become Jihadi brides in Syria. Alongside my analysis of this show, I will also discuss the short comedy skit “Real Housewives of ISIS”, featured in the BBC sketch show *Revoluting* in 2017. Mirza’s show shares certain interesting commonalities with the sketch: both reference popular American reality TV and juxtapose Western sexualised femininity in the entertainment industry with the oppressive violence of radical Islam. In both cases, the result is an unsettling yet amusing sense of incongruity.

As I analyse these case studies, I will keep in mind the academic framework set out in this introduction, and particularly the idea of “emotions-as-practice” (Ahmed, 2014) with the potential to change things. In a Western context in which Muslim women are often confined to the category “religious,

² See chapter 3 for a detailed discussion of these norms.

backward them” (Bracke, 2011, 30), this thesis proposes a more nuanced reading of (self-) representations of Muslim women. I hope that this thesis will convince the reader that humour offers a fruitful lens through which to understand the cultural, racialised, gendered dynamics of power that proscribe Muslim women from occupying complex, individual positionalities. At the same time, this thesis goes some way to showing the potential of humorous discourse to function as a feminist act of “speaking out” that deconstructs these proscriptions and ‘open[s] up futures’ (Ahmed, 2014, 202).

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework and Methodology

2.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I adopt a qualitative approach in engaging with my case studies. More specifically, I conduct a critical discourse analysis (henceforth CDA), in which I include specific tools for critical visual methodology (Rose, 2016; Flowerdew, 2018).

In this chapter, I will begin by situating the use of CDA within the conceptual framework of culture production and framing, and explaining how this serves as a lens through which to engage with dominant meaning constructions. I will then bring this Foucauldian lens into dialogue with several contemporary approaches to stereotyping, before expanding on the conceptual and methodological tools through which humour can be analysed (in the context of CDA). I will also address the question of researcher subjectivity in the study of humour, and close the chapter with some examples of previous research focusing on similar case studies, which inform the approach taken in this project. As my analysis unfolds, it is my hope that my methods and conceptual framework will shine through. Indeed, (self-) reflexivity about these methods will represent an integral feature of my analysis.

2.2 Discourse, framings and the “cultural turn”

In 1947, critical theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer introduced the notion of a “culture industry”, in which popular culture produces cultural “goods” (e.g. films, radio shows) that cultivate particular needs and values in subjects. However, it was not until the 1970s that the “cultural turn” began to gain attention in the humanities and social sciences. In *Frame Analysis* (1974), social theorist Erving Goffman defined cultural frames as the tools which allow an audience to ‘locate, perceive, identify, and label events... thus rendering meaning... and guiding actions’ (1974, 21). At the same time, framing can be understood as ‘a *selective* process’ in which the audience ‘chooses to foreground one given interpretation over the several options allowed by the text’ (Godioli, Kiss and Schiller, forthcoming, 1).

However, it is its polysemic quality (its ability simultaneously to contain and convey a plurality of meanings) that makes humour such a fascinating source for discourse analysis. It is therefore helpful, when studying humour, to keep in mind that ‘holding alternative framings at the same time is indeed an interpretive option in its own right, especially when dealing with highly ambiguous works’ (ibid, 1). This understanding encourages the researcher to engage in a ‘(self-)reflective practice and active response to

textual and audiovisual narratives’, resisting the restriction of interpretation to a ‘single comprehensive frame’ (ibid, 15). The scholar is encouraged to be aware of the ‘intricacies between... academic subjectivity and the subject matter it purports to analyse’ (Bal, 1996, 7), and to note the different levels of interpretation that make up an analysis of humour. This is not to say, however, that every interpretation is made equal. As cultural theorist Stuart Hall notes,

Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its classifications of the social... cultural and political world. These constitute a *dominant cultural order*, though it is neither univocal nor uncontested, but... mapped out into discursive domains, hierarchically organised into dominant or preferred meanings (Hall, 1980, 134).

2.3 Foregrounding stereotyping

The above quotation from Hall calls to mind Foucault’s observation that knowledge can never be separated entirely from power. Embedded in this understanding is the idea that discourse acts as a system of representation capable of (de-/re-)constructing identity (Foucault, 1981). At the same time, in analysing discourse, these pre-existing categories must be ‘held in suspense... we must show that they... are always the result of a construction the rules of which must be known’ (Foucault, 1972, 25). This is complicated, in the case of humour, since categories and constructions (which often become visible as stereotypes) sometimes represent the building blocks of what makes humour “work”. However, Foucault is not merely engaged with the dynamics of *visible* political and social structures, but is also ‘concerned to analyse power in the details of social practices, at the points at which it produces effects, as a fluid... and invisible “microphysics” of power’ (Nash, 2001, 82). In this context, humour - as a cultural field that can shape and be shaped by social practice - is a relevant field for investigation.

The discourse analyst seeks to ‘open up statements to challenge, interrogate, taken-for-granted meanings, and disturb easy claims to objectivity’ (Tonkiss, 1988, 259). The comedian/joke can work either alongside, or against, these goals: humour can act as ‘a means of satirizing and challenging outdated stereotypes’ *or* ‘as a means of confirming and further disseminating already existing stereotypes’ (Tsakona, 2017, 180). Stereotyping, as Margaretha van Es puts it, is ‘closely related to othering, a social process whereby a group of people strengthens its collective self-image by constructing an image of another group as essentially different’ (van Es, 2016, 11). This “othering” process will be contextualised with regard to representations of Muslim women in Britain in chapter 3. For now, in terms of the broader conceptual framework of stereotyping, it is noteworthy that ‘subverting stereotypes is always difficult because of the unequal power relations in which stereotyping takes place’ (ibid, 15). For this reason, we might expect to

find more examples reinforcing than contesting stereotypes in comedy. In practice, identifying and distinguishing stereotypes is not a simple matter: as van Es puts it, it is not always clear when and how ‘specific stereotypes emerge, change, or fade away’ (ibid, 34). The question of how to approach the analysis of stereotyping in humour remains a complex and challenging one. In the section that follows, I will outline the strategy adopted in this thesis, drawing on literature that applies comparable methodologies to thematically similar cases.

2.4 Critical discourse analysis: a theoretical model for humour analysis

‘The simple truth is that there seems to be no recognition anywhere in the more theoretical critical discourse analysis literature [on humour] of the capacity of ordinary (non-academic) people to use humour to resist ideologically insidious discourse, nor is there any recognition of the social function of humour as a... mechanism that helps to sustain communities’ (Simpson, 2003, 85).

This cautionary note acts as a helpful starting point when developing a more precise conceptual and methodological approach that remains grounded in the social functions of humour. In Paul Simpson’s *On the Discourse of Satire* (2003), while he does not explicitly reference CDA, his claim that humour discourse can be interpreted via several phases (the “prime”, “dialectic” and “uptake” levels) resonates with the dialogical aspect of CDA. In the prime phase, we identify the framework in which a joke becomes comprehensible. Simpson characterises this phase in terms of looking for ‘echoic mention’ (ibid, 116). In other words, humour is *referential*, always engaging with pre-existing discourses and situated within a particular performative setting ‘necessary for the construction of satirical discourse’ (ibid, 70). It is up to the scholar to recognise pre-existing discourses and to situate the dynamics of the performative setting. For example, a comedian is on stage to make us laugh, a political cartoon is most likely satirical, and comedy on TV is sometimes accompanied by a laughter track to underline the “funniness” of the discourse.³ The dialectic phase involves a more reflective approach in which the analyst may engage with the intra-textual discursive strategies that mark a text as humorous. This “intra-textuality” might take the form of one show referencing another, the use of humour resources such as mixed metaphors and stereotyping, or the subversion of what is deemed “politically correct”. Finally, at the uptake level, the emphasis is placed on the audience. There may be multiple addressees. For example, in the case of TV sitcoms, there may be an addressee *within* the show, who represents a broader demographic outside the show itself. Simpson labels

³ This is more complicated in the case of humour in everyday interactions, where misunderstandings can arise. While not the primary focus of this thesis, a few examples emerge in my analysis, where the audience response (issuing complaints) suggests a rejection of the “humour setting” (or an understanding that certain things should not be joked about).

four types of “target” to consider at the uptake level, namely the “episodic” (a public action or event), “personal” (an individual, often a stereotypical projection), the “experiential” (universal aspects of human experience e.g. mortality), and the “textual” (where the discourse ‘turn[s]... inwardly upon itself’ (ibid, 71)). Often, these targets emerge in dialogue with one another, and together broaden the horizons of what might be included in an analysis of comedy reception.

So how might the researcher translate Simpson’s framework to a CDA of comedy entertainment? While there are many possible answers to this question, for the purposes of this thesis, I carried out the following process: I transcribed my case studies, conducting a preliminary round of discourse analysis and noting my initial reactions (what do I laugh at? Who am I laughing at or with? What stereotypes seem to be at play?). This is not a simple matter, of course - as Asif Agha has noted, we do not all share the same ‘metapragmatic stereotypes’ (internalised models) about what humour is, how it should be used, and why (Agha, 2007, 148). At the same time, as Kuipers observes, certain “normative communities of humour” can be identified, since ‘[a]ll social groups establish some sort of consensus about what can be laughed about’ (Kuipers, 2008, 8). In Victor Raskin’s *Semantic Mechanisms of Humour* (1984), he argues that what is considered humorous in a particular social framework is subject to particular “knowledge resources”, such as situation (objects, participants etc.), target (persons, groups etc.), narrative strategy (genre) and language (specific wording). These “knowledge resources”, along with Simpson’s “levels” of satire, provide a helpful framework within which to explore humour as a dynamic, social discursive practice. After engaging further with secondary literature on the intersection/s between religion, gender and humour (see chapters 1 and 3), I revisited my case studies, paying particular attention to the audiovisual elements of the productions, choices made by actors and producers, and audience reactions (laughter tracks or live audience responses). It is only at this stage that I also explored public discourse about the shows, to reduce the extent to which my own analysis would be influenced by these interpretations. Critically analysing comedy is not a simple endeavour, but it is certainly a worthwhile one, given Kuipers’ observation that ‘[f]ew cultural forms more convincingly expose the ambivalences, intricacies and subtleties of social life than humour’ (Kuipers, 2016, 126).

2.5 Meta-hermeneutics and subjectivity

One important factor not to overlook methodologically, when analysing humour, is the question of subjectivity. As Tsakona puts it, those who study humour are ‘*de facto* members of specific normative communities and have their own metapragmatic stereotypes, which may influence not only their own research interests, but also their research questions... analyses and results’ (Tsakona, 2017, 198). Put simply, as a researcher, it is helpful to be aware of questions such as: does this make me laugh? Why? How am I

socially situated to interpret this material? In exploring contestations of the motif of the “humourless Muslim women”, I am conscious of the fact that I am influenced by my positionality as a feminist, as a native English speaker raised in a British context,⁴ and as a cis white middle class woman with no religious affiliation, and left-leaning political alignments. To negotiate the challenge of conducting research while a member of particular “normative communities”, I acknowledge my subjectivity and engage reflectively with the factors informing my analysis of my case studies.

Additionally, I take inspiration from meta-hermeneutics, a methodological tool often applied in literary studies, which involves taking a step back from one’s own interpretation to reflect on how a text can be interpreted differently. In humour studies, meta-hermeneutics serves as a useful analytical tool in exploring different layers of meaning, and focusing on the potential of laughter to operate in different ways at the same time. More concretely, I will analyse audience reception of my case studies in order to move outside my own interpretation and reflect on other possible readings.

2.6 CDA in audio-visual media analysis: some methodological examples

In this thesis, the focus of analysis is TV sitcoms and stand-up comedy (accessed via video footage). In an article entitled “Religion-in-the-Making” (2019), Nella van den Brandt suggests that ‘[r]eligious narratives... feature prominently in various Western cultural productions targeting a wide audience, such as cinema, literature, TV series and theatre’ (van den Brandt, 2019, 409). In order to navigate the complexities of bringing the study of religion and gender into dialogue with media analysis, van den Brandt proposes the innovative concept of “religion-in-the-making”, an interdisciplinary lens drawing on religious studies, anthropology, and gender studies. When seen through this lens, Western European cultural productions can be seen as ‘not only conveying religious voices or portraying religious identities, but as potentially creating or *making* religion as well’ (ibid, 422). In this thesis, I apply this concept to suggest that religious identity and the status of religious subjects can be made and remade repeatedly through humorous cultural productions. Indeed, critical discourse theorists have, in recent years, acknowledged the potential of film to act as a fruitful source of innovation and contestation (or the making and remaking of identity). In her invaluable contribution regarding audio/visual discourse analysis, Gillian Rose identifies factors that should be included in a critical visual methodology, including production, circulation, and composition (e.g. use of space, shot selection, camera movement) (Rose, 2016). These factors will be considered within this thesis to build on the CDA methods of humour analysis outlined in the previous section, providing an additional interpretive lens.

⁴ This is an important factor, given that national/cultural identity, upbringing and native language can significantly shape humour style (e.g. Adler-Nissen and Tsinovoi, 2018).

To make this method more concrete, I turn to a few recent works of scholarship that also engage with humorous representations of Islam. In *Little Mosque on the Prairie and the Paradoxes of Cultural Translation* (2017), Kyle Conway analyses a Canadian sitcom which portrays the lives of a small Muslim community in a fictionalised Canadian town. Conway sets this study up by underlining the notion of “cultural translation”, a process through which a minority community is ‘made intelligible’ to the majority (Conway, 2017, 11). He notes that the polysemic qualities of humour ‘unsettle the relationship between images and what they purport to represent’ (ibid, 17), before identifying a further tension in the sitcom *Little Mosque* between its dual goals: to counter stereotypes regarding the Muslim community and to create a commercially successful show. In analysing the show, Conway combines CDA of the show itself with interviews with its creator and executive producer, and a sample of discourse about the show from newspapers and online blogs. In mixing methods and sources, Conway aims to engage in a ‘conversation’ between the show’s makers and its viewers (ibid, 61). In a study of Muslim online comedy in Britain, Tim Miles applies a similar methodology, comparing mainstream media representations of Islam with humorous online representations. As Miles puts it, in the online age, ‘consumption of comedy has changed’, and sometimes reaches a more international audience (Miles, 2015, 175). I follow the example of these studies, combining audiovisual CDA with analysis of interviews⁵ and online reviews about the shows to facilitate a more nuanced, layered reading of my case studies.

2.7 Audience reception

Like the studies mentioned in the previous section, aside from a CDA of the comedic productions themselves, this thesis also engages with public discourse *about* these comedies. This is something that Conway’s methodology and Simpson’s notion of “uptake” encourage. In a discussion of audience reception of representations of working class people in Britain, Göran Eriksson notes that the (often white middle-class) gaze of the audience is ‘organized around certain discourses of identity, and promotes a superior... position, which appears to be the natural, normal and respectable way of seeing things’ (Eriksson 2015, 24). I explore the extent to which this applies to humorous discourse, in which what is typically deemed “natural” or “normal” is sometimes inverted. Since my chosen case studies were all (at least somewhat) controversial, they generated considerable media attention. In order to select a corpus of material to analyse, I used the database LexisNexus and sought articles on each comedy representing different political leanings and more and less favorable views of the shows. In my engagement with audience reception, I am

⁵ Given the scope of this project, I use pre-existing recorded interviews with producers and comedians, rather than conducting my own interviews. This also offers further insight into how shows/performers are framed by different interviewers, what questions they face frequently, and how they represent themselves both in the interview context.

influenced by the work of Villy Tsakona, who argues that the ways in which people ‘publicly comment on humor, its functions, its limits and its presuppositions’ offer a “way into” their simultaneously private but public⁶ responses to humour (Tsakona, 2017, 182). While conducting my research, I kept my analysis of audience reception and the shows themselves quite separate. However, I find that the most fruitful way to present my analysis (in chapters 4 and 5) is by combining these two hermeneutical levels in a CDA that is structured thematically.

