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Indigestible performances: Women, punk, and the limits of British multiculturalism in Nida Mazoor's *We Are Lady Parts*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the political potential and limits of Muslim punk feminism within the context of multicultural Britain through a reading of the first season of Channel 4's 2021 dramedy *We Are Lady Parts*. The show explores how the religious and cultural beliefs of Muslim communities are represented as incompatible with contemporary British values. To situate the cultural politics of the text, the article considers the characters in relation to their exclusion from "legitimate" British society, as well as their original feminist strategies as a subversive and novel response to it. Muslim women are read through a nexus of social factors – international and national. These readings can be viewed as both productive and conflicting: at some times producing important rereadings of the submissive and oppressed orientalised Muslim female figure, while at others challenging the possibility of a stable Muslim female identity as positioned in normative models of British assimilationist multiculturalism.

KEYWORDS

Muslim; feminism; Nida Manzoor; multiculturalism; British; body

Introduction: Punk, Muslim women, and the media

Representations of Muslim women are few and far between in British television, but Nida Manzoor's (2021) *We Are Lady Parts* is a refreshing departure from the usual orientalist depictions of Muslim femininity. A novel generic subversion of the romcom/chick-lit mode, the show tackles the positioning of Muslim individuals within a British context – and while depictions of Muslims on screen are not wholly original (for example, *Muzlamic* 2019, *Man like Mobeen* 2016, and *Citizen Khan* 2012) – one that focuses on the individual lives of Muslim women (particularly veiled Muslim women) certainly is. Rehana Ahmed (2015) notes that "the narrative facilitates identification with the cultural Other while preventing the absorption of the (veiled) Other into the Self by making visible the former's significant difference" (209). Using the innovative musical medium of punk music, the show mobilizes a shocking in-her-face anti-establishment attitude to upend commonly held tropes about Muslim women. Released in 2021 by Channel 4, the comedy-drama follows the trials and tribulations of 26-year-old Londoner and microbiology PhD student, Amina Hussain. The show explores her quest for love and

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marriage, her efforts to be a good friend to her tight-knit female group of university friends, and the usual exasperations that arise when an adult child still lives at home with overly involved but well-meaning parents. However, the central thrust of the show becomes Amina's involvement in an all-girl Muslim punk band called Lady Parts. Amina is a relatable, self-effacing, and endearingly likeable character, whose sharp voice-over overlays the show's story and reveals her innermost thoughts, encouraging the audience to sympathize with her struggles.

The show can be read as compatible with the category of chick-lit or romantic comedy: Amina is akin to the Everywoman that can be seen starring in these genres. However, this show departs from the formulaic conventions of chick lit or the romcom by subverting them within the framework of British multiculturalism, and it approaches the topic of Muslim identity with a genuine and comedic sense of self-awareness that politicizes the genre in innovative ways. *We Are Lady Parts* adapts and stretches these generic categories by populating the narrative with practising Muslim women, rather than the single white female urbanite who usually features as protagonist. The show productively mobilizes the radicalism of punk rock for its firebrand feminist political message: the band's members actively counter received and harmful tropes of the oppressed Muslim woman by operating outside the preconceived script of obedience and submissiveness and instead embrace profanity, joyful raucousness, and an anti-establishment attitude.

However, while attempting to traverse, negotiate, and reconcile the diasporic context of the band – black and brown Muslim women within the national context of multicultural Britain – several problematic discursive intersections are revealed. *We Are Lady Parts* has been critically lauded for its

progressive representations [that] highlight a truth about being a modern-day Muslim: you can be both God-fearing and weed-smoking; disorderly and devotional. Far from a clash, these things reflect a cultural mish-mash of the tangled and contradictory parts of ourselves that make us delightfully, bafflingly human. (Dawood 2021, n.p)

