Comedy, Inclusion and the Paradox of Playing with Stereotypes:
Representations and Self-Representations of Muslim Women in British TV Sitcoms and Stand-Up Comedy

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Abstract   In recent years, Muslim women have carved out spaces for themselves and become increasingly visible within the British comedy entertainment scene. This can be read in terms of popular cultural spaces becoming more inclusive and open to minority groups. At the same time, as this article will show, comedy representations can often be read in a range of different ways. Taking the stand-up comedy of Shazia Mirza and the BBC sitcom Citizen Khan (2012-2016) as examples, this article examines how comedy representations and self-representations of Muslim women both contest and reproduce stereotypes. This article also reflects on the risks and opportunities that arise from playing with the tensions and contradictions of stereotypes within the power-laden cultural space of comedy.

Keywords   comedy, stereotyping, Islam, gender, representation.

To be told you lack a sense of humour can be deeply hurtful, humiliating and even, at times, dehumanizing. Conversely, sharing jokes and moments of laughter together can create powerful feelings of belonging, mutual understanding and joy. Within the field of humour studies, scholars have grappled for over a century with how best to characterize the relationship of humour to power and the place of humour in the politics of inclusion. In the early twentieth century, French philosopher Henri Bergson described humour as a "social corrective" (Bergson 2014), claiming that being laughed at creates feelings of exclusion and humiliation powerful enough to prompt a change in social behaviour. In *Laughter and Ridicule* (2005), Michael Billig argues along similar lines that humour operates (in some cases) as a disciplinary mode

through which subjects are encouraged to adopt certain norms, and to abandon others. Others see humour more positively, noting its potential to engender solidarity and to allow marginalized[1] groups to contest designations of power (Golozubov 2014; Gilbert 1997). While some groups are often included in humourous contexts, performances and dialogues, others are labelled "humourless". Which groups are considered "humourless" has much to do with existing paradigms of inclusion and exclusion, and who is marked as "Other". This article focuses on one group specifically which has often been Othered in this way, namely Muslim women. I will explain and contextualize this narrative of the "humourless Muslim women" shortly. In broader terms, this article takes humour seriously as a lens through which to explore the shifting frames of marginality, inclusion and diversity politics within which Muslim women are situated in the British context.[2]

The structure of the article will be as follows. I will first situate the scholarship that informs my approach to religion, gender and humour, and specifically the representation of Muslim women. I will then outline the methodological framework of feminist critical discourse analysis (FCDA) (Lazar 2007) alongside relevant contributions from gender theory, cultural studies and humour studies. In the central section of the article, I will introduce two examples – British TV sitcom *Citizen Khan* (2012-2016) and the work of stand-up comedian Shazia Mirza – which will be discussed in terms of the ways in which comedic representations and self-representations both (and sometimes simultaneously) reproduce and contest dominant cultural frames about Muslim women. In the final section of the article, I will reflect more broadly on what we can learn about the mechanisms of inclusion itself from looking at comedy. What does it mean to be included in humourous discourse? I will suggest that comedy discourses can illuminate the ambivalent ways in which dominant scripts and cultural frames sit alongside contestations of these same scripts and

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[1] The term "marginalized" has its own normative trappings and its use risks buttressing the very boundaries between "self" and "other" this article aims to scrutinize. Here, I use the term specifically as shorthand to describe 'persons and representations which have been excluded from mainstream… narratives' (Thorsen et al 2015: 1).

[2] In using the term "women", I refer to the socially constructed gender category (see Butler 1990). I do not intend to exclude the voices of trans women or reinforce a hierarchy in which cis women are prioritized over trans women. However, in the shows I will examine, I have only encountered representations of cis women. I think it is important to acknowledge this, since the language of "man" or "woman" often risks reproducing trans exclusionary paradigms. There is a clear need for more research into (humour in) representations (and lack thereof) of trans, non-binary and queer lives, but it is beyond the scope of this article to do that work.

cultural frames. However, this is not to negate the potential of humourous representations and self-representations to amplify marginalized voices and social inclusion, by creating spaces of openness and shared humanity, in which the paradoxical logics and tensions of dominant stereotypes can be exposed.