2.8 Conclusion

‘We get a joke when we recognize the gap between what it *says* and what it *means*’ (Conway, 2017, 4). This statement resonates with the methodological strands set out in this chapter. In this gap between what is said and what is meant in comedic (self-)representations of Muslim women, the dynamics of power and politics of (gendered, racialised, religious) difference within this demographic emerge in sometimes confronting ways. I find the methodology and conceptual framework set out here helpful in entering the complex world of humour discourse, and hope that this chapter serves as a useful methodological model for future analyses of comedy entertainment in related fields and contexts.

⁶ Written on a computer in the privacy of an individual’s home, but with the intention to reach a wider audience.

Chapter 3: Islam, Gender and Humour in the British Context

“We work hard, we go to mosque, we pray to Allah five times a day, how much more British can you get?” (Citizen Khan, Season 2 Episode 2, 2013).

In an empirical study of TV comedy in Britain, Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore notes the shortage of leading roles for women.⁷ Kalviknes Bore argues that this can be explained by the fact that comedy is socially delimited as outside the domain of ‘appropriate female behaviour’ (Kalviknes Bore, 2010, 152). She relates this to a double standard in which ‘masculine issues’ are “universal”, while so-called “women’s comedy” is often constructed as ‘excluding male viewers’ (ibid, 148).⁸ In *Women and Laughter* (1994), an early contribution to this research field, feminist philosopher Frances Gray notes that:

Most feminist activity has been centrally concerned with silence, and with its breaking... The field of comic discourse is perhaps the most fiercely guarded of all (Gray, 1994, 13).

If this is the case, then female voices in comedy should be taken seriously as a way of better understanding and engaging with gendered dynamics in a particular cultural context.⁹ As Lockyer puts it, ‘television comedy is an important lens through which questions, uncertainties and anxieties about gender across the ages in contemporary British society are constructed and deconstructed’ (Lockyer in Chiaro and Baccolini, 2014, 225). While, as we have seen in the first two chapters of this thesis, humour can be theorized in general terms in relation to power and identity, humour is also gendered and ‘notoriously culture-specific’ (Kuipers, 2011, 68). This chapter will therefore trace the social and political history of Islam and gender in Britain as it intersects with contemporary narratives. This, in turn, will shed light on how humour might

⁷ There are a few notable exceptions, including the critically acclaimed tragicomedy *Fleabag* (2016-2019).

⁸ I use phrases such as “women’s comedy” and “masculine issues” as they are used by Kalviknes Bore and frequently feature in public and academic discourse on humour and gender. However, I approach these phrases with caution as they seem to reinforce a gender binary model that has been convincingly problematised in recent decades (Butler, 1990).

⁹ Like humour often involves culturally specific “in-group” knowledge, the formulation of the category “women” is also a cultural process. As Skeggs puts it, ‘being, becoming, practising and doing femininity are very different things for women of different classes, races, ages and nations’ (Skeggs, 1997, 98).

relate to a broader “cultural politics of emotion” (Ahmed, 2014) concerning Islam and gender in Britain, and therefore provide a helpful foundation from which to analyse comedy productions.

3.1 British identity politics and representations of Islam and Muslim women pre-2000

Before focusing on the intersection between British humour on TV and the motif of the “humorless Muslim”, it is worth saying something about the broader sociopolitical and historical context in which Islam is situated in Britain. While it is easy to identify the motif of the “humorless Muslim” as a 21st century phenomenon, contextualised as a reaction to 9/11 and the 2005 suicide bombings in London, it is worth noting that this is not a “new” trend. Rather, it seems to resonate with a juxtaposition between “the West” as ‘rational, developed... superior’ and “the Orient” as ‘aberrant, underdeveloped, inferior’ with a long history (Said, 1978, 300; Mertens and de Smaele, 2016). Said identifies historical clashes between “the West” and Islam, from the recapturing of Edessa by Muslims in the 12th century crusades to the fall of the Ottoman Empire during World War One, as a crucial dimension of this dichotomy. Still more significantly, for the purposes of this thesis, ‘Orientalism [as conflict]... was an exclusively male province’ (Said, 1978, 207). Where women are included in Oriental representations, they are usually fetishized as ‘the creatures of a male power-fantasy’ (ibid); as seductive and alluring, ‘titivating and disturbing’ (Perry, 2013, 8). This image of the “feminine Other” as ‘a silent, inscrutable object of desire’ (Agathangelou and Ling, 2004, 528) seems to persist in many Western representations of Muslim women (Perry, 2013). In the next chapter, I will explore this point by focusing specifically on representations of female sexuality in my case studies, which (in some respects) move away from this framing. In various gendered terms (perhaps unsurprisingly, given Britain’s colonial history), Muslims have been - and continue to be - both imagined and represented as “un-British”.

Beyond its imperialist foundations, in the British context, this “dominant cultural order” gained further traction in response to increasing migration, which ‘formed an inherent part of [the process of] economic reconstruction’ in Britain’s inner cities following World War Two (Hopkins and Gale, 2013, 2). Various studies in the 1960s and ’70s showed how immigrants were reported as posing a “problem” and provoking tensions in “race relations” (see Saeed, 2007, who cites Hartmann and Husband, 1974 and Troyna, 1981). However, the ‘contours of Muslim life in Britain continue[d] to be shaped largely by socio-economic factors, even though discrimination... added to their difficulties’ (Ansari, 2004, 216). This is not a pattern unique to the 1960s and ’70s: it is no coincidence that both *MLM* (2017-) and *CK* (2012-2016) are set in inner-city Birmingham, in neighbourhoods with a ‘run-down image’ (Ansari, 2004, 216). As Meer and Noorani put it, ‘Muslims are currently concentrated in the most socially deprived strata of employment,

education and housing’ (Meer and Noorani, 2008, 202). While it might be argued that ‘people with non-white skin in Britain have habitually been designated as outsiders (or other)... whose culture is... incompatible with that of the host nation’ (Saeed, 2007, 446) since before World War Two, various scholars (Hopkins and Gale, 2013; Moddod 1990) have labelled the Rushdie Affair a turning point in Muslim identity politics in Britain.

3.2 The Rushdie Affair and times of change

Following the publication of his novel *The Satanic Verses* (1988), which was seen to satirise the Prophet Mohamed and deride Islam, Salman Rushdie received death threats and a prominent Shi’a Muslim leader issued a *fatwa* against him. In the name of freedom of expression, no Western government banned the publication of the text, in spite of the offense that is caused.¹⁰ Instead, Islam came to be represented as an ‘undifferentiated monolith’ (Majid, 2000, 22) attempting to dismantle ‘cherished Western values’ (ibid.). In 1997, the Runnymede Trust published a study entitled *Islamophobia: A Challenge to Us All*, noting the growing presence of hostility towards Muslims in Britain since the 1970s. Amongst its findings, the study stated that Islam was often – and increasingly – framed as violent, sexist, and pursuing political or military advance. Furthermore, Modood argues, in the long term, ‘The Rushdie Affair [also] made evident that the group in British society most politically opposed to Muslims... was... the secular, liberal intelligentsia’ (Modood, 2013, 204). At the same time, the Rushdie Affair

[a]ltered the public imagination to the presence of minorities who subscribed not solely to a national identity... but to a potentially universal Muslim identity that provided an increasingly salient category of self-identification and public claims-making (Meer and Noorani, 2008, 201).

This marks the Rushdie Affair as a moment in which the significance of Muslim identity politics became clear, within both the Muslim community and the “public imagination” (if such a distinction can meaningfully be drawn). Indeed, protests within Britain over the publication of the *Satanic Verses* acted as a catalyst for the creation of the Muslim Council of Britain, which remains a relatively powerful political voice in debates concerning mis/representations of Islam in British public discourse.

In the late 1970s and early ’80s, shortly before the publication of *The Satanic Verses*, the British cultural scene experienced a comedic “revolution”, with the birth of “Alternative Comedy”. As Sophie Quirk puts it, this movement ‘turned the frequent recourse to racist, sexist and homophobic stereotype,

¹⁰ This contrasts the reaction to the more recent *Jyllands-Posten* controversy, which culminated in a ban on the further publication of the cartoons in many countries in an attempt to de-escalate the situation.

which had previously been a staple of popular comedy, into a taboo' (Quirk, 2018, 5). Admittedly, many comedians still frequently deliver jokes that play on these stereotypes - indeed, comedy has often, historically, thrived off engaging with taboo topics, and continues to do so in some ways (Bucaria and Barra, 2016). In *Taboo Comedy: Television and Controversial Humour* (2016), Chiara Bucaria and Luca Barra argue that TV comedy enjoys a 'fruitful duplicity' (ibid, 11), simultaneously 'follow[ing] the rules and break[ing] them' in order to 'introduce fresh and original perspectives into a common ground of habits and repetitions' (ibid, 10). This echoes the creative potential of humour discussed in the first two chapters of this thesis, while at the same time reminding us that this potential can be realised in different ways depending on the cultural norms to which it is reacting.

Perhaps following a shift in Muslim self-identification prompted by the Rushdie Affair, 'the voices of a variety of self-consciously Muslim actors have become increasingly discernable in public and media discourse in Britain' since the turn of the millennium (Meer, Dwyer and Modood, 2010, 216), even as the "War on Terror" has amplified suspicion and securitisation. For example, the ways in which Muslim women dress in the public sphere has been increasingly scrutinised, as part of a wider "public security" narrative. Meer, Dwyer and Modood advocate for paying attention to the voices of Muslim women, which help us to move beyond this framework of suspicion.

3.3 Cultural narratives: "Humorless Islam" vs. the "good old British sense of humour"

Alongside the changes in the political and cultural treatment of Islam mapped out in the previous sections, another significant change has taken place: namely, the growing popularity, variety and availability of British TV entertainment. In "Television and Culture: Duties and Pleasures" (2001), Corner argues that British television has contributed significantly both to the "official" life of the nation and to 'its private popular pleasures' (Corner, 2001, 263). Indeed, as Davies notes, what is aired - especially on public broadcasting services like the BBC - is about 'who decides whose tastes in comedy shall prevail' (Davies in Bucaria and Barra, 2016, 38).¹¹ Both publicly and privately, British TV has contributed to a 'strong sense of national self-consciousness and confidence... predicated largely on the imperialist history of many British cultural institutions' (ibid.). While this seems to be gradually changing, it remains a prescient point to keep in mind when analysing British cultural productions.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014), Ahmed explores the culturalised, racialised politics of fear and disgust in the context of a post-9/11 mediatized world. In one chapter, for example, Ahmed argues that "Western" subjects 'occupy more space through the identification with the collective body' (Ahmed,

¹¹ Notably, both *MLM* and *CK* were produced and aired by the BBC.

2014, 74), while those deemed “non-Western” may be viewed with suspicion (Saeed, 2016). In this context, it is perhaps unsurprising that, in spite of the work of stand-up comedians like Shazia Mirza, the consensus remains the same: “Muslims are humourless and cannot take a joke” (Miles, 2015, 169). This motif is evident in British headlines such as “Does Islam have a sense of humour?” (BBC, 2007), “Leave Citizen Khan alone! Po-faced, humourless Muslim protestors are their own worst enemy” (*National Secular Society*, 2012) and “We’re Catholic, Not Muslims: We Can Put Up With Bad Jokes” (The Daily Telegraph, 2015), which set Islam up as a “humourless” religion.

Within the British context, humour can be understood as an important marker of cultural affinity. In *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities* (2007), cultural studies scholar Andy Medhurst argues that, in the British national imaginary, humour is often associated with positive qualities such as humility, intelligence, and friendliness, and seen ‘as a mark of someone who has perspective, who can “see the funny side”, and is thus unlikely to have extreme views’ (as cited in Miles, 2015, 170). This clearly conflicts with the securitizing framework in which Islam is often placed. In a study of British media representations of Muslims from 2001 to 2012, researchers found that 91% of coverage was negative, with 84% specifically associating Islam with ‘intense difficulty or danger’ (Miles, 2015, 171). This matches the findings of *Reporting Islam: Media Representations of British Muslims* (2002), in which the author identifies the following as central narratives concerning Muslims in Britain:

That Muslims are a threat to British mainstream values...; that there are inherent cultural differences between Muslims and the host community which create tensions...; that Muslims are increasingly making their presence felt in the public sphere (Poole, 2002, 20).

This drawing of a dichotomy between Muslims and “the host community” illustrates the ongoing effects of Said’s Orientalism, which necessarily situates Muslims as “un-British”. Having said this, a study carried out by Faisal Hanif for the Muslim Council of Britain based on an analysis of over 10,000 representations of Islam in the UK media in 2018, suggests some modest improvements, finding that “only” 59% of coverage associates Islam with negative tropes (Hanif, 2018). This percentage increases to 78% in the *Mail on Sunday*, a conservative tabloid newspaper. Such examples typify a broader trend, which resonates with Ahmed’s observation, made over two decades earlier, that ‘the traditional Orientalist stereotypes of Muslims as political anarchists, and tyrants at home subjugating their women have been disseminated in the media as caricatures and stereotypes’ (Ahmed and Donnan, 2003, 9).¹²

¹² Interestingly, as Ahmed notes in “Killing Joy: Feminism and the History of Happiness” (2010), women who are “too outspoken” are likewise characterised as “killjoys”. This reflects the complex web of permissible behaviours navigated by women in contemporary Western European society.

3.4 Getting back to gender

The dominant Western picture of Muslim women is as passive and docile, subject to patriarchal traditions and lacking any active agency to change their condition; ... as exotic, ruthlessly oppressed victims of religion. Invisible in the public domain and trapped within the family framework, their lives are seen as unfree and exposed to domestic exploitation. Socially and sexually controlled in their male-dominated communities, they are presumed to have few opportunities to find fulfilment. (Ansari, 2004, 265).

This description encapsulates many “Western” stereotypes about Muslim women that are much in evidence in British public discourse, and informs the thematic categories around which I structure my analysis in chapters 4 and 5. This normative image mirrors ‘aggravated stereotypes’ often ‘attached to Muslim women [in Britain], who are perceived as passive, submissive, homebound’ (Joly, 2017, 165). This perception, in turn, leads to a tendency to overlook women’s voices in representations of Islam, which ‘reinforce[s] the view that they are passive or disengaged’ (Ryan, 2011, 1046), and perpetuates the model of Western secularism as “emancipatory” and Islam as “oppressive” towards women.

3.5 Self-representations: an alternative lens

In *Stereotypes and Self-Representations of Women with a Muslim Background* (2016), van Es examines the self-representations of Muslim women in the context of migration to Western Europe in the 1960s, a fruitful lens that is taken up in this thesis. She writes:

Since large groups of women from predominantly Muslim countries began to arrive in post-war Western Europe as a result of de-colonization, labour migration, family reunification, and refugee migration, more and more of these women have actively tried to break stereotypes and prejudices about “foreign”, “migrant”, or “Muslim” women (van Es, 2016, 2).