Yet this “truth” of a “modern-day Muslim” sits uneasily at the juncture of a variety of Islamic doctrines and progressive British ideals and is not as unproblematically resolved within the show's narrative as Dalia Dawood's review claims. The characters throw into sharp relief Muslim female subjectivity within British liberal democracy. This is articulated through the show's politics that cause offence to a diverse British audience consisting of heterogeneous Muslims and non-Muslims: the outrage of both communities is represented within *We Are Lady Parts*'s narrative. In Britain, centralized and cultural forces espouse a multiculturalism that appears to value tolerance, but only to the extent that it tessellates with “British” values. If cultural/religious practices – in this instance, Islam – are received as incompatible with these values, it produces a truncated hyphenated subjectivity, one that the band members struggle to stably realize and embody. This incompatibility functions as a sort of indigestion, both literal and metaphoric. Lead guitarist Amina, for example, suffers from stage fright which results in gastric maladies like nausea and vomiting. The perceived clashes between British and Muslim values escape the acceptable boundaries of British national discourse as well as Muslim female identity, just as somatic fluids escape Amina's body. Caught between glocal and universalized Islamic discourses, and competing feminist traditions, and situated within a hostile, assimilationist British multicultural, *We Are Lady Parts*'s punk interventionist

strategy to stably represent British Muslim female identity can be read as an anarchic retort to all these, often dichotomous, pressures. Yet limited by the numerous religious, political, and national discourses from which it borrows, responds to, and navigates, as well as the diverse audiences to whom it speaks, the show must be scrutinized for what is both visible and not visible on screen to decode its true feminist, punk tactics, and to evaluate the extent to which they are successful.

Multicultural Muslims

In a speech delivered in Munch in 2011, David Cameron coined the term “muscular liberalism” to herald a distinct form of British multiculturalism that distinguished between a passive versus an active approach to a culturally diverse nation. The speech addressed concerns about extremism and terrorism and as a solution proffered a “muscular” political approach that sought adherence to British values. Despite rhetorical attempts at neutrality, it is clear that Cameron’s speech indirectly targeted Muslims living within Britain as the specific “problem” population. Thus, he further confirmed a well-established global representational narrative that Muslims are “terrorists, traitors, non-democrats and threats to social cohesion and global peace” (Kumar 2018, 16). Muslims are widely viewed as a threat and “only contingently belonging to the nation, and as bearers of sets of values deemed irreconcilable with the values of Britain’s asserted status as a liberal democracy” (Shankley and Rhodes 2020, 214). Cameron’s speech deepens the dichotomy between “Britishness” and those foreign elements that are perceived as antithetical to it and thus synonymous with a dangerous and violent alterity:

A passively tolerant society says to its citizens: as long as you obey the law, we will leave you alone. It stands neutral between different values. A genuinely liberal country does much more. It believes in certain values and actively promotes them. (2011, n.p.)

Cameron indicates a distinct domestic attitude towards those labelled “other” and solidifies an ongoing one, both formal and informal, towards racial, religious, and cultural difference. This rhetorically “soft” approach belies a more robust project of exclusion and control, marked by a biopolitics that designates racial, cultural, and religious others – in this instance, Muslims – as hostile entities only granted access to “Britishness” by means of assimilation. By not conforming to these values, they experience discrimination and exclusion. As Lasse Thomassen (2017, 1) states, “they are included, but in a way that establishes a hierarchy, positioning some at the centre and some at the margins of the inclusive identity of Britishness”. *We Are Lady Parts*’s contemporary context of multiculturalism must be read through this current political milieu, where Muslims are pushed into the margins. The show outwardly decries intolerance and advocates inclusion within its own multicultural population, although at best it systematically erases difference, and at worst actively punishes Muslims.

Cameron’s “muscular liberalism” can be read as the solidification of an ongoing and systematic restructuring of the meaning of British multiculturalism in the context of hostility towards Muslims – one that by no means was inaugurated by events such as 9/11 and 7/7, although they intensified it. In Britain in particular, following 7/7,

a highly distorted picture of Britain’s Muslim “ghettos” – summed up by the specious term “Londonistan” – [. . . was] circulated by journalists and bloggers in America as an apparent warning from across the Atlantic of what happens when Islam is accorded too much tolerance. (Kundnani 2014, 11)