1. Positioning "the Muslim woman" in comedy[3]

As communications scholar Jerry Palmer observes, "humour is a fragile thing" (Palmer 1994: 147), whose meanings and effects vary dramatically dependent on the cultural context, and on who is speaking. The humourlessness of women is a recurring trope in popular media, with a long history in public cultural and political discourses. Historically, women who attempted 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 & Merziger 2012: 11). Until recently, media and cultural studies scholar Inger-Lise Kalviknes Bore notes, "women's use of humour tended to be confined to the private sphere" (Kalviknes Bore 2010: 140). This exclusion from public humourous discourse mirrors a more established binary distinction, in which the public sphere is framed as a masculine domain, and the private sphere as a "space for women" (Cady & Fessenden 2013: 9). This framework correlates with a secular model in which a dichotomy is drawn between the "secular, emancipated us" which is associated with the public sphere and the "religious, backward them", associated with the private sphere (Bracke 2011: 30). This dichotomy has been problematized by numerous prominent scholars in the study of religion and gender in recent years (Scott 2009; Cady and Fessenden 2013), but remains a strong thread in cultural and political discourses on Islam and women's rights. To situate humour here, cultural historian Sander Gilman notes that "laughing at oneself" has come to be regarded as a "hallmark of modern, [secular] subjectivity" (Gilman 2012: 53). Conversely, "not having a sense of humour" is associated not only with femininity but also "with (strict) religiosity" (Kuipers 2011: 76).

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[3] Where the phrase "the Muslim woman" is used here, it is emphatically *not* used to indicate that such a homogenous, hegemonic category exists. Rather, it is used here to reference a normative discursive frame, into which Muslim women's performances within comedy spaces are often "read" or assimilated.

At the nexus of these identities (and in a racially marginalized position)[4], the motif of the "humourless Muslim woman" emerges (Kuipers 2011: 75). In contemporary British discourse, and from a longue durée perspective, the prevailing narratives concerning Islam are overwhelmingly negative, centring on securitization and radicalization (Saeed 2016). It is perhaps unsurprising, within this framework, that the prevailing consensus dictates that: "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) and "Leave Citizen Khan alone! Po-faced, humourless Muslim protestors are their own worst enemy" (*National Secular Society*, 2012), which unanimously set Islam up as a "humourless" religion.[5] This is especially significant within the British context, where humour can be understood as an important marker of affinity and a determinant for inclusion. In *A National Joke: Popular Comedy and English Cultural Identities* (2007), cultural studies scholar Andy Medhurst argues that, in the British cultural context, humour is often associated with positive qualities such as humility, intelligence, and friendliness, and seen as an indicator of being less likely to have extreme views (Medhurst 2007). In this context, it is possible to see how the "humourless" framing of Islam corresponds with the "the traditional Orientalist stereotypes of Muslims as political anarchists, and tyrants at home subjugating their women [which] have been disseminated in the media as caricatures" (Ahmed & Donnan 2003: 9).[6]

The "humourless" motif is applied not just to Muslim men, however, but also (and sometimes more rigorously) to Muslim women, whose lives are supposedly "guided by religion, tradition and hierarchy, who never laugh" (Kuipers 2011: 76). Specifically in the context of Muslim women, the themes of oppression and violence tend to take centre stage (Kuipers 2011; Ansari 2004).

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[4] I do not find space in this article to do justice to an intersectional analysis of race, alongside religion and gender, but would point readers towards the excellent PhD thesis "The Performance of Intersectionality on the 21st Century Stand-Up Comedy Stage" (Blackburn, 2018), which brings critical race theory and intersectionality to the fore in an analysis of stand-up comedy in the North American and British contexts.

[5] This framing became particularly prominent following riots and protests against the *Jyllands-Posten* cartoons, reprinted across Europe in 2006, and again following the attack on the office of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in 2015, in which 12 people were killed. These violent incidents still colour public discourse and popular imagination concerning the relationship between humour and Islam to the present day. Indeed, when describing my research, I often encounter references to these incidents.

[6] Women who are "too outspoken" are also characterised as "killjoys" (Ahmed 2010). This reflects the complex web of (framings of) permissible behaviour navigated by women in contemporary Western European society.