While the ways in which Muslim women are represented in public discourse presumably influences how they represent themselves to some degree, the next two chapters will explore points of similarity and difference between representations and self-representations in the context of comedy. In particular, I keep in mind Ansari’s description of the stereotypical image of the Muslim women, and examine how framings of Muslim women as oppressed, passive, “sexually controlled” and confined to the private sphere where

they take care of the family play out. I will also consider what “breaking stereotypes” might look like in the context of comedy, and how the *medium* of (self-)representation might affect the ways in which stereotypes are contested or reaffirmed.

The following chapters will unpack how several comedy shows inform a more nuanced understanding of the contemporary social positioning of Muslim women in Britain, focusing firstly on representations of sexuality (chapter 4) and subsequently on how comedy engages with the narrative of “oppressive” Islam through representations of women in the family home (chapter 5). In developing this analysis, I keep in mind both the historical context(s) in which these subjects are situated, and the contemporary setting of the cultural material I analyse. At the same time, I remain curious about the potential of comedic communication to (re)create and (re)vitalise the affective politics of female Muslim identity, with varying degrees of subtlety and diverse effects.

Chapter 4: Comedic (Self-)Representations of Female Sexuality in Islam

In van Es' assessment of stereotypes and self-representations of Muslim women in Europe, she notes, echoing Ansari (2004), that Muslim women are often essentialised as passive and 'sexually repressed' (van Es, 2016, 13). In their study of religion, secularism and gender, Cady and Fessenden problematise an imagined binary between religion as "conservative" and secularism as sexually liberating (Cady and Fessenden, 2013), calling for more critical, complex readings of the relationship between sexuality and religious belief. In the last decade or so, a unanimous reading of the veil as a reflection of 'patriarchal control over feminine sexuality' (Dwyer, 1999, 7) has given way to more nuanced understandings of Muslim women's practices and modes of dress as acts of agency (Mahmood, 2004; Fadil, 2011). However, the motif of the Muslim woman as "sexually repressed", unable to speak openly about sex and sexuality, and always heterosexual, persists in non-academic discourse.¹³ At the same time, as I noted in the previous chapter, traces of "Orientalist" discourse that represents Muslim women as sexual objects remain (Perry, 2013). In this chapter, I will explore some of the ways in which *CK*, *MLM* and *TKMMDI* engage with normativities concerning the sexualities of Muslim women, and particularly the nuances of the ways in which stereotypes can operate in humorous contexts simultaneously to contest and to reinforce normativities. In this analysis, I focus not on sexual practices¹⁴ but rather on sexuality defined as a broad social arena in which 'power relations, symbolic meanings of gender, and hence moral discourse in relation to sexual behaviour' are played out (Sprock, 2014, 4). Within this framework, I include representations of individual embodiment/s of sexuality (via modes of dress, flirtation etc.).

This analysis will begin by exploring the association of sexuality with shame and embarrassment as a comedic device, focusing specifically on *CK*. I will explore some of the ways in which one character's wearing of the *hijab* is framed in media commentary, as it intersects with representations of sexuality. I will then go on to consider the themes of silence and "speakability", which seem to characterise the representation of female sexuality in *MLM*. Finally, I will consider how the theme of sexuality is brought

¹³ See Andrew Kam-Tuck Yip's study of the lived experiences of lesbian and bisexual British Muslim women for a critique of the heteronormativity of representations of Muslim women (2008). My sources do not yield data suitable for further analysis of this topic, but it would certainly merit further research.

¹⁴ For a discussion of religious/secular discourse on "good sex" and sexual identities, see Schrijvers and Wiering (2018).

into dialogue with seemingly unrelated narratives of radicalisation in stand-up and sketch comedy. Through these representations, the viewer is aligned with radicalised young Muslim women (everyone had awkward teenaged crushes), while at the same time amplifying their difference in how they respond. In this third section, the themes of clothing, silence and “speakability” are also present. This will lead into the chapter’s closing reflections on the ambiguities of humour that somehow simultaneously contests and affirms stereotypes about female sexuality in Islam.

4.1 Complicating Stereotypes Clothed in Shame in *Citizen Khan*

In a 2012 review, journalist Hasnet Lais discusses the many examples in *CK* of Alia feigning the role of the modest Muslim daughter for Mr Khan’s benefit. One scene in particular in the opening episode of the show provoked a ‘storm of complaints’ (Revoir, *The Daily Mail*, 2012): in this scene, as Mr Khan is heard walking up the stairs, calling out to his daughter Alia, she stops taking pouting selfies on her phone, rushes to cover up ‘a glamorous, tight-fitting and revealing outfit’ (Ahmed, 2013, 94) with the *hijab*, hides a fashion magazine that she is reading, and begins bowing before the Qur’an. This representation can be interpreted in a number of ways. To the 185 viewers who complained to the BBC after the airing of this first episode, the show in general – and Alia’s behaviour in this scene in particular – ‘insulted’ and ‘ridiculed’ Islam (Revoir, *The Daily Mail*, 2012). In an interview on the radio station BBC Asian Network, however, comedian Humza Arshad stated:

I wasn't offended but... the scene with the Qur'an... Some people might complain about it... The Muslim community is one of the most sensitive communities out there.

Here, Arshad is at pains to point out that *he* does not find the scene offensive, and implicitly puts the offense of others down to the “sensitivity” of the Muslim community. This scene exemplifies the ‘fruitful duplicity’ of TV comedy (Bucaria and Barra, 2016, 11) discussed in the previous chapter. While the representation of Alia performing a “holy charade” for her father might be offensive to some, this provocative juxtaposition could be precisely what makes it funny to others. In other words, this humour will be “read” differently depending on the viewer’s perspective.

Following the airing of the show’s first episode in August 2012, one viewer posted on the BBC’s messageboard, ‘People are reading too much into *Citizen Khan*, especially the hijab thing, it happens!’ One journalist says the same thing, in the following rather hyperbolic terms:

It was common to find young Muslim women duping their fathers into believing they were veiled outside the home, when, in actual fact, they could be spotted with peek-a-boo fabric at beaches and party jams, soaking up the sun, sex and booze.

(Lais, 2012, *The Independent*).

Here, Lais extrapolates, from the provocative image of Alia pouting and “duping her father”, the generalised image of young Muslim women “soaking up sun, sex and booze”. As if to justify this use of hyperbole, Lais proceeds to present the more serious claim that Muslim girls resort to ‘amateurish acts of make-believe’ rather than ‘confronting anxieties about their sexuality and identity head-on’ at least in part because they have grown up in contexts of ‘intense sexual repression’. There is some sense of paradox here, which hints at the difficulty of distinguishing between the affirmation and deconstruction of stereotypes. The representation of Alia seems, on one level, to *contest* the stereotype of the sexually repressed, modestly dressed Muslim women (she goes to parties, has boyfriends, and only puts on the *hijab* when her father is watching). At the same time, however, the humour of her representation derives from this double life, in which she plays the part of the “modest” woman for her father. Lais adds,

The agony which some Muslim women... find themselves in, hailing from conservative and teetotal families, which preach a very coy and shameful attitude towards sex, can generate confused notions of sexuality like Alia's.

Here, Lais’ analysis echoes a particular coding of the *hijab* as a symbol of sexual repression, which is not necessarily reflective of the lived experiences of Muslim women: the ways in which women dress in public does not necessarily say anything about their private sexual lives. Furthermore, to characterise Alia (somewhat patronisingly) as struggling with “confused notions of sexuality” goes beyond what is actually shown in *CK*. In the show, she does not seem “confused”, but rather knowingly uses particular devious strategies to outwit her father. Here, the hegemonic understanding that Muslim women are repressed and in need of saving (Bracke, 2011) seems to colour Lais’ interpretation of the show.

Later in his article, however, Lais arguably contradicts his earlier position, encouraging the reader to understand Alia as emblematic of ‘blow[ing] the whistle’ on a culture in which ‘opportunities to discuss sexuality are closed’ (ibid.). This interpretation, conversely, seems a little too charitable. Whenever Alia outwits her father, the audience shows their approval with laughter, but no discussion of sexuality follows and we are not privy to the more “emancipated” aspects of Alia’s life outside the Khan home. Furthermore, Alia’s wearing of the *hijab* is framed as a (feigned) submission to her father’s will, which she uses in order

to get her way and convince her father that he can trust her to leave the house whenever she likes.¹⁵ On the one hand, as Lais argues, this may be an accurate representation of some Muslim girls' lived experiences and a contestation of the stereotype of the "repressed woman" (Alia has found a way of making her own choices by outwitting her father). On the other hand, wearing the *hijab* is often a complex, personal choice. For example, in "Beyond Subordination vs. Resistance" (2010), Sarah Bilge reconsiders agency in the practice of veiling, going beyond the narrative of the "veiled woman" as an emblem of "civilisational boundaries" between cultures. Along similar lines to Saba Mahmood (2009; 2011), Bilge reminds the reader that agency may not always look how the "secular feminist analyst" expects. Women may use veiling to promote equal opportunity in employment, or to free themselves from the objectifying male gaze. While Alia's case can be seen to represent a realistic "middle ground" between emancipation and oppression, it might also be argued that it overlooks the possibility of wearing the *hijab* as an expression of agency in a society in which it is not the norm.

In the sixth episode of the show's second season, this theme of female sexuality is (again) conflated with aesthetic norms and modes of dress. In this episode, Mrs Khan plans to have a makeover and host a small surprise party for Mr Khan to celebrate their thirty-year anniversary. At the beginning of the episode, we see Mrs Khan trying on a dress with her daughter Shazia. Mrs Khan complains that she feels "ridiculous", but Shazia reassures her that she looks "amazing" and Alia tells her, grudgingly, that she looks "really good". At this moment, their conversation is interrupted by Mr Khan entering the room.

Shazia: How does she [Mrs Khan] look?

Mr Khan: She's got a new outfit.

Mrs Khan: What do you think? What does it look like?

Mr Khan: Like it was expensive.

Shazia (hastily): Well, I think she looks great. You look like a cougar, Mum.

Mrs Khan: A what?

Shazia: A cougar.

Mr Khan: Because she's a brownny-beige colour?

Shazia: No.

¹⁵ This portrayal of Alia as dishonest also seems to correspond with a wider representation of Muslim women as untrustworthy, which at times shifts towards a more dangerous framing of Muslim women as "vulnerable-fanatics" (Saeed, 2007).

Mr Khan: Because she's got funny teeth?

Shazia: *Because* she's a sexy older lady.

Mr Khan: Shazia, how dare you speak about your mother like that! Show some respect!

Shazia (unphased): She's having her hair done this afternoon, too.

Mr Khan: All this vanity's very unbecoming of Muslim peoples... [To his wife and daughter]: You should be more modest and humble.

This scene, on the one hand, reinforces the idea that expressing sexuality – specifically, dressing up to look “sexy” – is something shameful for Muslim women.¹⁶ In this episode, Mrs Khan dresses up for her husband as a romantic gesture, but when Shazia tries to point out the effort that her mother has made, she is told to “show some respect”. This invocation of respect is deeply ironic, following his own comments about his wife's “brownish-beige colour” and “funny teeth”. Furthermore, when Mr Khan asserts that “vanity is unbecoming of Muslim peoples”, this gets a big laugh from the audience, since Mr Khan himself is nothing if not vain. This double standard is made explicit when Mr Khan preaches to his wife and daughter about modesty and then, minutes later, we see him preparing excitedly to star in a promotional video for the mosque. Mr Khan's response to Mrs Khan's makeover contrasts sharply with that of Sajid (a young, “metrosexual” friend of the Khan family).

Sajid: Oh, my goodness. Who is this vision of loveliness?

Mrs Khan: Where?

Sajid: Wow, Mrs Khan. You look more beautiful than ever.

Mrs Khan: Hello, Sajid.

Sajid: New outfit?

Mrs Khan: Yes.

¹⁶ This inscription of female sexuality to dressing up in order to be attractive to men is, of course, problematic. In the context of *CK*, we see a duality in which, whether women wear the *hijab* or dress “seductively”, they are subject to criticism and scrutiny. In her *Feminist Review* article “Not-/Unveiling as an ethical practice” (2011), Nadia Fadil makes a case for understanding the choices not to veil, to “unveil” and to veil as acts of agency that can be emancipatory for the individual.

Sajid: Lovely. So where are you taking her, Mr Khan?

Mr Khan (irritably): What?

Sajid: You can't keep a magnificent creature like that shut up at home.

Mr Khan: What creature? Have we got mice?

Sajid: What's it to be? A romantic corner in your favourite bistro? Just a little dinner a deux?

Mr Khan (grumpily): Does anyone here speak English?

Mrs Khan (turning on her husband): Why can't you be more like Sajid?

Mr Khan: What you have to understand, sweetie, is that Sajid and I are very different. I'm the quintessential Muslim man.

In this scene, again, Mrs Khan is a predominately passive figure, who is often talked *about* but rarely speaks for herself. Her presence serves mainly as a vehicle for underlining the different forms of masculinity embodied by Mr Khan and Sajid. Sajid, in contrast to the brusque and unromantic Mr Khan, showers Mrs Khan with compliments and jumps to the conclusion that Mr Khan must be “taking her somewhere” in her “magnificent” new outfit. When Mrs Khan reproaches Mr Khan for his ill-tempered dismissal of Sajid's flattery, Mr Khan explains to his wife that he is “the quintessential Muslim man”. Here, the idea that the husband should not pay too much attention to his wife's beauty is characterised by Mr Khan as “quintessential” of masculinity within Islam.

In an analysis of gendered tropes in popular Internet humour, Limor Shifman and Dafna Lemish note the importance of an imagined public/private distinction in comedy. While men are portrayed as “doing” in the public sphere, women are ‘associated with “being”/“appearing” in the private sphere, hence they are also evaluated on the basis of their appearance and sexual attractiveness’ (Shifman and Lemish, 2010, 872). In the episode from *CK* described above, these dynamics play out on several few levels: firstly, Mr Khan is identified as the “public” figure, involved in a promotional video for the local mosque. At the same time, Mrs Khan is repeatedly evaluated in terms of her attractiveness (although *not* by Mr Khan, who is “comically” blind to her efforts), and spends the episode preparing a romantic gesture to celebrate her and Mr Khan's anniversary. She remains the doting wife in spite of Mr Khan's disparaging remarks and inattentiveness. This episode, and the series in general, serves as a helpful reminder that any analysis of humour and gender cannot ignore the ways in which masculinity is pitted against femininity to create a

sense of incongruity.¹⁷ While Mrs Khan is not represented as a strong agent of her own sexuality or as a central comedic voice (instead playing the supporting role of the “sensible woman”,¹⁸ who dresses “modestly” and rarely leaves the house), much of the comedy derived from this is at Mr Khan’s expense. This seems to exemplify a recent trend in gendered humour in industrialised countries, in which ridiculing male characters is ‘sometimes a part of “liberating” women’ (ibid, 871).

4.2 Silence on Sexuality: Sexularism, “Speakability” and the Public/Private Divide

In the introduction to this thesis, I noted the work of Deleuze, and in particular his claim that the ‘capacity for affecting and being affected... also defines a body in its individuality’ (Deleuze, 1992, 625). In *MLM*, broadly hailed as a more “progressive” representation of “modern British Islam” than *CK*, there is a general silence on sexuality. This silence, I argue, speaks volumes about the affective boundaries that surround the representation of Muslim women. In a study of the surveillance of gender and sexuality in the French context, Mayanthi Fernando argues that institutional discourses concerning Muslim women render their ‘ostensibly private spiritual and sexual lives [public]... in order to regulate them’ (Fernando, 2014, 688), while at the same time shaming them when they ‘exhibit that which must be hidden’ (ibid, 688). This, Fernando argues, is one example of the ‘cunning of secular power’ (ibid). In *MLM*, the silence surrounding female sexuality deviates from Fernando’s contention that women are compelled to render their private lives public. At the same time, however, this silence seems to be tied more to discomfort and “unspeakability” (Wiering, 2020) than to the agency of Muslim women. In *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), Judith Butler writes:

To move outside the domain of speakability is to risk one’s status as a subject. To embody the norms that govern speakability in one’s speech is to consummate one’s status as a subject. (Butler, 1997, 133: italics in original).