These sentiments are reflected in a speech delivered in Manchester in September 2005 in which Trevor Phillips (2004, n.p.), chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, claimed that Britons were “becoming strangers to each other, and [...] leaving communities to be marooned outside the mainstream”. Phillips reasserted his insistence in a *Times* interview in 2004; that in order to resolve the issue of extremism in Muslim communities “we need to assert that there is a core of Britishness”, interpreting this as “democracy rather than violence, the common currency of the English language, honouring the culture of these islands, like Shakespeare and Dickens” (2004, n.p.). Indeed, in response to the term “multiculturalism” he even goes so far as to suggest that “the word is not useful, it means the wrong things [...]. Multiculturalism suggests separateness. We are in a different world from the Seventies” (n.p.). Phillips indicates an active political sea change in British multiculturalism. As Sarah Illott (2021) states:

the slipperiness of the term “multiculturalism” – as interchangeable shorthand for an ideal or “moral project”, a set of governing policies, and the reality of diversity – means that the rejection of multiculturalism as a failed political ideal was and is often expressed as a rejection of lived multiculturalism, leading inexorably to resurgent nationalism and racism. (343)

Again the message to Muslims is clear: assimilate, or face exclusion, erasure, and systemic oppression.

These strategies that purport to deal with the “problem” of British Muslims flatten a diverse group into an orientalist fantasy and deny the reality that the Muslim population is wildly varied. As Shankley and Rhodes (2020) state: “These established tropes work to deny the heterogeneity of Muslims in terms of nationality, ethnicity, religious practice, place, social and economic positions, and gender” (214). Islam as a religious identity is also problematically folded in with other identity positions, creating easy and inaccurate associations between certain types of bodies, and thus making Islam and Muslims “synonymous with a racial threat to American and global Western civilization rather than solely a religious identity” (Karaman and Christian 2020, 520). By homogenizing Muslims, media representations of them – often racialized – fall into two categories: either reinforcing stereotypes of the dangerous Muslim, or attempting to actively respond to these tropes: ultimately, both effectively rehearse the “clash of civilizations” binary.

Due to being forced into this oppositional binary, British Muslims have sought to legitimize and recoup the exclusionary zone in which they are situated through the practice of various forms of difference (religious and cultural), yet simultaneously to negotiate this difference in the face of an increasingly hostile scene of multiculturalism that demands assimilation. As a way of finding greater acceptability, Muslims have sought to represent themselves as familiar and indeed simply “one of you”: moderate and inoffensive “good Muslims”. And yet more defiant, extremist iterations of Islam that respond to orientalist and racist ploys to represent Muslims,

constructing their ideological stance as oppositional to the “godless” west, are undeniable, and thus,

when certain Muslims position themselves, often in direct answer to these images, as the pure antithesis of a corrupt, materialist modernity, they both stereotype the West on its own terms— take it too much at face value [. . .]— and stereotype themselves. (Morey and Yaqin 2011, 5)

By occupying a zone of exclusion which is simultaneously, reactively defended yet also demands that Muslims “fit in” to an increasingly hostile and assimilationist Britain, Muslims find themselves in a double bind. For diasporic British Muslims, global Islamic identity and Islamism empower and embolden in the face of systematic marginalization and prejudice (Husain 2007), and “it is global Islamist narratives that empower, speaking both to individual and collective feelings of marginalization and offering forms of agency and empowerment otherwise unmet in contemporary Britain” (Weedon 2016, 107). However, this complicates the efforts of British Muslims to stably represent themselves both as national citizens and as belonging to a wider global religious community whose principals exceed the limits of western Islamophobia. In fact, globalist Islamic discourse, facilitated by the Internet, is so constructed and entwined with its own specific, historical religious origins as well as being responsive to contemporary, negative representations of Muslims that they become difficult to detangle.

It would be reductive, however, to deny those elements of Islam that precede and surpass this well-rehearsed Islamophobic binary of Islam versus the west. There are elements of Islam – a global Islamic discourse read here as “mainstream” Islam – that directly contravene the British multicultural project of assimilation. Islam is read, by most Muslims the world over, as “unchangeable”. Although Islam is undeniably practised with a national cultural specificity – Islamic identity operates as a global identity as well, with the local/national influencing the global and vice versa – mainstream and extremist Muslims all consider their holy text as sacrosanct – and this practice of the Islamic faith historically precedes contemporary global iterations of the religion. The exegesis of Islam’s sacred text is limited by the belief that the Koran is the absolute word of God, unchanged since the 7th century, and should be followed literally. The Koran is “the direct speech of God, God’s own voice speaking through the Prophet [. . .] as opposed to divinely-inspired compositions, translations, and redactions” (El-Desouky 2014, 12). Thus, Islam is read as clashing with modern western discourse and condemned for not updating to its current historical and political environment. Rather than liberalizing to become compatible with western modernity, Islam in its dominant form has remained staunchly rooted in an unchanging set of principles. Such stability attracts adherents worldwide, especially disenfranchised individuals seeking the security of a global community and a clear religious doctrine. Seyla Benhabib (2004) conceives of a “citizenship of residency” that allows for multiple and overlapping allegiances to locality, region, and transnational institutions. Diasporic Muslim identity may be included in this, which “in the case of Catholics might be encompassed by transnational institutions, but for many Muslims could be seen as completely separate from any institutional or geo-political structures” (Rogeanu 2011, n.p.). This presents the complex position of Islam within Britain, invested in a universal Islamic doctrine, but also existing within the secular state. Therefore, the term “glocal” encounters limits when confronted with the