Beginning from the premise that what and who is deemed "funny" or "unfunny" can have serious implications for the formation of subjects and the politics of inclusion and exclusion, the homogenizing cultural script of the "humourless Muslim woman" has the potential to exclude Muslim women from particular ways of communicating and being seen. This exclusionary cultural script is related to a broader framing of Muslim women in Europe. It is important to emphasize that this script is not static, univocal or without contestations (Hall 1980). However, it does encapsulate many stereotypes about Muslim women as "passive…, subject to patriarchal traditions and lacking any active agency" (Ansari 2004: 265). Echoing Ansari, Margaretha van Es also notes that Muslim women are often essentialized as "sexually repressed" and unable to speak for themselves (van Es 2016: 13) despite having "actively tried to break stereotypes and prejudices" about their identities (van Es 2016: 2). This contemporary discourse of Muslim women as "sexually repressed" and oppressed is linked to the imagined binary between religion as "conservative" and secularism as "liberating" (Cady & Fessenden 2013). At the same time, a contradictory image of the "feminine Other" as a (silent) object of desire also seems to persist in many Western representations of Muslim women (Perry 2013).

In the past decade or so, in contrast with the script of the "humourless Muslim woman" (Kuipers 2011), Muslim women have become increasing visible and carved out spaces for themselves in the British comedy scene. The growing numbers of representations and self-representations of Muslim women within "humour discourses" (Kuipers 2011) are not, however, without their varying degrees of attachment to structures of power and normativity. By engaging with public iterations of humour by and about Muslim women, this article will explore gender norms concerning Muslim women that are variously reinforced and contested under the guise of "only joking". In so doing, this article will grapple with the questions that arise from these comedy performances; what does it mean for Muslim women to become visible in comedy spaces, in terms of dynamics of power, inclusion and cultural diversity? How optimistic should we be about reading this growing representation of Muslim women in comedy as part of a move within popular entertainment towards reflecting Britain's religious and cultural diversity? In order to critically explore these broader questions, I focus on the ways in which dominant exclusionary scripts and stereotypes are variously reflected, contested, and reformulated in the cases of *Citizen Khan* (2012-2016) and the stand-up of Shazia Mirza.

2. Theory meets methodology

In this section, I bring together approaches from cultural studies, gender theory and humour theory as thinking tools which contribute to developing a methodological approach to comedy material. Alongside these approaches, I am influenced by a feminist model of critical discourse analysis. One criticism that is often levelled at critical discourse analysis as a methodology is that it means different things to different researchers, and can be coupled with a vast range of methods. While this is, in a sense, an opportunity, allowing for scholarly innovation in combining different methods and theoretical lenses, it can also make "methodology sections" on critical discourse analysis feel rather abstract. Rather than shying away from this problem, I begin by situating critical discourse analysis theoretically, alongside key concepts in cultural studies, gender theory and humour theory. I will describe the methods used in this research more concretely, but first I invite the reader to join me in this interdisciplinary exploration.

As a starting point, put very concisely, critical discourse analysis is a methodology inspired by Michel Foucault, who famously argued that discourse is a mode of representation that delimits the production of knowledge and identity (Foucault 1972). The categories that make up discourse "do not come about by themselves" (Foucault 1972: 25), but rather develop and change over time subject to the social and political contexts in which meaning and category construction occurs. These contexts are always intractably tied to structures of power. In "The Order of Discourse", Foucault explores the relationship of discourses to power and inclusion: "We know quite well that we do not have the right to… speak of just anything in any circumstances… and that not everyone has the right to speak of anything whatever" (Foucault, 1981: 52).

Following in the tradition of Michel Foucault, Michelle Lazar develops the methodology of feminist critical discourse analysis (henceforth FCDA) to expose the various "ways in which frequently taken-for-granted assumptions and hegemonic power relations are discursively produced, sustained, negotiated and challenged in different contexts and communities" (Lazar 2007: 142), specifically in the context of gendered power structures. Lazar situates gender as a form of hegemonic ideological structure. Like other ideological structures cemented in social discourse, it does not "appear as domination" but rather "as largely consensual and acceptable to most" (Lazar 2007: 147). Here, Lazar is influenced by the prolific philosopher and gender theorist Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which gender is theorized as a social and