She goes on to add that ‘the conditions of intelligibility are themselves formulated in and by power, and this normative exercise of power is rarely acknowledged as the operation of power’ (ibid, 134). This notion of the invisible operation of power governing the subject reaffirms the value of analysing discourse as a mechanism of power. In the context of comedic representations of female sexuality in Islam, the question

¹⁷ This incongruity between masculinity and femininity, in turn, seems to reaffirm the notion of a gender binary, which Butler labours to deconstruct (Butler, 1990).

¹⁸ This is a common motif in representations of women more generally in comedies (see Kalviknes Bore, 2010). In film studies, it has also been pointed out that women frequently occupy “supporting roles”, keeping the narrative on track by giving sensible advice to complex male characters without having much character development of their own (see Nulman, 2013).

of “speakability” and what is funny *by omission* is an important one. In the second episode of *MLM*’s first season (“Wifey Riddim”), Mobeen becomes convinced that his irascible teenaged sister Aqsa needs a maternal figure in her life, to guide her on questions of gender and sexuality. When Mobeen tries to broach the subject of sexuality, the conversation is awkward and unsuccessful:

Mobeen: Aqsa!! I need to talk to ya. I dunno how to say this but...

Aqsa (looking scornful but sympathetic): Is it your breath?

Mobeen: Nah...When I was your age, yeah...

Aqsa: You had no friends?

Mobeen: No, no, it’s not that, listen to what I’m saying.

Aqsa: Loads of spots.

Mobeen: No, no, you’ve got to listen to what I’m saying.

Aqsa: At least the spots stopped people noticing your breath.

Mobeen (suddenly raising his voice, flustered): Boys! [Aqsa jumps]. Yeah... Sorry. [In a softer voice]. Boys, yeah. What does you think of boys, then?

Aqsa (dryly): I think they are human beings.

Mobeen: No, no, but what I mean to say is like... you know, like, at your age, boys might come up to you and be like, “Yeah can I have your snapchat and that?” Yeah?

Aqsa (reluctantly): Yeah?

Mobeen: Well then stab him. Or tell me and I’ll stab him for ya...

Aqsa (upset): I can’t believe you, Mobeen.

Mobeen: All boys are just weirdos, don’t talk to them, please.

Aqsa: Oh... you think I mess around with boys and that? I swear, all men are stupid, thick idiots.

Mobeen (hurt): Yeah, but not me, cos, like, I’m not a stupid thick idiot, and I’m a man.

Aqsa: I wish I had a mum here sometimes, and not just a brother.

In this dialogue, humour derives from Mobeen's discomfort in broaching the subject of sexuality with his sister. At the same time, Aqsa is also reluctant to discuss her sexuality with her brother. She appears embarrassed, which is understandable given her age and the context of their sibling relationship, but also shows a certain degree of maturity and skill in her sarcastic handling of Mobeen's clumsy questions: initially, she plays dumb, before faux-sombrely reminding Mobeen that boys "are human beings". When this fails to derail the conversation, she shifts to hyperbole, exclaiming that "all men are stupid, thick idiots", and thus putting Mobeen on the defensive. It is striking that this is the closest the main characters come to an explicit discussion of gender and sexuality in the show's four seasons.¹⁹

4.3 Humiliation, shame and speaking back

In *CK*, there are also a few moments in which this theme of "speakability" coincides with the affect of shame. In the final episode of the show's first season, Alia's sister Shazia finds herself in the middle of an unexpected scandal, after Mr Khan inadvertently starts a rumour that she had an affair with a family friend, Imran Parvez, before meeting her fiancé, Amjad. In the scene in which Shazia first learns about this rumour, Mr Khan explains the situation in the following euphemistic language:

Mr Khan: Your mother thinks that you and Imran Parvez, you know...

Shazia: No, I don't know.

Mr Khan: You know. The thing.

Shazia: What thing?

Mrs Khan: The thing! The thing!

Shazia: You mean sex?

Mr Khan (horrified): Shhh!

Even the word "sex" provokes a silencing reaction in Mr Khan. This prompts laughter from the audience, who see Mr Khan's response as comically puritanical. This also seems to draw the notion of "speakability" together with another key concept in this discussion: namely, "sexularism" (Scott, 2009). "Sexularism" is

¹⁹ One exception is a brief dalliance between Mobeen and Aqsa's teacher Miss Aitken, in the show's second season. However, this romance does not surpass the level of flirtation and a coffee date derailed by a man who used to buy drugs from Mobeen.

a term coined by historian Joan Scott to describe an imagined correlation between secularism and ‘the alleged abandoning of supposedly outdated social protocols of sex’ as part of “Western modernity” (Wiering, 2017, 7).²⁰ Later in the episode, Shazia rails against her parents’ responses to the idea that she might have had previous sexual partners. “What if I did go out with Imran Parvez?” she asks. “What if I went out with half of Sparkhill? Would that matter to you?” Mr Khan interjects with, “Which half are we talking about?” prompting Shazia to respond:

That’s not the point! ... My body is my own... I can do what I want with it. It shouldn’t matter to Amjad what I’ve done in the past, and it shouldn’t matter to you either.

Her parents reluctantly agree, but are clearly relieved when she reassures them that she has not in fact had any previous sexual partners. While her parents here accept her assertion of a common Western understanding of “sexual emancipation”, she is nonetheless shamed throughout the episode for an imagined dalliance with Imran Parvez. Mrs Khan is particularly distressed at the idea, exclaiming:

Do you know what it means to have a daughter who has been with other boys before she’s married? She’ll be ruined! We’ll all be finished here, finished, over, dead and buried.

Much of the episode’s humour derives from this perception and from the ensuing drama of Shazia’s humiliation. This representation of a “prudish” approach to female sexuality within Islam prompts hearty laughter from the show’s audience. In a sense, both *CK* and *MLM* seem to reflect a polarized imaginary that distinguishes religious and irreligious takes on sex and sexuality. If humour may be understood as a marker of social inclusion or exclusion (Billig, 2005), it is notable that these fictionalised examples, in which humour derives from Muslim women feeling shame or embarrassment as other characters make public claims about their private lives, meet with the audience’s laughter. This seems to affirm an imagined religious/secular binary with regard to speaking about sex and sexuality.

While sexuality is addressed only indirectly in *MLM*, it is more often centred by reviewers of the show. This can be understood on a number of levels. Often, sexuality is seen as an integral identity marker that should be “taken seriously” and handled with sensitivity.²¹ In the case of representations of sexuality within a minority religious and racial group, it is important to acknowledge the traces of colonial history at

²⁰ It is beyond the scope of this thesis to unpack the multiple complex and sometimes problematic meanings of the terms “secularism” and “modernity”. For a detailed introduction to this topic, see Scott’s 2009 lecture ‘Sexularism’. For further relevant reflections on religion, secularism and sexuality, see Schrijvers and Wiering (2018).

²¹ Paradoxically, many female stand-up comedians also build their careers around sexual humour and breaking taboos in relation to sexuality (e.g. Mae Martin or Katharine Ryan).

play. As historian Antoinette Burton writes, regulated ‘ideologies of gender and sexuality were foundational to the projects of modern coloniality’ (Burton, 1999, 2). In the introduction to this thesis, I discussed Ahmed’s reading of the role of emotions in acts of “speaking out”. While it might be an overstatement to claim that the ways in which humour can be expressed are *always* ‘bound up with gendered histories of imperialism and capitalism’ (Ahmed, 2014, 170), it can be argued that, in the cases of *MLM* and *CK*, female sexuality seems to be represented predominately in terms of restrictions tied to shame or silence. Admittedly, these representations of Muslim women in *CK* (and *MLM*, to some extent) can be interpreted differently: *CK*, communications scholar Anamik Saha argues, adopts ‘a very orthodox take on the genre... of British situation comedy’ (Saha, 2013, 99). Unlike representations of Muslim culture on “serious” TV that are ‘still mostly exoticised and orientalised... there is something potentially counter-hegemonic in situating a comedy programme about Pakistanis squarely in the ever-so-British tradition of BBC sitcoms’ (ibid.). Ultimately, however, *CK*’s representation of British Pakistani²² culture seems to be far from “counter-hegemonic”.

4.4 Stand-Up: Sexuality, Identity and Securitisation

While the sitcoms discussed above seem to represent female sexuality as something “taboo” and marginal in Islam, comedian Shazia Mirza takes quite a difference stance in her 2016 show *The Kardashians Made Me Do It*. *TKMMDI* is a comedy set inspired by a real news story about three London schoolgirls who left home to join ISIS. I first saw the show in London in 2017 – at the time, I had not developed this research topic but I remember being struck by the ambiguity and boldness of the topic, and the audience’s uncertain response. This is noteworthy because my recollections of my first response seeing the show live (what I found funny, discomfiting etc.) may inform my analysis now.

In the right-wing²³ tabloid newspaper *Metro*, Sharon Lougher describes *TKMMDI* in the following terms: “Why girls fall for terrorists: Shazia Mirza’s new stand-up show says it’s sex, not religion, turning teenage girls into jihadi brides” (Lougher, *Metro*, 2016). In this article, Lougher summarises Mirza’s show as claiming that the reason British Muslim girls become jihadi brides has nothing to do with religion, rather deriving from ‘a hero worship of the type usually reserved for boy bands’ (ibid). These jihadi brides are, as Mirza puts it in the show, ‘repressed, rebellious, horny teenage girls’ enticed into joining ‘the One Direction

²² It is beyond the scope of this thesis to delineate potential differences in terms of ethnic belonging and culture between British Pakistani Muslims and other Muslim demographics in Britain. All case studies in my thesis focus on South Asian British Muslims, the majority Britain Muslim group and the most widely represented in TV entertainment.

²³ When paying attention to the political alignments of media sources, it appears that left-wing problematizations of Islam in relation to gender and sexuality hinge on classical feminist models of emancipation, while right-wing problematizations place a greater emphasis on the potential radicalization of Muslim women. These different threads can be understood as typifying different formulations or “grammars” of the secular (Asad, 2003, 17).

of Islam for no-guilt, halal sex of which Allah approves' (Mirza, 2016). On the one hand, this narrative in Mirza's comedy seems to echo Lais' framing of Muslim women like *CK's* Alia as sexually repressed. On the other, however, Mirza's comedy counters this framing, characterising jihadi girls as "rebellious" and "horny". Mirza, like Lais in his review of *CK*, is clearly exaggerating for comedic effect, but the show gained considerable media acclaim as political comedy that provides insight into the radicalisation of young girls. In an interview for the centre-left broadsheet newspaper *The Telegraph*, Mirza admits that she did not 'particularly want' to do the show to begin with, and only began thinking about it because TV and radio stations kept asking for her views on the topic as a British Muslim comedian (interview with Sanghani, *The Telegraph*, 2015). In the interview, Mirza jokingly adds, 'I had no idea why – it wasn't like those girls consulted me' (ibid.). This observation resonates with Tania Saeed's analysis of the construction of Muslim women as "vulnerable-fanatics", who repeatedly 'have to prove their innocence, lest they are thought to be extremists' (Saeed, 2016, 66). Earlier in her career, 'all people wanted [Mirza] to do was give them insight into Islam and terrorism' (Mirza, interview with Homa Khaleeli, 2015, *The Guardian*). This is partly unsurprising since she first made a name for herself on the British comedy circuit by opening a set performed shortly after 9/11 with the line 'My name is Shazia Mirza, or at least that's what it says on my pilot's license'. However, Mirza later resisted this limiting of her comedy to her identity as a Muslim woman. In an interview in 2005, when asked about her decision to stop wearing the *hijab* on stage, Mirza explained: 'people are very narrow-minded and they see you dressed like that and they think oh, well she can't do this and she can't do that' (Lockyer and Pickering, 2005, 117). In *TKMMDI*, this resistance to stereotyping shines through, as she both challenges stereotypes concerning sexuality in the lives of Muslim women in her own outspoken performance, and affirms certain stereotypes regarding Islam as sexually repressive and dangerous through her representation of the young women who joined ISIS.

At the beginning of her *TKMMDI* set, Mirza deliberately positions herself as a Muslim woman, and sets the tone for the show with the line, 'These days as a Muslim woman you get an award just for leaving the house'. This is, perhaps, particularly important given the sensitive content of the show, which weaves her own lived experience as a Muslim woman growing up in Britain together with those of the three London schoolgirls who joined ISIS. Later in the set, Mirza plays on her identity as a Muslim woman in relation to the themes of sexuality and radicalisation in the following vignette:

My mum can't find me anyone to marry. My friend Matthew looks at me with great concern and says, "You're not thinking of becoming a Jihadi bride are you?" Would I do that? ... The sunsets... in Syria are meant to be very romantic... I'd get a husband, wouldn't have to work, and would definitely get a place in heaven. Yes I'd miss my hair straighteners and hot pants, but that's a small price to pay.

Here, Mirza pre-empts some of the stereotypes her audience may hold about Muslim women; that they fall into the category of the “vulnerable-fanatic” (Saeed, 2016, 2), prone to becoming Jihadi brides, or that their sole aspirations in life are to “get a husband” and not have to work. Often, as we saw in the case of *CK*, comedic representations of Muslim women centralise their marital status and attractiveness in the eyes of their husband. In Mirza’s comedy, she references the stereotype that Muslim women’s marriages are arranged by their parents, while at the same time satirising the “Western” gendered stereotypes that women are easily ensnared by romantic sunsets, and concerned only with being able to straighten their hair and wear hot pants, even when deciding to move to Syria to join ISIS. This duality typifies Mirza’s recent work, in which she simultaneously ‘jokes about her experiences... as a young Asian Muslim in Western culture and uses her comedy to challenge the prejudices of non-Muslims and... particular conservative views held by Muslims on women and their position... in society’ (Lockyer and Pickering, 2005, 100). When defending the show against its critics, Mirza invoked her identity as a British Muslim woman to legitimise her comedy. In one interview about *TKMMDI*, Mirza states:

I’ve had a life like these girls. I’m from the same religion. I feel like I have some affiliation with them... If I wasn’t from the background... it would be very difficult for me to do [the show].

(Interview with Sanghani, *The Telegraph*, 2015).

Here, we see that, while Mirza does not want to be typecast as a female Muslim comedian, she uses her identity strategically as a tool in managing audience reception of her comedy. In a promotional brochure for the show, Mirza is quoted as saying, ‘in the context of my own upbringing, my life was exactly the same as these girls growing up, but I rebelled in the normal way - I dyed my hair pink and took drugs. I didn’t join a terrorist organization’ (Mirza, 2018). Here, Mirza again simultaneously aligns herself with these girls in terms of upbringing and distances herself from their radical “rebellion”.