unchanging principles of a global Islamist discourse. Islamic practice in Britain evidently presents a serious ideological problem for the nation's muscular liberalism – one that does not follow a “mosaic” model of multiculturalism, where differences can be respected – and also for its adherents who, as British citizens, must be seen as responsive to national ideology. The characters in *We Are Lady Parts* attempt to negotiate this converging conflict, with varying degrees of success.

Muslim women, as sign-bearers of the west's interpretation of Islam's backwardness, are read through a western feminist lens as exemplars of its barbarism, mainly citing Islam's unequal gender politics as evidence. Islamic feminists, by contrast, claim that Muslim women “are still exposed to different forms of oppression (national, class and sexual)”, but that “the original cause of their triple oppression is not Islam but the patriarchal class system which manifests itself internationally as world capitalism and imperialism, and nationally in the feudal and capitalist classes of the Third World countries” (El-Sa'dawi 1982, 206). Islamic feminists argue that the culturally inflected practice of Islam, rather than Islam, oppresses women. As Sariya Contractor (2012) claims: “I believe Islam as derived from the Quran and the Sunnah is emancipatory” (9). But her further statement that “Islam values family structures, positions men and women as different but equal and gives them complementary roles that are equally important to the development and future of society” (3) contravenes gender equality as defined by western feminism. If filtered through a western perspective that defines gender as constructed, and equality as absolute access to all gender privileges regardless of biological sex, Islamic feminism does read as incompatible with western feminism: “While the Qur'an makes some remarkable and heartening assertions about the value and dignity of women, those statements do not necessarily mitigate its hierarchical statements” (Hidayatullah 2014, 121).

We Are Lady Parts's feminism – sourced from Islamic doctrine and located in a British context of women's rights – comes up against the limits of both Islamic and western feminism. By attempting to speak simultaneously to several ideologically competing audiences, the show's real feminist message is somewhat syncopated: it attempts to avoid causing offence to both Muslim and non-Muslim viewers. Its subversion lies in what it does not say – what it *cannot* say without severely overstepping the bounds of the profane, in the context of both a global Islamic identity and national Muslim identity, or without being overtaken by the assimilationist rhetoric of Britain's muscular liberalism. Caught between multiple discursive systems and diverse Muslim subjects who seek representations of themselves on screen, the feminist message of *We Are Lady Parts* is most effectively read through what is visible on screen, and what is omitted.

The politics of Muslim punk

We Are Lady Parts positions its radical punk protest at the juncture of mainstream Islam, a hegemonic British multiculturalism, and its own unique practices of Muslim faith. With its young protagonists and focus on *Künstlerroman* (artist-novel) themes, the show appeals to Muslim young people as evidenced by its deployment of punk – always received as a distinct youth culture – as well as its focus on intergenerational conflict. This well-worn struggle, characteristic of the British second-generation postcolonial experience, is exemplified through Lady Parts's lead singer Saira's strained relationship