cultural construct that is learned and embodied through repetition. The book is characterized by a "dogged effort to "denaturalize" gender" (Butler 1990: *xx*), since the naturalization of gender is itself a mechanism of power and exclusion. This concept of naturalization is also taken up by cultural theorist Stuart Hall, who coined the phrase "naturalized codes" to describe discursive frames and categories that are "so widely distributed in a specific… community or culture, and… learned at so early an age, that they appear not to be constructed… but to be 'naturally' given" (Hall 1980: 55). In Lazar's FCDA, she underlines the complexity of gender and power relations, noting that difference and diversity among women is an important insight for FCDA. The power asymmetries within discourse are shaped not only by gender but also by the intersections between race, class, sexuality and religion, in which some combinations of identities are "naturalized" while others mark individuals out for exclusion and "Othering".[7] An important point here is that the academic researcher does not exist outside these structures of power asymmetry. More specifically, those who study humour are "de facto members of specific normative communities and have their own […] stereotypes, which may influence not only their own research interests, but also their […] analyses and results" (Tsakona 2017: 198). In exploring comedy representations and self-representations of Muslim women, I am conscious of my own positionality as a feminist, as a native English speaker raised in a British context,[8] and as a cis white middle class woman with no religious affiliation, and left-leaning political alignments. To navigate this question of positionality, I acknowledge my subjectivity and engage reflectively with the ways in which it inevitably informs my analysis. Writing in the first person is one step towards making my own embodied and social position visible.

Having outlined the theoretical frame of critical discourse analysis, I will now turn to the specific question of analysing comedy discourse. This will lead to a brief explanation of the specific methods that were used in producing the analysis in this article. One crucial feature of humourous discourse is its potential to operate on many levels at the same time. As humour scholar Anton Zijderveld puts it, "Ambiguity is the essence of humour" (Zijderveld 1983: 55). By virtue of its polysemic qualities – its ability to say multiple things at once – a

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[7] See Kimberley Crenshaw's introduction to the concept of intersectionality (1989). For a more recent collection on the concept of "intersectionality", see Crenshaw's *On Intersectionality: Essential Writings* (2017).

[8] This is a relevant factor, given that national and cultural identity, upbringing and native language can significantly shape humour style and taste (e.g., Adler-Nissen & Tsinovoi 2018).

joke often "pivots on a point of its precarious balance" (Conway 2017: 27). The precarity to which Conway refers here may be explained by the fact that the different layers of comedy discourse often reflect conflicting cultural values and ideals. Needless to say, from a methodological perspective, this presents both opportunities and challenges. Humour is particularly intriguing from the point of view of discourse analysis precisely because it can operate on different levels at once, and these levels may reveal conflicting cultural values and norms. At the same time, the researcher has their work cut out in analysing this complex form of data. In analysing my data, I followed Lazar's suggestion to scrutinize the relationship between different semiotic resources (between language and images). I produced multi-modal transcriptions, in which I noted visual frames (such as panning shots, jump cuts, and particular objects in-shot) as well as sound and text-script columns.[9] From here, I identified particular sections of interest in the transcripts, and developed my analysis, mapping it against reviews and interviews with the performers. This approach follows the examples of Conway (2017) and Miles (2015), who conduct CDA of representations of Islam in comedy shows and media dialogue about these shows.[10] Having now situated the theoretical and methodological context of this article, in the next section, I use two examples to disentangle some of the ways in which dominant cultural frames regarding Muslim women are (sometimes simultaneously) reinforced and contested in comedic representations and self-representations of Muslim women.

3. Sitcoms as representation: The case of *Citizen Khan*

The British TV sitcom *Citizen Khan* (henceforth *CK*) (2012-2016) is one example of a show in which Muslim women are represented by a team of screenwriters, producers and actors with varying degrees of connection to the community they represent.[11] It is worth noting that *CK* was produced by the BBC. According to sociologist and humour studies scholar Christie Davies, what is aired by public broadcasting services like the BBC has far-reaching

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[9] See Moernaut, Mast, & Pauwels (2020) for an introductory outline of multimodal analysis methods.

[10] While these studies provide useful examples in developing my methodology, they differ in their focus on male Muslim comedians in the North American context.