In his article “Dave Allen’s Stand-Up Monologues: An Epidemiological Approach” (2005), Francisco Yus underlines the importance of mutuality and immediacy to audience reception of stand-up comedy, writing that humour derives from ‘the public realization of the mutual manifestness which spreads in the audience’ (Yus, 2005, 8). This spatial conception of mutual experience spreading almost “epidemiologically” calls to mind Sara Ahmed’s understanding of emotions as “doing things” as they move in different directions (Ahmed, 2014).²⁴ According to Yus, in stand-up comedy, a similarly dynamic combination of ‘public representations (monologues) and the audience’s background knowledge (mental

²⁴ For a more detailed outline of this approach to emotions, see chapter 1 of this thesis.

representations)' leads to 'the shifting of representations from private storage to the manifestly collective and cultural' (Yus, 2005, 10). This motion from private to public is often fraught, since different audiences bring different "background knowledge" to their encounters with stand-up comedy. By simultaneously identifying with the audience ("rebellious in the normal way", a perhaps deliberate paradox) and with the girls who joined ISIS (in terms of upbringing), Mirza negotiates the space between public and private, collective and personal. Indeed, throughout *TKMMDI*, Mirza walks a fine line between speaking from a legitimising "insider perspective" on the radicalisation of young Muslim girls, and reminding the audience that she is "normal". For example, after delivering the joke on her conversation with her friend Matthew about becoming a Jihadi bride, Mirza shifts tone, reassuring her audience:

It's a joke, obviously. They wouldn't have me. They're not looking for an in-house comedian. I'm thirty years too old and when it's hot I get my ankles out... for the lads.

Mirza's colloquial tone here evokes a sense of affinity and familiarity with the audience. She posits an alternative to the dominant cultural discourse concerning Muslim women, by representing herself as an agent of her own sexuality, who makes her own decisions about how to dress. At the same time, however, it is an alternative in keeping with a particular normativity about female sexuality (as something performed "for the lads") that already operates in the British context. Thus, while stand-up comedy offers a 'performative space within which to discursively situate the self in radical opposition to collective categories' (Smith, 2018, 90), this is not necessarily the approach adopted by the performer. Indeed, to task the stand-up performer with "situating the self in radical opposition to collective categories", while potentially empowering, might also be experienced as restrictive, something Mirza seems to recognise.

In *The Politics of British Stand-Up Comedy: The New Alternative*, Sophie Quirk describes stand-up as 'an act of storytelling as community-building and expectation-setting' (Quirk, 2018, 8). When characterised in this way, the potential cultural significance of *TKMMDI* as both a contestation and a reiteration of traditional expectations of how Muslim women experience and express their sexuality becomes apparent. On the one hand, in an interview about the show, Mirza states that she

[c]ouldn't see a boy, let alone chase one. It's the same with these girls – no boyfriends, no sex before marriage... They have seen these [jihadi fighters] on TV and some of them – you have to agree – are hot. And they think "I want a bit of that – and it's all halal." (*The Guardian*, 2015).

In the show itself, she also reaffirms the image of Muslim girls as sexually repressed, while at the same time implicitly problematising it with her outspoken, unabashed delivery of jokes about sexual desire. In one part of the show, she explains that, 'They look at the pictures [of jihadi fighters] and go, "Phwoar!"' In

my own viewing of the set – and in footage I have reviewed in developing this analysis – the audience seemed a little uneasy at this line, not knowing quite what to make of it. Mirza’s delivery here is confronting in its amalgamation of the themes of radicalisation and extremism with outward expressions of sexuality. However, I would argue that it also challenges the viewer because of the perceived incongruity of the idea of a young Muslim girl, who (as we saw in the examples of *CK* and *MLM*) might typically be represented as sexually repressed or prudish, being explicitly motivated by sexual desire. In his study of satire and “unlaughter”, Karl Malmqvist argues that an audience may express ‘disapproval of breach[es] of expectations through unlaughter, attempting to bring the satirist back into line’ (Malmqvist, 2015, 749). This assessment would explain the audience’s “unlaughter” at this point in Mirza’s set. Indeed, this is something Mirza herself is clearly aware of: she continues, ‘These are big, hairy, macho men – Brad Pitt with a Qur’an’. At this reference to Hollywood culture, the audience relaxes and laughs more comfortably. Through this comparison, Mirza normalises the idea of Muslim teenage girls being attracted to ISIS fighters. At the same time, *TKMMDI* affirms the stereotype that Muslim women in Britain are raised to feel shame concerning sexuality. She adds that this suppression pushes Muslim girls towards radicalisation – an interpretation absent from most discourse on Muslim women as “vulnerable-fanatics” (Saeed, 2016), which remains silent on the topic of sexuality.

Many reviewers of *TKMMDI* praised the show’s “bravery” for addressing such a challenging and politically significant topic. In an article for conservative broadsheet newspaper *The Times*, Suna Erdem situates Mirza’s comedy alongside that of other “brave” female Muslim comedians Sajeela Kershi and Sadia Azmat who “fight ISIS through stand-up comedy” (Erdem, *The Times*, 2016). The following line from Erdem’s interview with Kershi is telling:

Listen to Muslim women joking in the kitchen and you’ll realise they’re really funny. Some of the dirtiest jokes I’ve ever heard were told by a woman in a burqa.

Here, being able to speak openly about sexuality (to tell “dirty jokes”) is seen as synonymous with being “really funny”. This seems to imply that speaking openly about sexuality is an important step in the deconstruction of the “humorless Muslim women” motif (Kuipers, 2011). It is also noteworthy that Kershi refers here to women “joking in the kitchen”. At first glance, this seems a little ironic, reinforcing the stereotype of women “belonging in the kitchen”, even as Kershi contests other stereotypes. Conversely, this might be interpreted as an anecdote that acknowledges that some Muslim women *do* spend time in the kitchen, and turn this into a space for self-expression through humour. Like Kershi’s, Mirza’s stand-up comedy reimagines social reality in ways unavailable within “serious” forms of discourse. In the case of *TKMMDI*, this reimagining takes the form of combining typically distinct themes and categories of identity

(e.g. radicalisation and sexuality, and Western and Muslim gendered identity), and playing on their incongruence for comedic effect.

4.5 “Real Housewives of ISIS”: Securitisation, Agency and Public Discourse on Satire

It is not only in stand-up comedy that this proclivity towards challenging the status quo can be seen. In the British context, the history of sketch comedy as part of a “countercultural” movement dates back to the 1960s and the famous comedy troupe Monty Python. In the section that follows, I will analyse a short (90-second) sketch entitled “Real Housewives of ISIS” featured on the BBC sketch show *Revoltin* (2017) that seems to follow in this tradition of parodying religion and satirising gender norms.²⁵ The themes of modes of dress as a form of self-expression and the notions of shame and “speakability” with regard to female sexuality identified earlier in this chapter are also present in this case, and the sketch is similar in tone and content to *TKMMDI*. However, “Real Housewives of ISIS” at times pushes the boundaries of satire still further, and has generated a lively public and political discourse around securitisation and the comedic representation of Muslim women.

In this sketch, we are introduced to four jihadi brides as they speak about their experiences of life in Syria in (as the sketch’s title suggests, and in striking similarity with Mirza’s *TKMMDI*) a parody of American reality TV. The sketch begins with a panning shot of the four brides, taking selfies while dressed in the *abaya* and *hijab*. As the sketch continues, we are introduced to the brides: firstly, we see Afsana taking a selfie as she says, “It’s only three days till the beheading... and I’ve got no idea what I’m gonna wear!” As in *TKMMDI*, the humour here seems to derive from the fact that, while one would expect the girl’s concern to be with the shocking, violent act of beheading, she instead fulfils the normativity of the Western woman always thinking about her appearance. Next, we see Mel, who poses grumpily, hands on hips, as she explains, “Abdul seduced me online... he had me at free healthcare”. This jab at the underfunded National Health Service in the UK underlines Mel’s “Britishness” and seems incongruous when mentioned as a strategy of seduction. Thirdly, we are introduced to Zaynab, who explains: “this is my sixth marriage... eh... I’ve been widowed five times...” She is interrupted by the sound of an explosion and the camera shakes. Her face falls, then she smiles half-heartedly and amends her statement: “six times.” Finally, Hadiya is shown imitating gunshots with her right hand as she pulls an aggressive facial expression. “I’m glad I moved over here,” she says. “It’s everything those guys on the chatrooms told me it would be... and it’s full of so many wonderful surprises”. As Hadiya says this, the camera cuts to her scrubbing the floor of her home and grumbling, “Didn’t have to do this in Birmingham!” Here, Hadiya’s claim to be

²⁵ See Wiersma’s article “Redeeming *Life of Brian*: How Monty Python (Ironically) Proclaims Christ *Sub Contrario*” (2012).

“glad” that she moved to Syria is undercut by the clip of her being forced to perform tedious domestic tasks. At the same time, the fact that she “didn’t have to do this in Birmingham” echoes the assumption that the “emancipated” women in Britain should not be consigned to domestic labour.²⁶ In her ethnography *Pious Practices and Secular Constraints* (2015), Jeanette Jouili challenges this stance, arguing that the experiences of Muslim women in Western Europe cannot and should not be framed in terms of ‘emancipatory promise’, since Muslim women may exert agency ‘squarely outside of liberal paradigms’ (Jouili, 2015, 95).

Interestingly, in media discourse on the sketch “Real Housewives of ISIS”,²⁷ this question of agency arises repeatedly. For example, Melanie Smith, a researcher for the Women and Extremism programme at the *Institute of Strategic Dialogue* criticises the show, stating:

I think this is less about grooming online... [That] takes away the agency of the person being radicalised and speaks to gender stereotypes around Isis, with the press and government saying “innocent” women are groomed while men are “angry” jihadists.

(Interview with Patrikarakos, *New Statesman*, 2017).

This assessment contrasts Mirza’s representation of the young girls she discusses in *TKMMDI* as misguided and motivated by sexual desire. Instead, Smith sees young women who radicalise²⁸ as equally as violent and angry as their male counterparts. Director of counter-extremism Women’s Rights Organization *Inspire* Sara Khan shares the same view, writing that ‘women from our country (as opposed to girls who in their vulnerability were groomed) willingly chose to join the group, many admitting the desire to live in this caliphate’ (Khan, *IBT* newspaper, 2017). While it is not clear where Khan proposes to draw the line between vulnerable young “girls” and women who “willingly choose” to join ISIS, her reference to “our country” is mirrored by a particular narrative of “British humour” that operates alongside framings of the Muslim woman as “vulnerable-fanatic” in various responses to the sketch. For example, Khan claims that the sketch ‘provides a taste of... the dry wit and sarcasm we Brits are well known for’ (Khan, *IBT*, 2017). Similarly, comedian Richard Gadd commented, in defence of the sketch, that satire is ‘a fundamental part of British culture, it’s part of the fabric of our country’ (interview with Topping, *The Guardian*, 2017). This defence of satire as a part of British identity has served to legitimise numerous controversial comedic works in

²⁶ This notion is problematic on two levels. Firstly, data collected in the last two decades suggests that women continue to conduct the majority of unpaid labour in the domestic sphere in Britain (and globally) (see Criado-Perez, 2019). And secondly, to impose a particular model of the “emancipated woman” implies that there is one “correct” way for agency to be performed.

²⁷ There is a strikingly substantial quantity of media engagement with this sketch, considering it is a 90-second skit in a fringe TV sketch show. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to discuss all the available material, but it certainly merits further analysis.

²⁸ Using the active rather than passive voice here has implications for the question of agency. Muslim women are often characterized as “being radicalized” as opposed to “*radicalizing*”. I use “radicalize” here because this seems most in alignment with Smith’s argument.

recent decades, but seems particularly prescient here since national identity is also often centralised in discourse on radicalisation.

Conversely, it might be argued that the girls in “Real Housewives of ISIS” come across as naïve and ‘no different to their non-Muslim peer group’ (Patrikarakos, *New Statesman*, 2017), like the wannabe Kardashians of Mirza’s *TKMMDI*. This becomes particularly apparent midway through the sketch, when we see Afsana and Mel sitting on a sofa as Zaynab asks off-stage, “Ready girls?” Afsana answers, “Yeah! Hang on, I’m recording it for Instagram”. Zaynab enters wearing a suicide vest and exclaiming, excitedly, “Ta-da! What do you think?! Ahmed surprised me with it yesterday!” Both Afsana and Mel nod approvingly, as Afsana takes a picture and types aloud into her phone: “Hashtag OMG. Hashtag Jihadi Jane.²⁹ Hashtag Death to the West, ISIS emojis”. Here, the comedic strategy of juxtaposition is again used, in the mixing of a “normal” Western digital vernacular (“hashtag”, “emojis”) with the violent language of ISIS. In the sketch, Zaynab continues posing and Mel says, “Aww babes, I love it. You look *gorgeous*.” The camera then cuts to Mel in a separate interview, saying emphatically, “She looked massive. You’re gonna need a lotta Semtex³⁰ to kill that one”. The dark comedy here derives from the contrast between what Mel says *to* Zaynab and what she says behind her back, and from the fact that, in her separate “interview”, Mel firstly emphasises that Zaynab does not “look good” in the suicide vest, and only afterwards references what the item is actually for in unsettlingly crude, dispassionate terms. At this point, Hadiya walks on, saying proudly, “Hey ladies, what do you think of *this*?” She wears an identical suicide vest and poses next to Zaynab for a moment, before noticing her lookalike, her face falling.

Afsana: Awkward!

Hadiya (in a separate interview, furious): What a complete bitch! She knew I had that jacket. Copies everything. Copied this! [She gestures her current outfit, the *abaya*].

Afsana: Oh my god, it was so cringe. Hashtag matchy matchy.

Zaynab: It’s times like this I wish I never moved out here. [She looks directly down the camera, with a sad, pouting expression].

Again, the way in which the young girls are depicted here seems deliberately “normal” (in the sense of fitting into a Western normative image of how teenaged girls behave). While the suicide vest may be shocking to the audience, to the girls, it is simply part of a competition to look good. Language such as

²⁹ This seems to reference the American convert to Islam who went by the same name, and, in 2014, was convicted of terrorism-related crimes in a high-profile trial.

³⁰ A plastic explosive.

“cringe” serves to further reinforce this image of the girls as “normal” teenaged girls in an abnormal situation. The dry irony of Zaynab saying that this moment makes her wish she never joined ISIS is rendered more impactful through the breaking of the fourth wall.³¹ This moment – and various cuts between shots in the sketch – exemplifies the use of the audio/visual medium to comedic effect. The viewer is expected to find certain moments in the sketch shocking and challenging, and is guided in when to laugh by the cuts before punchlines are delivered. Shaista Gohir, chair of the Muslim Women’s Network UK, praised the sketch for demonstrating the potential of comedy to serve as ‘a powerful tool in preventing the radicalisation of young women’ (interview with Topping, *The Guardian*, 2017):

Everyone just uses the same old approach [to combat Isis], telling terrible stories of girls who went, but this... gets the message across in a satirical way... Teenagers are... more likely to share humorous videos than didactic messages... We need different strategies and this is one of them.