with her family, and the stark sense of otherness she experiences when in her family home. However, the show deliberately works against these more archetypal conflicts characteristic of diasporic texts by presenting a counterpoint in Amina's parents, who, rather than force her into the hijab and an appropriate marriage, actively push back against the more traditional goals Amina independently strives towards. Although Saira's look more readily fits the aesthetics of punk music, and Amina seemingly lives entirely outside it, shying away even from wearing colours that are too bright – a headscarf that is too bold a colour brings censure from her best friend, Noor – both their central narratives reflect the political doctrine most associated with punk music: that it “should not be understood simply as a model of consumption, or a product of media invention, but as a formative and contested experience through which young people discover, comprehend, affirm and express their desires, opinions and disaffections” (Worley 2017, 2–3). Arguably, the show's two protagonists, Amina and Saira, both threaten the status quo in their own way. Saira, in more overt forms through her dark eyeliner, tattoos, and punk rock wardrobe, unsettles the stereotype of the oppressed Muslim woman. But Amina, too, challenges norms by presenting a modern Muslim woman who, given the choice and against the wishes of her parents – who are much more lackadaisical in their religious attitude and can be read as assimilationist – still actively chooses a more “traditional” interpretation of what it means to be Muslim. She does not receive this identity position from her parents or Islamic patriarchy, generally accepted as the forces from which Muslim women passively receive the edicts of conservative Muslim culture. It is in fact sourced from outside the familial home, from her peer group, and from a home-grown and globalist British Muslim culture. As Stuart Hall (2000) reminds us, when speaking of diasporic culture one should remember that “so-called ‘traditional’ ways of life derived from the cultures of origin remain important to community self-definitions, but constantly operate alongside extensive daily interaction at every level, with British mainstream social life” (220). Thus, what is considered traditional or not is overtly questioned in this text.

The Islam we encounter in *We Are Lady Parts* operates at the intersection of global Muslim and British national identities, neither of which is static or unbounded. The band's British Muslim identity is indeed a home-grown subjectivity, but it is limited by a universalist Muslim identity that precludes the kinds of adaptations the band members make in their practice of Islam. The Islam they practise may be read by British audiences as “mainstream”, convenient for the standard European narrative of Enlightenment and progress and lauded in Dawood's review earlier in this article. This apprehension of Islam assumes a natural move towards liberalization, compatible with western ideals of secularization, but, as Shadi Ham (2016) says,

there is no particular reason why Islamic “reform” should lead to liberalism in the way that the Protestant Reformation paved the way for the Enlightenment and, eventually, modern liberalism. [. . .] Islam, because of its fundamentally different relationship to politics, was simply more resistant to secularization. (26)

Thus, liberal Muslims (those practising Islam beyond the constraints of universalist/mainstream Islam) remain a “relatively small minority” (Ham 2016, 24) in the context of even a global Islamic faith. Besides this, the women of Lady Parts actively deploy an anti-colonial rhetoric in their music and a political position that precludes the efficacious

absorption of their identities within this “liberal Muslim” category. Their aim is not assimilation into Enlightenment ideals of progress. In the words of their own lyrics they are “misfits of the motherland” and “broken by the empire” (Manzoor 2021). The women in the show take pride in and acknowledge their hyphenated identities, and while these dislocated subjectivities produce a myriad of obstacles in terms of national belonging, the band refuses incorporation into mainstream Islam, liberal Islam, or British ideals of liberalism and modernity. Their punk presentation of Islam attempts to break free from all these delineations.

Deploying punk music as social critique, *We Are Lady Parts* mobilizes righteous anger towards social reinvention with both its aesthetic and its innovative sound. The show’s punk music utilizes profanity and obscenity to undermine the “good Muslim woman” archetype, which is constructed as submissive and demurely feminine by both the show’s mainstream Muslim discourse and British cultural stereotyping: “The Muslim woman was the damsel in distress locked up in her cage waiting to be rescued by whoever was narrating the story – be it the Orientalist, the colonialist, the feminist or the patriarch” (Contractor 2012, 2). Punk music’s history as the anarchic anthem of social change and youth culture’s disaffection provides a productive medium and theoretical frame to counter tired tropes of Muslim women, particularly for these young women who face the trials of establishing themselves in adulthood in the face of social hostility. The fact that the women pick this particularly angry music as their genre of choice indicates that they are actively responsive to the forms of oppression that they experience, and this may be read as coming from within both the Muslim community and the non-Muslim British context in which they are situated. The show illustrates and negotiates contradictions that structure the dichotomy between the conservative stereotypes of Muslim women – of gender as well as music – that the band are self-consciously pushing against with their performance – and a more radical “new” Muslim woman more congruous with, but not completely subsumable within, western standards of equality. The show’s representative elements of Muslim propriety are Noor’s and Amina’s university friends, Saira’s conservative family, and Amina’s occasional male suitors. They clearly delineate a set of acceptable codes for Muslim women. These expectations are sourced from a global Islam as well as a more localized iteration of Muslim culture. Amina is afraid to tell Noor about her passion for the guitar, let alone joining a punk band. Through Noor’s more overt surveillance of her behaviour, and through various Muslim characters’ negotiation of gender and space – Amina’s suitors are interested mostly in her demonstrable faith rather than her sexual/romantic appeal, and are accompanied by their parents during meetings, and Noor’s engagement party is segregated by gender – the show establishes a baseline of expected conduct for Muslim women, originating from pre-existing codes associated with a universalized, global Islam. Similarly, the various elements of “typical British society”, like the derisive white men in a local pub that the band performs for, or the racist customers who mock Ayesha in her Uber car, claiming she must only work because her father is making her, reveal the multiple stereotypes the women push against. The band retaliates against these identificatory overdeterminations through its behaviour, sartorial choices, and music.