[11] It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss further examples in-depth, but it is worth noting that the BBC began airing *Man Like Mobeen* (2017-), a show also set in Birmingham and centring a Muslim male protagonist and his younger sister, the year after *CK* came off air.

implications in terms of "whose tastes in comedy shall prevail" (Davies, in Bucaria & Barra 2016: 38). In recent years, Davies adds, the BBC has tended to favour relatively "traditional" styles of sitcoms, focusing on family life and avoiding taboo topics. In *CK,* we see this pattern reproduced in some respects. The show depicts the everyday lives of the self-proclaimed "community leader" Mr. Khan, his wife and his daughters Shazia and Alia. While Mr. Khan is the show's central protagonist, *CK's* comedy often derives from the ways in which his wife and daughters deal with his delusions of authority. The show was written and produced by Adil Ray, a Muslim raised in Birmingham to a Pakistani-Punjabi father and Kenyan mother, alongside Richard Pinto and Anil Gupta, who had both previously worked on other shows representing Muslim communities, including *Goodness Gracious Me* (1998-2001) and *The Kumars at No. 42* (2001-2006). Given that there were no Muslim women involved in the writing of the show, it may be analysed through the lens of representation as opposed to self-representation. At the same time, of course, the actresses playing these parts also make choices about how to represent their characters and deliver their lines. Furthermore, as Maya Sondhi (who plays Shazia) comments in an interview, "The writers… write for our voices… They know the way we are. So there are… elements of us going in there as well" (*BBC Asian Radio Network* 2014). However, she also adds that Bhavna Limbachia (who plays Shazia's younger sister Alia) is nothing like her character. This is particularly notable given that many viewers and critics of the show are particularly interested in how Alia is represented.

In the show's first episode, we are first introduced to Alia when she hears Mr. Khan walking up the stairs and immediately stops taking pouting selfies on her phone and rushes to cover up "a glamorous, tight-fitting and revealing outfit" (Ahmed 2013: 94) with the hijab and hide a fashion magazine under the Qur'an. Mr. Khan is entirely taken in by the performance and delighted at his daughter's display of piety. This scene alone prompted 185 complaints from viewers, who felt that this representation "ridiculed" Islam (Revoir 2012) and reproduced the stereotype of the "oppressed Muslim woman". One journalist responded to this representation in the following rather hyperbolic terms:

> 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 (Lais 2012).

Throughout *CK,* Alia's representation appears, on one level, to *contest* the stereotype of the sexually repressed, modestly dressed Muslim women - she goes to parties, has boyfriends, and dresses "provocatively". At the same time, however, the humour of her representation derives from this double life, in which she has to play the part of the "modest daughter" for her father. This can lead viewers and commentators to filter Alia's representation through a hegemonic understanding of Muslim women as sexually repressed and in need of saving (Bracke 2011; Abu-Lughod 2013). Later in his review, the journalist Hasnet Lais goes back on his earlier position, suggesting instead that Alia is emblematic of "blow[ing] the whistle" on a culture in which "opportunities to discuss sexuality are closed" (Lais 2012). This interpretation also goes beyond what we actually see in *CK*. When Alia misleads her father, the audience shows their approval with laughter, but we are not privy to many aspects of Alia's "love life" or any part of her life outside the Khan home. Indeed, the same can be said of Mrs. Khan and Shazia, who are also most often seen inside the Khan home.[12] This seems to reproduce the dominant cultural frame in which religious women in general (Cady and Fessenden 2013) and Muslim women in particular (van Es 2016), are associated with the private sphere and domesticity.

Later in the show, the theme of shame and embarrassment around sexuality arises again, this time when Alia's sister Shazia finds herself embroiled in an unexpected scandal, after Mr. Khan accidentally starts a rumour that she had an affair with a family friend, Imran Parvez, before meeting her fiancé. 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!

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[12] Admittedly, it is a common trope of TV sitcoms to situate most scenes within a few settings. This may be a budgeting decision, to minimise costs on set production, or as a practical choice in order to avoid long interludes between scenes in front of a live audience. However, in this case, the gendered aspect seems to hold, since Mr. Khan often has scenes in the mosque setting, where he meets with other men.

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. By contrast with Mr. Khan's embarrassment, Shazia is pragmatic and impatient at her parents' inability to speak openly about sex. This representation stands in stark contrast with the stereotype of the "oppressed Muslim woman" who is unable to speak for herself. Instead, 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."

In making this declaration, Shazia echoes a common Western understanding of sexual emancipation and bodily agency. Her parents reluctantly agree but this is undercut by the fact that she is repeatedly 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… over, dead and buried."