4.6 Positionality, visibility, and mis/interpretation

Whether it is interpreted as impactful, as undermining female agency (here aligned with accountability), as offensive, or as funny, this short sketch proves an invaluable example of the capacity for humour to generate discourse and open up new perspectives. As I watched this sketch, I had the uncomfortable feeling that, while its dry tone appealed to my sense of humour, this is not something I should be laughing at. This discomfort may derive from my own positionality as a white, British, middle-class feminist, in the privileged position of not having to constantly grapple with visibility in the public sphere. In engaging with stereotyping, I fear being unwittingly complicit in misrepresentation if I misinterpret my examples. While analysing Mirza’s *TKMMDI* and “Real Housewives of ISIS”, I noticed my own internalised assumptions about how Muslim women *want* radicalised Muslim women to be represented (which does not correspond with Gohir’s response). However, some Muslim women quoted in media articles *do* seem discontented with the narratives in *TKMMDI* and “Real Housewives of ISIS”. For example, Sulekh Hassan, a British Muslim woman, is quoted as saying:

As a visibly Muslim woman who wears the *abaya* on occasion... I felt offended that my choice of clothing was being inextricably linked with terrorism... The reality is that visibly Muslim women

³¹ “Breaking the fourth wall” refers to a convention in film and theatre in which the actor directly acknowledges or addresses the audience. It is a comedic strategy that has, incidentally, recently been popularised by the (female) leads of the British TV sitcoms *Miranda* (2009-) and *Fleabag* (2016-2019).

have been physically and verbally attacked on our streets. This isn't about us being overly sensitive, it is a product of the real dangers we face as visibly Muslim women.

(Interview with Patrikarakos, *New Statesman*, 2017).

Here, Hassan's repeated references to visibility are striking, and resonate with my reflections on my positionality. When thinking about representation in both academic and political discourse, visibility is a recurrent theme. The presupposition, typically, is that more representation leads to increased visibility, which makes minority groups feel safer and better "integrated". At the same time, in the Western European context, citizenship is often framed in terms of visibility and the conviction that 'a good citizen does not hide anything' (Amiriaux, 2014, 86, my translation). Within this framework, visibly Muslim women face real dangers, while at the same time constantly having to prove that they do not pose a threat. In other words, visibility is not always experienced as a positive; instead, there seem to be "good" and "bad" kinds of visibility, with the visibility of Muslim women being "inextricably linked with terrorism". Although this sketch is exaggerating for comedic effect, Hassan's critique points to an important factor that is easily forgotten when analysing comedy: namely, the potential for viewers to misread it or take it literally. In an analysis of a controversial cartoon published by the *New Yorker* shortly after Obama's election in 2008, Craig Stewart notes that satire is particularly at risk of being misunderstood where the discourse being satirised is highly "pre-saturated". In the run-up to Obama's election, Stewart argues, conservative discourse was so "pre-saturated" with narratives about the Obamas as threatening racial "Others" that the cartoon image of Barack Obama in a 'generically Muslim turban, robe and sandals' and Michelle Obama as a black Militant, with 'a machine gun strapped to her back' (Stewart, 2013, 203) could not be satirised in a 'sufficiently exaggerated' way 'to mark the image as... satire' (ibid, 214) as opposed to insult. Similarly, it might be argued that contemporary British securitisation discourse makes it difficult to satirise Muslim women who join ISIS without either reinforcing stereotypes by which all "visibly Muslim women" are "inextricably linked with terrorism" or creating a new stereotype that all jihadi brides are "horny teenagers" made vulnerable by their suppressed sexualities. However, when asked to comment on "Real Housewives of ISIS", Mirza takes rather a different stance, stating that:

Muslims aren't offended... There's a long history [in Britain] of people from different religions mocking themselves – Christians, Jews, Catholics – why can't Muslims make jokes about themselves? If we are going to continue that proud tradition of satire that has to be allowed.

(Interview with Topping, *The Guardian*, 2017).

This statement from Mirza is surprising. While, in other interviews, Mirza voices her discomfort with being labelled a “spokesperson” for Muslim women, here, she repeatedly uses the collective pronoun “we” in her response to “Real Housewives of ISIS”. Her reference to the “proud tradition of satire” again centralises humour as a key facet of British identity, to which Muslims should subscribe. Mirza’s tone in this quotation raises another dimension of the dynamics of power in comedy. The comedian, of course, has a platform on which to speak publicly, and a well-known comedian like Mirza is often invited to comment on topics related to her identity as a Muslim woman in Britain. When doing so, she speaks not only as a comedian, but as a public figure in some more general sense. At the same time, the fact that she works as a comedian seems to give her credibility as a commentator. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to unpack the implications of this fully, it serves as a valuable reminder that the comedic performance does not exist in a vacuum, and has implications for the status of the performer (and the community she represents) in social life more generally.

4.7 Conclusions: Stereotypes reiterated, contested and reformulated

In *MLM*, *CK* and *TKMMDI*, female sexuality within Islam is represented in a range of ways. The shows variously draw on, reinforce and problematise the notion of a binary between secularism as sexually liberating and Islam as sexually repressive. In some cases, strategies for dealing with sexual repression serve, paradoxically, to reinforce the stereotype of Muslim women as repressed. For example, Alia is forced to deceive and outwit her father in order to free herself from his expectations. Similarly, in *TKMMDI*, even as Mirza undermines the stereotype of the repressed Muslim woman by going on stage and making jokes about “horny Jihadi brides”, her stand-up simultaneously echoes the stereotype of the sexually repressed Muslim woman. Furthermore, *TKMMDI* and “The Real Housewives of ISIS” seem to reinforce the stereotype of Muslim women as “vulnerable-fanatics”. Perhaps unsurprisingly given the polysemic qualities of humour, the question of whether a stereotypical framing of Muslim women’s sexuality is affirmed or contested remains open. However, as the varied media responses to the shows reflect, perhaps this is precisely the point: by virtue of their inherent ambiguity, what these shows *do* provide is a lively, public discourse about dimensions of Muslim women’s lived experiences previously ‘invisible in the public domain’ (Ansari, 2004, 265).

Furthermore, the comedic technique of juxtaposition often seems to operate to underline the vices of particular characters and, by association, the ideologies they represent. When Mr Khan or Mobeen is the butt of the joke, this challenges a stereotypical model of patriarchal order within the Islamic tradition. In *TKMMDI*, Mirza does not endorse the actions of those girls who joined ISIS, but she does use her stand-up to challenge a Western model of female emancipation, which she views as hypocritically proscriptive. This

calls to mind Talal Asad's analysis of secular critique, in which he notes that, behind the 'putative transparency of secularism' lies ambiguity and normativity (Asad, 2009, 2). He adds:

Unseating governance of this sort is the very signature of political, social and cultural critique; it targets what is presumptive... in the current order of things. (ibid.)

In this chapter, we have seen how comedic representations of Muslim women can be oriented towards "unseating governance" and cultural critique, by making "what is presumptive" about female sexuality in Islam visible and debatable. This plays out particularly clearly in the ways in which *TKMMDI* and the "Real Housewives of ISIS" bring together the (typically separated) themes of radicalisation and female sexuality. At the same time, the securitisation framework remains intact, with the stereotype of Muslim women as sexually repressed serving to explain what makes radicalisation "alluring". Throughout this chapter, we have caught glimpses of the potential of humour to act outside the 'boundar[ies] of what is considered the suitable gendered (religious) bodily subject' (Valkonen and Wallenius-Korkalu, 2015, 9), and to deconstruct the imagined binary between the "secular" and religious frameworks of female sexuality. We have also begun to see how stereotypes can act as tools in the deconstruction of other stereotypes. This dynamic of humour will be explored further in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Comedy, the Family and The “Oppressed Muslim Women” At Home

In *MLM*, the stereotype of the “oppressed Muslim woman” is continuously contested through the representation of the relationship between Mobeen and his sister Aqsa. In the show’s first episode, we are introduced to Aqsa as she rebukes Mobeen for braiding her hair so slowly that she can “hear [it] growing”, and a bickering, bantering rapport is immediately established between the two characters.

Mobeen: I just don’t feel comfortable with the level of tension in your scalp. You know as well, they’ve got these extracts of volcanic ash clouds that...

Aqsa (interrupting): Mum never took this long to do my braids.

Mobeen: Well... she can’t reach your hair from Karachi,³² can she? So you’re stuck with your big brother doing your hair.

Aqsa: Can’t I get a professional to do them?

At this, Mobeen takes offence, claiming that he *is* a professional. In the exchange, Aqsa is set up as the dominant figure in their relationship, and Mobeen conforms to none of the stereotypes that shape discourse on how Muslim men treat women. Admittedly, at various points in the show, Mobeen takes on a more “macho” persona (getting into fights etc.), but his respect for women, and his conviction that this is compatible with his identity as a Muslim man, is unwavering. This is grounded repeatedly in his relationship with his younger sister, who, in many ways, sets the rules in the house. In an article for left-wing broadsheet newspaper *The Guardian*, Stuart Jeffries praises *MLM*, writing:

³² The capital of the Pakistani province of Sindh.

Not only is it rare to see a bearded Muslim male as a protagonist on screen in general, but one plaiting his little sister's hair is unheard of.

This is not something that goes unnoticed by the characters within the show. Indeed, later in the same episode, Mobeen becomes the butt of the joke once again for his hair-plaiting endeavours, this time at the hands of Aqsa's best friend Karima. When Mobeen attempts to assert his authority by warning Karima to "stay well away from" a young man who is involved in drug dealing, she responds sarcastically, "Why? What're you gonna do? Are you gonna braid my hair really, really slowly?" Both she and Aqsa giggle as they walk away, leaving Mobeen lost for words. In this family setting, Mobeen is not the tough, even threatening man the police and local criminals perceive him to be. It is striking that it is only Aqsa (and her friends) who bring out this side of Mobeen, who remains confident and outspoken with his friends Nate and Eight. In other words, the relationship between Mobeen and Aqsa becomes a key context in which both of their identities are complicated, moving beyond stereotypes of oppression.

5.1 Family: Stereotypes of oppression in the domestic sphere

In his above comment on Mobeen's "unheard of" representation, Jeffries indicates something which this chapter will take further steps to examine: namely, contrary to the norm of the "oppressed Muslim women" confined to domesticity, representations of women at home can act as a relevant site in which to contest stereotypes. When women convert to Islam, this is often explained – and scrutinised – in public discourse in terms of family ties (especially parent-daughter relationships) or as a challenge to harmonious family relations (Hermansen, 2006; Spoliar and van den Brandt, 2020). This seems to mirror the persistent Western gender norm (see also chapter 4) that women should dominate the private, domestic sphere and men the public (Scott, 2013). It also intersects with the perhaps still more insidious (though gradually shifting) norm that women should be the empathetic, emotionally expressive, caring "glue" that holds the family together. Although the narrative of "oppressive Islam", juxtaposed with the "emancipated secular woman", often functions to "other" Muslim women (Cady and Fessenden, 2013), this stereotype of women as "family peace-keepers" seems to apply to all women (regardless of religion, race etc.). This stereotype often goes even further, however, in the case of Muslim women, who are represented (as we saw in chapter 3) as 'being trapped within the family framework, their lives... unfree and exposed to domestic exploitation' (Ansari, 2004, 265).

In this chapter, I will examine how (self-)representations of Muslim women as humorous figures in the family sphere function variously (and sometimes simultaneously) to contest and reinforce the stereotype of the Muslim woman as oppressed within a patriarchal family structure. More specifically, I will explore the dynamics of the sibling relationship between Mobeen and Aqsa in *MLM*. I will then go on

to examine the (at least superficially) more stereotypical representations of Mr Khan's relationship with his daughters in *CK*, before finally turning to Mirza's representation of her relationship with her parents in her stand-up, which often replays stereotypes. The chapter will close with a brief reflection on how scripted comedy differs from stand-up comedy, in terms of how far stereotypes about oppression in Islam can be explicitly invoked and at the same time contested.

5.2 *Man Like Mobeen*: the absent mother and the misbehaving sister

At the beginning of the show's second episode, Aqsa arrives home from school furious at having been suspended. When Mobeen asks what happened, she explains that two older students were bullying a younger one, so "I knocked one out, and the other one went and grassed me up [told a teacher]". On hearing this, Mobeen grins and goes to fist bump Aqsa. The exchange that follows exemplifies the dynamic between the two with regard to authority throughout the show.

Aqsa: Aren't you angry?

Mobeen (nonplussed): No..

Aqsa: Aren't you going to tell me off?

Mobeen: No, I hate bullies. I'm proud of you, kiddo...

Aqsa: It's the start of my GCSE courses, I've been suspended for fighting, all because I couldn't control my temper...

Mobeen (stammering): Couldn't control your temper?

Aqsa (sarcastically, with the tone of an adult explaining something very simple to a child): I couldn't control my temper. And you don't think you should be explaining how I might have made a wrong decision today?

Mobeen (hesitantly): I mean, when you put it like that, I can see some negatives... [Aqsa rolls her eyes and turns to walk away]. Hey, what you always walking off on me for? Acting like you're the boss... [without conviction] I'm the boss of this house.

Aqsa: Whatcha say?

Mobeen (ingratiating): Nah, no, nothing, I didn't say anything to you.

In this scene, as at various other moments in the show, Mobeen is the butt of the joke. Although he is Aqsa's formal guardian, she finds herself explaining to him how to fulfil this role, when he responds in incongruously positive terms to the news that she has been suspended. Contrary to the normative narrative that Muslim women are dominated or oppressed by male relatives (Bracke, 2011), Mobeen is clearly *not* the "boss of the house". Indeed, in an interview about the representation of women in the show, its writer, producer and lead actor Guz Khan referenced this scene:

Who's the boss in the show? ... I was raised by three women... which means that I was taught about comedy by three women. In my whole life, all I have known are powerful, strong, active South Asian women. I've never seen it on TV though... [On TV], they are always subservient, victimised, abused. So, you have Aqsa completely dominate Mobeen... – it's refreshing, but nothing that's abnormal to us because... that's just life.

(Hussain, 2019, *Gal-Dem*).

Here, Khan points to a gap between representation and reality. He acknowledges that South Asian women on British TV are typically represented as subservient but situates his own upbringing and family ties as a point of reference for Aqsa's domineering role in the show. As well as being domineering, Aqsa, like the women who "taught [Khan] about comedy", is funny. While Mobeen is the more obviously comical character in the show, Aqsa's dry sense of humour, which sometimes goes over Mobeen's head, is not lost on the audience. In "Wifey Riddim", when Aqsa states that she sometimes wishes she had a mother at home, Mobeen responds, "We've discussed this. I can be a mother figure to ya". Aqsa replies, sharply, "Yeahh... you can be a real mother f...igure sometimes", before storming out of the room. Here, Aqsa delivers the punchline, and leaves Mobeen sitting in stunned silence before muttering to himself "Oi, that's rude" without attempting to assert his putative authority. Instead, he takes on board what Aqsa says, and sets about looking for prospective wives, who could take on a maternal role in Aqsa's life. When asked about this vignette in the same interview, Guz Khan explains that it is supposed to reflect:

The pressures of being a child of diaspora... being pushed by his community into arranged marriage... Mobeen was quite into it, considering, okay, I have a little sister to look after – maybe extra parental support might be sensible.

(Ibid.)

While, in the episode, Mobeen is "pushed" towards arranged marriage by his community, Khan also underlines Mobeen's sense of responsibility towards his younger sister. This poses a challenge to the

normative stereotype of women as caregivers and men as “oppressive” within the Islam tradition: instead, Mobeen develops, as one reviewer puts it, a kind of “maternal masculinity” (Hussain, 2019).³³ Furthermore, contrary to the normative narrative that Muslim women are pressured to marry by their families, in *MLM*, it is Mobeen who feels under pressure to find a partner. In one scene, Mobeen greets a potential spouse by mumbling “Y’alright, Khadijah?” with an awkward thumbs up. She responds dryly, “A thumbs up. No one’s used that as a greeting since ’98”. After they are seated, the interview begins:

Khadijah: What do you think of women?

Mobeen (eyes widening, stammers): Sorry?

Ahmed (Khadijah’s brother): Women. What do you think?

Mobeen (stammering): Um, I think... Well, women are amazing. Like phenomenal. Just powerful and strong and like... if I weren’t a man, I’d *be* a woman.