The band’s punk attitudes and rebellious gender performance consciously counter British assumptions about the position of Muslim women. The band members are loud and boisterous; their drummer is queer and romantically active; their lead singer, covered

with tattoos, presents a combative, masculine countenance and is sexually active outside marriage; and their manager vapes incessantly – and comedically – through her niqab. Bassist Bisma certainly wears the trousers in her family unit, with her husband taking a back seat to her headstrong leadership. These women are encoded as mainstream British young people, interested in contemporary fashion, “normal” pastimes, and getting high. By presenting the women in a culturally normative way but simultaneously constructing them as Muslim women who have retained the outward (hijab and niqab) and inward (spiritual practice and faith) indicators of Islam, the show attempts to integrate or at the very least negotiate between the two, apparently opposing ideological contexts of being regular Brits as well as Muslim. Further still, in some instances, the band members’ behaviours such as smoking weed, wearing tattoos, or having sex outside wedlock might be seen as actively prohibited by Islam. By crossing the boundaries of the sacred that structures Islamic codes of prohibition, as the band members do in their lives and music, the show problematizes the boundary between the sacred and the profane within Islam. Yet in the band members’ overt displays of cultural difference and defiance, the show also challenges “sacred” British values – in this instance, referring to the nation’s assimilationist demands.

The music written for the show illustrates the strategic deployment of profanity, incongruent comedy, and obscenity to establish a polemic that challenges the strictures of Islamic propriety, as well as the overdeterminations Muslims experience in Britain. There are four original songs in the series, written by series creator Nida Manzoor and her collaborators Shez Manzoor, who also scored the show, Sanya Manzoor, and Benjamin Fregin. The songs are performed by the actors who play the members of the fictional band, *Lady Parts*: Anjana Vasan (Amina), Sarah Kameela Impey (Saira), Juliette Motamed (Ayesha), and Faith Omole (Bisma). The lyrics intentionally engage with flashpoint topics that typically characterize debates around Muslim women in the west: honour killings, the hijab, sexuality, and national belonging. The first song performed in the show, “Ain’t No One Gonna Honour Kill my Sister But Me”, approaches the limits of the blasphemous through making absurd the notion of honour killing. The song’s lyrics read:

I’m gonna kill my sister (Go on then!)
 This ain’t about you, it’s between her and me
 She stole my eyeliner (What a bitch)
 And she’s been stretching my shoes out with her fucking big feet
 (Manzoor 2021, Season 1, Episode 1)

The song’s lyrics clearly evidence punk’s strategy of using obscenities and a rageful narrative voice to stage a political critique. The speaker cleverly masks the intended target – western audiences – by ironically using a comedic stand-in in the form of the fictional sister. Although the song’s object of ire appears to be the offending sibling, the real target is the preconceptions of a western viewing audience who arrive at the song with a set of stereotypical notions about Muslim women and who are upended by the narrative redirection. The stereotype of the submissive and demure Muslim woman who is interpellated only through a controlling and patriarchal male gaze that flattens out her subjectivity is undermined by the song’s lyrical content and aggressive tone and language. This song animates and humanizes the Muslim woman, reminding the audience of the