While Shazia (like Alia) does not conform to the dominant frame of the "sexually repressed Muslim woman", nor is she fully included in the humourous discourse of the show, rather often being represented as earnest and sensible. Still more so, as the quote above reflects, Mrs. Khan is often represented as a figure of insecurity, whose main concern is with preserving status within the community and keeping her family out of trouble. Much of the episode's humour derives from the drama of Shazia's humiliation, and Mrs. Khan and Shazia are both often the butt of the joke. The representation of a "prudish" approach to female sexuality from Mr. and Mrs. Khan also frequently prompts laughter from the show's audience. This begs the question: how should we interpret the representations of Alia and Shazia in *CK?* Both are, in some ways, complicating a particular "dominant cultural order" (Hall 1980) in which Muslim women have been discursively framed as sexually repressed. At the same time, the humour of the representations of both Alia and Shazia often falls back on the audience's awareness of the stereotype that Muslim women are "sexually repressed" and confined to the private sphere. In their analysis of TV sitcoms, Chiara Bucaria and Luca Barra argues that comedy thrives off a "fruitful duplicity" (Bucaria and Barra 2016: 11), at the same time "follow[ing]

the rules and break[ing] them" to bring "fresh and original perspectives into a common ground of habits and repetitions" (Bucaria & Barra 2016: 10). When seen from this point of view, the seemingly contradictory ways in which Shazia and Alia both "break" and "follow" the rules appear productive, in illuminating the complexity, plurality and internal paradoxes of dominant stereotypes and frames about Muslim women in British discourse.

The picture is further complicated by media and cultural studies scholar Anamik Saha, who argues that *CK* calls for the inclusion of Muslim voices in mainstream British culture precisely *through* its "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 exoticized and orientalized... there is something potentially counter-hegemonic in situating a comedy programme about Pakistanis squarely in the ever-so-British tradition of BBC sitcoms" (Saha 2013: 99). Within this "ever-so-British tradition", the recycling of stereotypes is a prominent comedic strategy. Thus, rather paradoxically, the use of the hegemonic discursive model of British sitcoms may operate to create a counter-hegemonic statement, calling for the inclusion of Muslim voices in mainstream British comedy culture. Film studies scholar Daniela Berghahn takes a similar but rather more optimistic approach, arguing that sitcoms about minority groups tend to invite "majority and minority culture audiences that recognise that families... [wherever they come from] have a great deal in common" (Berghahn, in Thorsen et al. 2015: 111).

It is worth developing the question of marginality and representation a little further here. Since the advent of the British school of cultural studies (founded by Stuart Hall, among others, in the 1960s), an emphasis has been placed on examining cultural representations with a view to moving "the margins into the centre, the outside into the inside" (Hall 1990: 10). However, when a group or individual is labelled "marginal", "we must be aware of what is being inscribed as central" (Thorsen et al. 2015: 1). By focusing on the family (as *CK* does), groups that are sometimes placed in "the margins" take on a new representation of shared experience and similarity, becoming, in a sense, "central". This model of challenging "Othering" by emphasizing similarities is not without its limitations, however. In her semiautobiographical work *Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black* (1989), bell hooks observes how often ways of talking back to dominant or ruling groups are co-opted into the language and frame of the dominant group: "It becomes easy to speak about what that group wants to hear, to describe and define experience in a language

compatible with existing images and ways of knowing, constructed within social frameworks that reinforce domination" (hooks 1989: 29).

Saha's observation concerning sitcoms as part of an "ever-so-British tradition" begs the question of to what extent comedy of this kind can move beyond "existing images and ways of knowing", which would include the dominant cultural frame of Muslim women as "oppressed". In a more recent article, Sarah Bracke similarly observes that "different ways of talking back, and the different subjects they foster, continue to rely, albeit it in different ways, on the terms of debate" (Bracke 2011: 44). It might be argued that, in the case of representations like those of Shazia, Alia and Mrs. Khan in *CK,* the dominant "terms of debate" retain a strong presence. In the next section, I turn my attention to stand-up comedy as a (possible) vehicle for self-representation that moves beyond the reproduction of norms.