This exchange captures the mood of the scene as a whole, in which Mobeen is unable to find the “right” answer to any of the questions that are posed and is once again the butt of the joke in conversation with a female character with a dry sense of humour. Furthermore, the humour in this exchange seems to derive precisely from the fact that it inverts the typically serious tone of British public discourse on Muslim women, where the themes of oppression and violence tend to take centre stage (Kuipers, 2011). In *Television Comedy and Femininity: Queering Gender* (2018), Rosie White advocates for the application of a queer approach to comedy, citing Alexander Doty’s claim that ‘comedy is fundamentally queer since it encourages rule-breaking, risk-taking, inversions and perversions in the face of... patriarchal norms’ (Doty, 2000, 81 as cited in White, 2018, 16). As White herself puts it, ‘the traditions of... comedy work to destabilise and unsettle our understandings of... categories even as we laugh at them’ (2018, 18). Towards the end of the scene, Mobeen tries to regain control of the situation, but is again rebutted.

Mobeen: Khadijah, you got any more stupid ass questions in that book of yours?

Khadijah: How do you feel about having bigger breasts than your wife?

³³ This review was published by *Gal-Dem*, a publication – as its website puts it – “committed to sharing perspectives from women and non-binary people of colour”. I find its analysis, and particularly the interview with Khan, insightful, but it is worth noting that it does not typify media discourse about the show more generally.

Mobeen: Ah, you got jokes, yeah? [Khadijah smiles sarcastically]. How do you feel about your dad being a brown version of Karl Pilkington? [Now Khadijah smiles sincerely]. You know, maybe me and you... some Costa Coffee shop or somewhere else, see Mobeen differently.

Khadijah (still smiling): No. [Mobeen's face falls].

In this exchange, Mobeen tries to shift the conversation away from the “script” of the “stupid ass questions” which have already got him into trouble, but Khadijah sharply ripostes with a cruel jibe about Mobeen's body image (a recurring theme throughout the show) and has no qualms about bluntly turning down his invitation to go for a coffee. While, earlier in the episode, Mobeen considers his decision to find a wife who can act as a “mother figure” to Aqsa as a simple matter of arranging a meeting with a woman in his community, Khadijah quickly dispels this view. Her behaviour also resonates with Doty's aforementioned queer approach to comedy as a space for “rule-breaking” and “risk-taking”, embodying a destabilising subversion of norms concerning the “submissive Muslim woman” (van Es, 2016).

It might be argued that Mobeen's decision to seek a wife in order to introduce a female role model into his sister's life conforms to the stereotype that the principal role of women in society is a nurturing, maternal one. As the show develops, however, Mobeen himself slowly comes to fulfil this caring role in Aqsa's life, although she maintains most of the control in their relationship. Take, for example, the following exchange from the first episode of the show's second season, where Aqsa convinces her brother to give her permission to attend her school's prom night:

Aqsa: You know I've always appreciated all the sacrifices you've made for me. You've been a mum and a dad, and a big brother, all rolled into one.

Mobeen (smiles, then his expression shifts, and he says defensively): If this is about my weight, then I don't appreciate that, Aqsa.

Aqsa: I'm serious, Mobeen. This is something special, something I want to be a part of. Everyone else is going... so [puppy dog eyes] can I go?

Mobeen: Let me think about it, yeah? Let me think about it.

Aqsa watches Mobeen pleadingly for a few seconds, before prompting him with a “So...?”

Mobeen: Can I have more than a minute to decide, please? Thank you.

Aqsa: My bad. [Another short pause follows]. So...?

Mobeen (defeated): Any funny business, yeah, I'm gonna home-school you from now on.

Aqsa (hugging Mobeen): Thanks, Mobeen. I'll never forget this.

Mobeen (affectionately): Alright, go on, on you go.

Aqsa has already stood up and is leaving the room.

Aqsa (under her breath as she leaves the room): Sucker.

Mobeen: Huh? Yeah, you better get going... Cutting down on carbs and everything.

In this exchange, we see Aqsa using her position as the younger sister to her advantage. While she seems at least partially sincere when she declares that she appreciates the sacrifices Mobeen has made, she is also aware that this compliment will make Mobeen more likely to acquiesce. Mobeen tries, at various points, to regain control of this exchange, asking for more time to consider his decision and “threatening” her with home-schooling if she misbehaves. However, one gets the feeling that Aqsa has orchestrated the whole situation, knowing her brother well enough to know how to get her way. This impression is reinforced by her muttering “sucker” as she leaves the room.

The comedy of the scene derives from the irony that, even as Mobeen discourages his sister from going to prom because he is trying to protect her, he is in fact the character who comes across as naive in the face of Aqsa's deviousness. Mobeen's representation as the butt of the joke here is significant as it intersects with Aqsa's representation as an intelligent, independent young woman, who is strong-willed in spite of the absence of a nurturing maternal figure in her life. This representation of Aqsa's unusual family arrangement, and her domineering role in her relationship with her brother, seems to counter the stereotype of the Muslim woman oppressed by Muslim men at home. One further point to note, however (which complicates this discussion somewhat), is that in this scene, as in many disputes between the two characters, Mobeen becomes distracted by his suspicions that his weight is being made fun of. Indeed, soon after Aqsa leaves the room, his attention returns to the topic of “cutting down on carbs”. It might be argued that much of the humour in Mobeen's representation derives from the incongruity of his normatively “feminine”

preoccupations (for example, his concern with his weight and his penchant for clothes shopping). While *MLM* still, in a sense, fulfils the model of “queering comedy” by destabilising patriarchal norms, if it is by virtue of Mobeen deviating from stereotypical masculinity that Aqsa feels able to challenge her brother, this may not be such a radical contestation as it initially appears. With a few exceptions, reviews of *MLM* do not pick up on the threads discussed in this section, scarcely mentioning Aqsa and instead focusing on the (at times more stereotypical) representation of Mobeen as a Muslim man trying to let go of his troubled past. While this is certainly a part of the show, it seems to be disproportionately represented in media discourse. A similar observation leads Sarah Illott, a prominent scholar on the politics of representation in comedy, to observe that ‘no matter how shows like *Man Like Mobeen* attempt to redraw the boundaries for what a comedy about British Muslims might look like, audiences may still... interpret it through all-too-familiar frameworks’ (Illott, 2018). I add this as a cautionary reminder that, while *MLM* seems to contest the stereotype of the humourless “oppressed Muslim woman”, this may not be the main thing that viewers take away from the show.

5.3 Patriarchy, power and care: Mr Khan and his wife and daughters

In an ethnographic study on British married Muslims and the “patriarchal family structure”, Asifa Siraj argues that Muslim men are often tasked with ‘provid[ing] for and protect[ing] their wives and children’ (Siraj, 2010, 211). What is more, Siraj claims, some Muslim women are ‘fully complicit and supportive of the hegemonic masculine ideal’, even ‘protecting, and sometimes actively constructing, male leadership within the home’ (ibid, 212). While this claim echoes the narrative of the subordination of Muslim women within a “patriarchal family structure”, it also situates women in a position of agency, as essential figures in the maintenance of the father/husband’s “leadership within the home”. This duality plays out in various ways in the representations of Mrs Khan and her daughters in *CK*.

At various points in the show, Shazia shows her loyalty to her parents and fulfils the stereotype of the “well-behaved” daughter (getting married to a nice Muslim man, dressing modestly). Nevertheless, Alia remains Mr Khan’s clear favourite. We saw some indication of this at the beginning of the previous chapter, where Alia’s strategies for breaking the rules Mr Khan tries to set for her (going to parties, removing the *hijab*) – and Shazia’s embroilment in scandal before her wedding – were discussed. Here, I will focus on the repeated juxtaposition of Mr Khan’s image of himself as the “man of the house” with the reality that his wife and daughters constantly make jokes at his expense and have to rescue him from embarrassing situations. The following vignette, in which Shazia explains her decision to join a gym in a different neighbourhood, typifies the different relationships the two sisters have with their father:

Mr Khan: We Muslims don't need to go to the gym. If you pray five times a day, you get plenty of exercise. It's all that bending down, isn't it?

Alia: That's why I'm so slim, Papaji.

Mr Khan: Oh, this girl! She's like a one-woman praying machine.

Shazia: This is a step up for us [Shazia and her partner, Amjad]. I'm not going to live in Sparkhill my whole life. One day, me and Amjad are going to get a place in Solihull. We're going to give our family all the things we never had.

Mr Khan: What things?! I've always given you everything.

Shazia: Yeah? What about the pony I always wanted?

Mr Khan: How many times, Shazia? We don't need a pony. We got a car! [To Mrs Khan.] I don't know what's wrong with that girl – putting on all these hairs and graces.

Mrs Khan (gently): She wants to move up in the world, and you shouldn't get in her way and embarrass her.

Mr Khan: How could *I* embarrass her? What's embarrassing about me? [Slurps noisily from his drink, then coughs and grunts].

In this exchange, Shazia is represented as an independent woman with ambitions to “move up in the world”. More concretely, moving from Sparkhill to Solihull (a nearby white middle-class neighbourhood) and giving her family “all the things we never had” indicate an aspiration to be more wealthy than her parents. This is a legitimate aspiration that resonates with those of many real second-generation migrants. However, its seriousness is rather diminished in this scene by Shazia's reference to wanting to have a pony. Mr Khan's complaint that he “doesn't know what's wrong with that girl” contrasts strikingly with his pride and affection for Alia, the “one-woman praying machine”. This disparity seems to speak to the stereotype that, within the Muslim community, women are expected to be obedient and devout, and should not have their own ambitions. However, in this scene, Mr Khan is ultimately the butt of the joke, when he demands how he could embarrass his daughter, blissfully unaware of the fact that, throughout the show, his behaviour

continually embarrasses his family. Ultimately, it falls to Mr Khan's 'long-suffering but ever-forgiving wife' (Abbas, 2013, 87) to defend Shazia. When Shazia becomes irate after discovering that Mr Khan started a rumour that almost ruined her wedding plans (as discussed in the previous chapter), for the sake of attracting a business contact, Mr Khan responds defensively, but sobers when Mrs Khan interrupts to ask, in a quiet but furious tone:

Mrs Khan: Are you telling me that you invented an imaginary love affair for your own daughter, just so you could invite some business contact, who we *don't even know*, to her wedding?

Mr Khan: Let's not get bogged down with who said what... The good news is, I was lying.

Mrs Khan: Yes, and now you're going to tell the truth. You're going to go in there and tell everyone what you've done, and clear Shazia's name... and then I'll be able to show my face at the Sparkhill Women's Day Group Coffee Morning next Tuesday!

Clearly, Mrs Khan's motive for defending Shazia here is, in part, a selfish one: she is not willing to sacrifice her own reputation in order to protect her husband's. However, as the scene continues and Shazia responds gratefully to Mrs Khan's intervention, the mother-daughter relationship is, for a moment, centred, with Mr Khan standing on the sidelines, comically startled at this turn of events.

Mrs Khan (to Mr Khan): Of course, we're her parents; we should support her, no matter what. [Addressing Shazia]: I'm so sorry... I don't deserve such a wonderful daughter.

Shazia: Aw, Mum.

Mrs Khan: You're so smart, and pretty, and kind, and I'm a silly old woman, and a terrible mother and....

Shazia: Mum, you're not a terrible mother.

Mr Khan: Don't interrupt her, sweetie.

Here, once again, Mr Khan ineptly attempts to insert himself into the conversation and assert his authority over his daughter. In doing so, he interrupts the heartfelt moment that Shazia had been sharing with her

mother. At this point, Mrs Malik (the mother of Shazia's fiancé, Amjad) enters the room and Mr Khan, in an attempt to redeem himself and defend his daughter, addresses her thus:

Mr Khan: What you have to remember, Mrs Malik, is that this is the modern world, 21st century. Women are as independent as men. I believe women should make their own decisions. They are in charge of their own lives, and they can do whatever they want.

Mrs Malik: I see. Then I say, this wedding will never take place.

Mr Khan: Ok... but what does Mr Malik say about it?

While Mr Khan claims to believe “women should make their own decisions”, he appears discomfited and insecure when his wife and daughters actually assert themselves at home. In case the irony of this dialogue is not clear enough, Mr Khan's statement about women's independence is immediately undermined when he refuses to take Mrs Malik seriously, instead asking what her *husband* thinks about the wedding. This brings us back to a broader duality in the show. On the one hand, female characters are represented as dependent on, and subject to, the needs of their fathers, partners or husbands. For example, Shazia is broadly represented as ‘plain, insignificant and almost invisible’ with her ‘main visibility derived from her role as the dimwit [Amjad's] bride-to-be’ (Abbas, 2013, 87). On the other hand, we see Mrs Khan and her daughters supporting one another and undermining Mr Khan's authority with sarcastic comments. The fact that Mr Khan favours Alia (who, unbeknownst to him, goes to parties and dresses “immodestly”) over Shazia (who, superficially, conforms more closely to the stereotype of the domesticated, obedient Muslim woman) further undermines the idea that he is an oppressive man of the house. Instead, he is the “fool” who does not know what is actually going on in his own home. Like in *MLM*, where Mobeen claims to be the “boss” of the house while Aqsa is clearly in charge, Mr Khan asserts his status of “boss” without conviction, when he explains to Dave, his colleague at the mosque:

Dave, what you have to understand is that [in a Pakistani marriage] the husband is in charge. He's the boss and he can do whatever he wants. But sometimes it's best not to tell the wife... because she would never understand and only worry and fuss and make him sleep on the downstairs sofa.

Here, the narrative of the husband being “in charge” quickly dissolves into a perhaps more realistic image, given what we see of Mr Khan's relationship with his wife in the show, in which the wife has the power to “make [her husband] sleep on the downstairs sofa” if she is angry with him. The humour here derives, in

part, from Mr Khan's incongruous combination of delusion and self-awareness when it comes to the dynamics of a "Pakistani marriage". At the same time, it plays into a longstanding stereotype of the fussing wife who nags her husband, which seems to go beyond the context of the Pakistani marriage, echoing tropes about marriage that also appear in "secular comedy".³⁴ In an interview about the show, its producer Adil Ray claimed that *CK* was 'not a Muslim comedy [but rather] a family comedy [dealing] with universal themes of hypocrisy, deceit, and relationships that we can all connect to' (interview with Saha, 2013). This description resonates with many of the examples given in this section: Alia's relationship with her father is founded on deceit, Mr Khan's standards for his daughters and wife are deeply hypocritical, and yet perhaps we can "all connect to" the affection of the mother-daughter relationship, the bickering between the two sisters, or the way that Mrs Khan teases her husband. At the same time, the show frequently references stereotypes about the oppression of Muslim women, where the positioning of the 21st century woman contrasts the norm of the well-behaved Muslim daughter or wife.