mundane concerns and frustrations that any woman has at one time or another, such as conflict with a sibling over an errant piece of make-up. The song makes absurd the easy associations between Muslim communities and honour killings by popular western discourse, by initially rendering them humorous and by incongruently combining what is taboo – singing and joking about honour killings – with that which is absurd and profane, threatening murder for minor infractions and bad language. *We Are Lady Parts* can be read in relation to Kathleen Rowe Karlyn's (1995) exploration of "unruly women", women in comedy who are positioned "as subjects of a laughter that expresses anger, resistance, solidarity, and joy" (5) or who disrupt or challenge their positioning as objects of a male gaze. The song's speaker intentionally pushes out an assumed male character – "this ain't about you / it's between her and me" (Manzoor 2021) – and redirects its concern onto homosocial female relationships. This song is not about how to be a Muslim woman in the context of Muslim men, but is rather a conversation about and for Muslim women, for and amongst themselves. The song is polysemic; for knowing Muslim audiences who will already understand its intentional absurd comedy, the effect is one of community building between characters and audiences, in possibly their first opportunity to watch such Muslim women characters on television.

Subsequent songs similarly push against the boundaries of taboo/profane and the sacred. The songs address multiple audiences simultaneously, effectively drawing in new audiences and pushing against harmful tropes of Muslim women, as well as speaking directly to those who might identify with the struggles the band members themselves face. In "Bashir with the Good Beard", the typical romantic struggles faced by young British women – "Why won't you love me? / Why won't you text me back?" (Manzoor 2021) – draw in overlapping audiences. A romantic struggle in the digital age is relatable and signals a recognition between different audiences whose day-to-day anxieties may be more similar than they imagine. Non-Muslim audiences who may have the preformed notion that Muslim women do not sexually desire in the same fashion as they do become aware of this as the song's speaker can objectify men and sexual desire, as demonstrated in the line "You're so pretty, you're so pretty, you're so pretty", while the codes of propriety expected of Muslim women are also acknowledged and a protest against their unfairness is delivered with a boldness meant to scandalize in order to be effective:

Are my clothes too tight?
Do I laugh too much?
You say I'm not polite
I say fuck you very much
(Manzoor 2021, Season 1, Episode 1)

Here we witness the proper Muslim female body transformed into an angry, unruly one, its excesses spilling out of clothes and in the form of laughter escaping. This body is self-consciously positioned between the sacred and profane in the song "Fish and Chips", which acknowledges the legacy of empire in the construction of a hybrid female Muslim identity and sits precariously between overdetermining extremes: sexually over-policed at one pole, orientalized at the other:

I'm a woman, I'm a creature
I'm Madonna, I'm the whore
I'm a zombie queen, I'll eat your brains

I am the girl next door
(I'm a zombie queen, I'll eat your brains)

Broken by the empire, raised by MTV
Misfit of the motherland, still fish and chips for tea
Broken by the empire, raised by MTV
But still, it's fish and chips for tea (Manzoor 2021, Season 1, Episode 5)

This song overtly foregrounds the sacred/profane binary through establishing dual feminine subject positions – Madonna or the whore, a violent zombie or the wholesome girl next door. By occupying both extremes of female gender performance, the speaker deconstructs the boundary between them, revealing the illusory nature of these tropes Muslim women regularly contend with. The song can be read as a conscious attempt to destroy the false dichotomies and strict stereotypes within which Muslim women find themselves situated, and to construct a female Muslim identity of their own making. If taken at face value, the lyrics can also be read as a hyperbolic attempt to acknowledge elements that are often excised from the acceptable bounds of Muslim identity. The women lay claim to the violent productivity of the zombie, and the sexual freedom of the whore – subversive strategies that may find favour with western feminism, but are still embedded within the band's own brand of Muslim identity. Moreover, the song's lyrics reveal an awareness of the historical legacies of empire that impact the characters' identities as postcolonial subjects. They are “broken by the empire” and gesture towards their complex identity within the context of their racial difference and cultural hybridity. This diasporic heritage determines their identification with both the British national context and a cultural and religious elsewhere towards which they also feel an affinity, and thus might be read as assimilatory; but with no indication of which motherland the speaker refers to when claiming they are misfits, it is unclear whether this means, for example, the metropolitan centre of the country of their forebears. These lyrics demonstrate a keen awareness of debates around the racially othered, postcolonial. The line “I'm a woman, I'm a creature” echoes the animal/human binary that structures racist discourse around the colonial body. The band's music consciously uses shock and a punk rhetoric to undermine and rewrite racist narratives about Muslim women.