4. Stand-up as self-representation: Shazia Mirza

In *The Politics of British Stand-Up Comedy: The New Alternative,* Sophie Quirk describes stand-up as a transformative act of "storytelling as community-building and expectation-setting" (Quirk 2018: 8). In her analysis of comedy as "cultural critique", Joanne Gilbert argues that women in stand-up comedy often "rhetorically construct and perform their marginality onstage" (Gilbert 1997: 317). Keeping in mind these two characterisations of stand-up comedy, the potential cultural significance of stand-up comedy as a space in which a Muslim woman can write her own script and represent herself becomes apparent. 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. For this reason, she will be subject of analysis in this section, although it is important to note that she is by no means the only Muslim woman working in British stand-up comedy.[13]

In this section, I will begin by focusing on Mirza's 2016 show *The Kardashians Made Me Do It* (henceforth *TKMMDI*). *TKMMDI* is a comedy set inspired by a real news story about three London schoolgirls who left Britain to join ISIS in Syria. Specifically, in the set, Mirza describes these young women as "repressed, rebellious, horny teenage girls" enticed into joining "the One

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[13] Take, for example, the work of comedians Fatiha el-Ghorri, who recently performed on popular British TV chat show *The Jonathan Ross Show* and Sadia Azmat, whose credits include stand-up set *I Am Not Malala* (2014) and comedy podcast *No Country for Young Women* (2018-2020 BBC Sounds).

Direction 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 through her own comedy and openness when talking about "taboo" topics related to female sexual desire. 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" (Mirza 2016). This is, perhaps, especially important given the sensitive content of the show, and opens up space for Mirza to play on her identity as a Muslim woman in relation to the themes of sexuality and radicalization. For example, she brings her own lived experience into contact with the news story 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. (Mirza 2016).

Here, Mirza pre-empts some of the stereotypes her audience may hold about Muslim women as "vulnerable-fanatic[s]" (Saeed 2016: 2), prone to becoming Jihadi brides, or solely aspiring to "get a husband" and not have to work. She also references the stereotype that Muslim women's marriages are arranged by their parents, while at the same time satirizing 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. When defending the show against critics who found it too controversial a topic for comedy, Mirza invoked her identity as a British Muslim woman to legitimize her performance.

Thus, while Mirza has stated in several interviews that she does not want to be typecast as a female Muslim comedian (Lockyer & Pickering 2005), she also uses her identity strategically as a tool to gain access to comedy spaces. In the promotional brochure for the show, Mirza is quoted as saying, "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). By simultaneously identifying with the audience ("rebelling in the normal way") and with the girls who joined ISIS (in terms of upbringing), Mirza negotiates and blurs the space between "insider" and "outsider". Again, after

describing her conversation with her friend Matthew about becoming a Jihadi bride, Mirza deploys this strategy, reassuring her audience that: "It's a joke, obviously. They wouldn't have me. They're not looking for an in-house comedian. I'm 30 years too old and when it's hot I get my ankles out for the lads."

Mirza's colloquial tone here creates a sense of familiarity with the audience. She also posits an alternative to the dominant cultural discourse concerning Muslim women, by playfully representing herself as an agent of her own sexuality, who "gets her ankles out for the lads". At the same time, however, this alternative representation resonates with another norm about female sexuality (as something performed for male gratification) that also circulates in British public discourse. In her comedy, Mirza walks a fine line between playing sarcastically with stereotypical frameworks and going along with them. While stand-up comedy offers a "performative space within which to discursively situate the self in… opposition to collective categories" (Smith 2018: 90), this is not a simple matter. When looking at Mirza's comedy career as a whole, we see still more clearly how complicated questions of inclusion and self-representation in stand-up comedy are.

In one of her early sets, Shazia Mirza jokes 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" (Mirza 2005). Later in the same set, Mirza adds: "I'm looking forward to my wedding day… I can't wait to meet my husband" (Mirza 2005). These jokes are received with laughter and applause and crop up in many positive reviews of her comedy. In an interview, Mirza references this tendency towards praising Muslim women who "speak out" and observes 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 & 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 lacks agency and only meets her husband on her wedding day). At other times, however, as we saw in *TKMMDI*, Mirza also uses her audience's expectations to her advantage, creating subversive, humorous moments through the perceived incongruity of her status as an outspoken Muslim comedian. At times, her references to stereotypes are so over the top that her sarcasm is clear, but in other moments, her attitude towards the stereotypes she uses is more ambiguous. In sum, Mirza seems to experiment with different gradations along a continuum between repeating and contesting stereotypes, but to remain silent regarding stereotypes is rarely an option. This

resonates with a broader point, which will now be developed further in the concluding section of this article; namely, that navigating tensions seems inherent in the humour of those who are marginalized and/or framed as "Other", who may laugh back but will always be expected to speak about, and thus risk reiterating, "Othering" stereotypes in contemporary comedy spaces (Weaver 2010).