While the stereotype of the "oppressed Muslim woman" is not necessarily reinforced, nor is it entirely rebutted or replaced: Mrs Khan still allows her husband to believe that he is the "boss" in the house, as do Shazia and Alia in their different ways, "breaking the rules" that Mr Khan sets only deviously, behind his back. In her discussion of the stereotype of the oppressed Muslim woman, van Es writes that 'In dominant discourse, oppression is no longer something that happens *to* women in some aspects of their lives but a label that defines women in absolute terms' (van Es, 2016, 79). Perhaps as a result, 'in the contemporary dominant discourse, particularly that regarding women with a Muslim background, there seems to be little room for nuances' (ibid.). In this regard, *CK* reflects the potential of humorous discourse to challenge the lack of nuance in dominant discourse about oppression, while at the same time situating itself close to this discourse, within the context of the ostensibly patriarchal household. In his analysis of *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, Conway argues that the sitcom 'transform[s] stereotypes into images of diversity and move[s] Muslims from the realm of the foreign to that of the familiar' (Conway, 2017, 141). It might be argued that situating *CK* and *MLM* at home is a gesture towards this transition "from the foreign to the familiar", but also (at least superficially) reinforces the stereotype of the Muslim woman confined to the family environment. As in my analysis of representations of female sexuality in chapter 4, once again here it becomes evident that stereotypes (e.g. the situation of Muslim women in the domestic, family context) can sometimes facilitate the *contestation* of other stereotypes (e.g. women as oppressed), although rarely in straightforward ways.

³⁴ Examples of this trope span decades of British TV comedy, from the character of wives Barbara Good in *The Good Life* (1975-1978) and Sybil Fawcety in *Fawlty Towers* (1975-1979), to Susan Harper in *My Family* (2000-2011) and Sue Brockman in *Outnumbered* (2007-2014). In these examples, the female lead is an anxious housewife who supports her husband by nagging him and listening to his complaints, rarely having adventures or comedic moments of her own.

5.4 Self-representation in stand-up: oppressive parents and the power of “just kidding”

In turning her attention to self-representations, van Es notes: ‘when women with a Muslim background want to change the dominant image of their minority group, they must still do so within a framework of unequal power relations’ (van Es, 2016, 302). This is manifestly applicable to the British comedy circuit, which, as Mirza notes in several interviews, is dominated by white, (ostensibly) “secular” men. In a blog article, Ilott describes *MLM* as ‘a subversive comedy that implicitly challenges ways in which British Muslims have often been badly represented through lazy caricature and stereotyping’ (Ilott, 2018). On stereotyping, and the framing of the “oppressed Muslim woman” in particular, Mirza takes rather a different approach. In various sets, she discusses the stereotype that Muslim women are forced by their parents to marry at a young age, which she simultaneously embodies and rejects.

In her early stand-up, Mirza made references to norms concerning her status as a Muslim woman, joking that, “My parents really want me to get married, but the thing is that Muslim men don’t want to marry me, because I speak”. Later in the same set, Mirza followed this with: “I am looking forward to my wedding day y’know... I can’t wait to meet my husband”. In this set (and others), Mirza rails against the stereotype that Muslim women are pressured to marry young, complaining ironically that she has remained single through her 20s and into her 30s, when she would actually like to be married or in a relationship. Her jokes about her parents wanting her to marry were received with laughter and applause, and crop up in many positive reviews of her comedy. In one interview, Mirza acknowledges this tendency towards praising Muslim women who “speak out”,³⁵ observing that she is often treated as a “novelty” because ‘in a comedy club people have never really heard a Muslim woman’s point of view’ (Lockyer and Pickering, 2005, 123). In a sense, Mirza is rewarded (with career advancement) for (re)producing a particular gendered image of Islam that draws on secular sensibilities and narratives (e.g. the Muslim woman who is pressured into an arranged marriage by her parents). In some respects, Mirza can be understood as *confirming* an essentialist image of the Muslim woman who lacks agency and is forced to marry a stranger. However, as we saw in the previous chapter, in *TKMMDI*, she goes beyond what might be “expected”, to challenge the motif of the oppressed “humorless Muslim woman”. Mirza turns her audience’s expectations to her advantage, creating subversive, humorous moments through the perceived incongruity of her status as an outspoken Muslim comedian. As we can see here, humour sometimes seems to act as a form of *disguise*, in which hegemonic perspectives and power structures can be critiqued under the guise of being “just a joke” – of course, Mirza is not actually planning to marry a man she has never met, because she is a “modern”, Western Muslim woman.

³⁵ We see a similar pattern in the foregrounding of the voices of “ex-Muslim women” in the public, political sphere to legitimize critiques of Islam as oppressive towards women.

In various comedy sets throughout her career, Mirza emphasises her own “emancipation” by juxtaposing it with her parents’ “traditionalism”: she characterises herself as a “disappointing daughter” of immigrant British Pakistani parents. In an interview earlier this year, she explained:

My parents wanted me to be a doctor and get married at 20. I'm now 31 and I'm not married, and they're devastated. In our culture, seeing your kids married is a real achievement, far more than being a great stand-up comedian. They're quietly proud of my successes, but marriage would make them really proud.

(Interview with Wiseman, *The Guardian*, 2008).

This reflects the tone of her stand-up comedy, in which her own pursuit of happiness is contrasted with her parents’ unhappy, arranged marriage. She explains, in the same interview, that her parents both acknowledge that they are entirely incompatible but would never consider ending their marriage. In a recent set, Mirza reflects on her parents’ relationship, joking, “My mother wears the *burqa* – she doesn’t want to be seen with my dad”. In the comedy vignettes discussed here, Mirza seems simultaneously to reinforce the stereotype of the Muslim woman raised by strict parents, and to implicitly deconstruct it: much as her parents might be more proud of her for getting married or being a doctor, she has instead remained single and developed a successful career as a stand-up comedian. Indeed, we might say that Mirza invokes the example of her stereotypically strict parents to internalise, appropriate *and* subvert the norm of the “oppressed” Muslim woman (van Es, 2016).

5.5 Conclusions

In this chapter, we have seen some of the ways in which comedy represents the role of Muslim women as part of the family, simultaneously reinforcing and contesting the stereotype of the “oppressed Muslim woman” confined to the domestic sphere. In the case of *MLM*, Guz Khan centres the complex, funny character of Aqsa as an authoritative figure. The limitation here, of course, is that the show represents Muslim women through the Muslim man’s perspective. However, this does not necessarily render the representation “oppressive”. Indeed, Aqsa’s implicit status as “boss of the house” exemplifies ‘rule-breaking... inversions... in the face of... patriarchal norms’ (Doty, 2000, 81 as cited in White, 2018, 16). At face value, the representation of Mrs Khan and her daughters in *CK* is rather more stereotypical. Mr Khan, like Mobeen, imagines himself as the “boss” and, at first glance, the behaviour of his wife and daughters seems to confirm this picture. On closer inspection, however, it becomes clear that Alia, Shazia and Mrs Khan all, in their own ways, subvert the stereotype of the “oppressed Muslim woman”, particularly (like

MLM's Aqsa) through the use of sarcasm. Mr Khan often thinks he wields authority, while the comedy derives from the fact that he is actually outwitted by his wife and daughters. At the same time, the fact that they are forced to outwit him in order to deviate from patriarchal norms can be interpreted as conforming to the very same stereotype that it challenges.

In both *CK* and *MLM*, scripted comedies written by Muslim men, it is masculinity that is centred, with female characters operating in supporting roles. These supporting roles are essential (keeping the protagonist “out of trouble”) but not always fully developed. In stand-up comedy, by definition, it is rather a different story. Mirza is the agent of her own representation, and consciously instrumentalises the patriarchal, oppressive norms embodied by her parents in order to underline her own emancipation. At the same time, however, Mirza’s comedy reinforces a binary framing between “oppression” on the one hand as conformity to “traditional” norms (marrying young, having children), and “emancipation” on the other, as making “non-conventional” choices (in Mirza’s case, being a comedian and remaining single). This sits uncomfortably with the recent feminist reading of agency as something that can be expressed in many ways, not all of which will look like the Western neoliberal ideal of “emancipation” (Mahmood, 2004).

In other words, the deconstruction of stereotypes about the “oppressed Muslim woman” will never be a simple or straightforward matter, since challenging one stereotype about oppression often involves reinforcing another. However, one strength of comedy seems to lie in its ability to transgress constructions of difference through representations of complex family relationships (father-daughter, sister-sister etc.) that almost anyone can relate to in some way. By analysing comedic representations of Muslim women in the family context, it becomes possible to engage with the stereotype of the Muslim woman “oppressed” by male family members, and to enter into a more nuanced discussion, in which the ambiguities and emotional complexities behind notions like “freedom” or “oppression” shine through.

Chapter 6: Final Conclusions and Future Directions

At the outset of this thesis, my assumption was (broadly) that in cultural representations of Islam, stereotypes would posit ‘an implicit distance... between the viewer (the normalised subject) and the Muslim object of the gaze’ (Morey in Macleod, 2010, 266), a distance ‘heavily marked by racial and cultural value judgements’ (ibid.). While this assessment resonates with some parts of my analysis, the nuances and complexities of the cases discussed in this thesis suggest that this response falls short.

In some cases, comedic representations of Muslim women echo pre-existing “racial and cultural value judgements” precisely in order to contest or deconstruct stereotypes. Satire often uses exaggeration to inflate a discourse to the point of bursting. At the same time, it can be argued that *CK* and *MLM* cater to the “normalized subject” of TV sitcoms and make the Muslim woman the “object of the [secular] gaze”, constrained by “Othering” normativities born out of a colonial history. The stereotypes concerning Muslim women in the British context are various and contradictory. Based on the literature reviewed in chapter 3, however, one would expect representations of Muslim women in comedy to reflect certain key tropes: “passive”, “subject to patriarchal traditions”, “lacking agency”, “oppressed”, ‘invisible in the public domain..., trapped within the family framework..., sexually controlled in their male-dominated communities’ (Ansari, 2004, 265), and – of course – “humorless” (Kuipers, 2011). In one way or another, these stereotypes all appear in my case studies, and one might argue that this fact, in itself, is enough to suggest that the shows are, to some degree, perpetuating these normative framings of Muslim women.

Having said this, it is my hope that the analysis in this thesis reflects the constructive and innovative potential of comedy to move *beyond* proscriptive stereotypes. As van Es writes, ‘The alternative representations of today can be the dominant representations of tomorrow’ (van Es, 2016, 302). This brings me back to the discussion, at the beginning of this thesis, of Ahmed’s reading of emotion as something dynamic and socially constructive, with the potential to “open up futures”, an understanding which, in turn,

resonates with numerous theories of humour. Even when comedic representations of Muslim women seem to mirror “dominant representations of today” rather than offering an alternative, this illuminates how stereotyping proscribes or restricts the positionalities available to Muslim women. In practice, as is perhaps the case in society more broadly, comedy performances rarely purely either contest or reinforce stereotypes. In chapter 2, I noted van Es’ comment that ‘subverting stereotypes is always difficult because of the unequal power relations in which stereotyping takes place’ (ibid, 15). This observation might serve to explain *why* – as I argued in both chapters 4 and 5 – one stereotype often seems to operate within humour discourse to enable the contestation of another; to “open up futures” by restating and playing on narratives of the (colonial) past.

Like the many emotions with which it can be entangled (shame, embarrassment), humour is something both deeply personal and profoundly social. Understood in this way, comedy discourse helps to create a more nuanced framework in which to understand the ways in which Muslim women are represented. Starting from normative narratives of Muslim women as sexually repressed, consigned to the private sphere and oppressed by Muslim men, it is possible to reach a more nuanced view of (self-) representations of Muslim women, without denying the presence of harmful stereotypes in British public and cultural discourse. On this point, it is worth reiterating the apparent differences between stand-up comedy and sitcoms in terms of the modes of (self-)representation at play. In stand-up comedy, the performer is (usually) on stage on their own, performing a (predominately) scripted piece that they wrote themselves. Conversely, the sitcoms discussed in this thesis were written by men *about* women. While the delivery of jokes was in the hands of female actresses, the level of immediacy and agency in terms of how Muslim women are represented differs strikingly between the two mediums. In this thesis, we have seen how Mirza receives praise for “speaking out” critically against “oppressive” standards within Islam, but has to mollify her audience when she discusses Islamophobia or tells jokes about radicalisation. Thus, while Mirza is the author of her own comedy, the immediacy of the audience and the personal, autobiographical nature of her work adds another layer of restriction and scrutiny. At face value, in *CK*, stereotypes are reinforced and in *MLM*, through the character of Aqsa, they are very deliberately challenged. However, through my analysis in this thesis, a more complex picture emerges.

In chapter 4, we saw how comedic representations of female sexuality in Islam are often tied to affects of shame, embarrassment and silence, while at the same time (in stand-up comedy) being outspoken about sexuality in relation to securitisation serves as a mode of contestation. In chapter 5, I reflected on how the situation of sitcoms (and, to a lesser extent, stand-up) in the domestic sphere and in the context of family relationships renders them fruitful sources through which to engage with the stereotype of the “oppressed Muslim woman”. In both chapters, my analysis points to one important, if perhaps unsatisfying, conclusion: the use of stereotypes can (sometimes simultaneously) work to challenge hegemonic framings

of Muslim women and to reinforce them. The outcome of stereotyping in comedy depends somewhat on the positionality and pre-existing beliefs of the audience. Funny, entertaining scenarios can variously be promulgated to challenge hegemonic representations of Muslim women and/or to reinforce them under the guise of “just joking”. It is my hope that this thesis also demonstrates that engagement with stereotyping in comedy opens up a public discourse, in which usually hidden stereotypes about Muslim women become visible and explicit.

The very fact that *CK*, *MLM* and the stand-up and sketch comedy discussed in this thesis focus on a religious and racial minority within the British context brings up the question of visibility, which is also present at the level of embodied practice and modes of dress (see chapter 4). Muslim women are caught between representations as “invisible” in the public domain (Ansari, 2004) on the one hand and visible in the “wrong way” (Saeed, 2016) on the other. The stereotyping of Muslim women in comedy serves to sustain normative images of intersecting religious, racial, and sexual difference (e.g. Muslim women as sexually repressed figures confined to the private, domestic sphere). At the same time, comedic representations and a particular strain of humour are seen as central markers of the “us” in the British cultural narrative, and the inclusion of Muslim women in this domain of cultural production therefore provides a space in which the normative “Othering” of Muslim women can be challenged.

In future research, it would be worthwhile to explore comedic representations of Muslim women comparatively across different national contexts, in order better to understand how the cultural specificities of humour and visibility discourses influence representations of Muslim women in comedy. In chapter 4, I explored how humour seems to intersect with challenging or typically negative affects like shame and embarrassment. Humour is also, of course, traditionally associated with enjoyment, solidarity and catharsis. It is beyond the scope of this project to theorise the relationships between these various affects further, but the ways in which humour might be integrated into theories of emotion and affect (especially in relation to religion and gender) would certainly merit further study. This thesis has made some steps in this direction, taking Ahmed’s *Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2014) in particular as a valuable resource when investigating emotions where ‘gendered histories of imperialism’ (Ahmed, 2014, 170) are at play, as is the case in the context of representations of Muslim women.

To close, this thesis has stepped into a promising emerging field of study, taking comedy seriously as a lens through which to develop a more nuanced understanding of the ways in which Muslim women are – and could be – represented in public discourse. If comedy constitutes a ‘particularly fertile genre for stimulating osmosis between the cultural and political public spheres’ (Hjarvard and Rosenfeldt, 2017, 140), we should not underestimate the potential of shifting humorous representations to have a wider impact on the cultural and political treatment of Muslim women in Britain. For example, the subtleties and paradoxes visible in the representations of Muslim women analysed in chapters 4 and 5 pose a challenge to

the stereotypes that currently dominate cultural representations of Muslim women – even as they seem, on some level, to reinforce them. One thing that can be said with certainty is that Muslim women, positioned within intersecting gendered, religious and racialised identities typically marked out as “humorless”, can be funny. And, when the mechanisms of power that structure discourse permit it (more often the case when the discourse is humorous), comedy actually *instrumentalises* stereotypes to contest normativities about Muslim women.

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