3. Conclusions: blurred boundaries and productive tensions

As I mentioned at the outset of this article, Muslim women are increasingly being represented and representing themselves in comedy spaces. This should, in theory, mean that Muslim women are increasingly included in a more diverse range of cultural discourses and that the "humourless" frame fades over time. It is too early to say – and very difficult to measure – the extent to which this is the case. What is already clear is that the humourous discourses that emerge out of these comedy representations and self-representations cannot simply be labelled as either inclusive or as reproducing exclusionary stereotypes. In a sense, it might be argued that stand-up comedians like Shazia Mirza reimagine social reality in ways unavailable within "serious" forms of discourse. This reimagining often takes the form of combining typically distinct themes and categories of identity, and playing on their (imagined) congruence for comedic effect. In achieving this reimaging, Mirza's explicit self-positioning as a Muslim woman speaking from personal, lived experiences is crucial, in allowing her to play with, and contest, stereotypes for comedic effect. Having said this, Mirza's comedy can also be interpreted as reinforcing 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). Furthermore, when comedians are invited to perform first and foremost as Muslim women, and expected to speak on what are imagined to be the main issues concerning Muslim women, self-representation in stand-up comedy remains entangled with the dominant cultural frame. At the same time, when Muslim women gain access to comedy spaces, they are invited to "be the laughers rather than the laughed-at" (Gilbert 1997: 328). We should not underestimate the significance of this shift, in terms of changing dynamics of power and contesting the prevailing politics of inclusion and exclusion from public comedy spaces.

In scripted comedies like *CK,* we see Muslim women represented through the lens of male writers. Characters like Shazia, Alia and Mrs. Khan are written into supporting roles, and not always fully developed. Comedy representations, in the context of sitcoms perhaps still more than stand-up comedy, risk being transposed back into dominant cultural frames (for example, when stereotypes are referenced tongue-in-cheek, but this can be read by the audience as reinforcing their own stereotypes or pre-existing biases). At the same time, comedic representations of Muslim women in the family context in *CK* also engage tongue-in-cheek with the stereotype of the Muslim woman "oppressed" by male family members. Mr. Khan is not, in fact, the powerful patriarch that he thinks he is, but is rather repeatedly outwitted by his wife and daughters. The show therefore opens up a more nuanced discussion, in which the ambiguities and emotional complexities behind norms around "freedom" or "oppression" shine through, while the prevailing stereotypes about Muslim women are not ignored. The deconstruction of stereotypes about the "Muslim woman" in TV sitcoms will never be a simple or straightforward matter, since the boundaries between challenging and reproducing stereotypes are often blurred and hard to pin down in humourous discourse. However, one strength of both sitcoms like *CK* and stand-up like Mirza's lies in their ability to transgress constructions of difference through representations of complex family relationships (father-daughter, sister-sister and so on) that almost anyone can relate to in some way. In this sense, comedy is a valuable medium for cultural discourses of inclusion and diversity, which can create spaces of individual expression and shared humanity.

To close, despite the frustrations it may bring to the researcher, it is ultimately the ambiguity of comedy that makes it such a fascinating and fruitful topic of research. Lived experience is full of tensions, ambiguities and contradictions, perhaps especially for marginalized groups. Representation and self-representation in cultural productions often involves a dilution, summarisation or simplification of identity and lived experience to create a coherent social and cultural narrative. However, in the case of comedy, the tensions, ambiguities and contradictions between lived experience and how one is positioned as a subject are often the topic of the joke. It is my hope that this article reflects the value of taking humourous representations and self-representations of marginalized groups seriously, as an invaluable cultural tool for nuanced reflection on the politics of inclusion, and the ways in which dominant cultural stereotypes can be experienced, reproduced and contested.

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