The fourth original song, “Voldemort Under my Headscarf”, comedically takes aim at perhaps the most contentious and scrutinized aspect of Muslim feminine identity, the hijab. Around the world, Muslim women wear the hijab for a variety of reasons: as a sign of their Ummah (faith), to conform to religiously prescribed standards of modesty, as political protest, as cultural practice, or even as rebellion against received repressive codes of femininity as determined by the patriarchy, or to be a subject rather than an ornament. Homa Hoodfar (1997) reminds us that “veiling is a lived experience full of contradictions and multiple meanings” (249), and cannot be distilled into simply one meaning or motivating factor. In the west, however, Muslim women's practice of veiling has been flattened out into a singular signification. It has come to metonymically symbolize the backwardness, difference, and unassimilable nature of Islam, its incompatibility with western liberal democracy. The hijab is read as a sign of male tyranny, and unethical and irrational behaviour on the part of male relatives. It becomes shorthand for the inherent oppressiveness of Islam, making Muslim women the orientalized lodestar of the endemic undeveloped, static nature of Islam, out of step with modernity. It is within this context

that the song “Voldemort Under My Headscarf” takes on significance. Here the Muslim body is read as a site of veiled potential terror, the scarf a symbolic veil for the threat Islam poses, one of a violent anti-European culture come to wreak havoc upon the foundations of western modernity. The song’s lyrics are full of rage, but are also comedic, and speaks mostly to the non-Muslim viewer who fears and misunderstands the veiled woman. The fear of what lies beneath the hijab is that of a universally recognized figure of evil, but one that is self-undermining. Voldemort is the antagonist from the Harry Potter series and thus rendered ultimately absurd through the laughter triggered by the infantile intertextual reference. Despite its comedy, the song also manages to lodge a reasonable argument against the vilification of the headscarf through lyrics that state:

Does other headgear scare you too?
 Hats? Helmets? Nah, just you
 Does other headgear scare you too?
 Hats? Helmets?
 (Manzoor 2021, Season 1, Episode 3)

When compared with other items worn on the head, such as hats and helmets, the hijab can be reduced to its unfurnished signified, which is simply a cloth draped over the head. The absurdity of fearing such a garment is foregrounded, and the song ironically dispatches its chorus, “Voldemort’s alive and he’s under my headscarf / He’s alive, he’s alive”, with the enthusiasm of the insider’s knowledge that the fear of what the headscarf conceals is a threat to western ideals of equality. This is as fictional as the negative stereotypes such as the belief that hijabi women are coerced into wearing the headscarf and cannot choose to wear it for self-empowering reasons.

Despite the women’s skilful, polyvocal lyrical manoeuvres there remains a problematic disjunction between the two cultural spheres they attempt to reconcile, Islamic doctrine and their own brand of Muslim feminism, which is read as more liberal and radical. These inconsistencies take the form of gaps in the text’s narrative where these two ideological stances collide and are irreducible to seamless integration. The narrative foil used to reveal this is the character of Zarina, a Muslim blogger and Internet influencer who also serves as Ayesha’s queer romantic interest. Initially viewed as an ally whose online influence might aid the band’s goals to reach a wider audience, she is later cast in the role of a self-interested opportunist who appears more interested in generating online controversy around the band to garner more followers and views. Despite becoming an antagonist in the band’s eyes, Zarina brings to a head the misalignments between the women’s feminist principles and the practice of their faith. For the purposes of an online interview, she asks the band difficult, unanswerable questions. Does Amina keep her involvement in the band a secret because it might be read as impropriety by the Muslim community? Is Saira’s angry lyricism a strike back at misogynist elements in that community? Is Ayesha in the closet about her queerness because homosexuality is forbidden in Islam? Why does Momtaz really wear a niqab? The girls stumble at these questions and the camera cuts away before they give fully realized responses; the show produces gaps around these issues because they fall into the irreconcilable elisions between mainstream Islamic doctrine and the do-it-yourself, punk rock feminism that the band practises. These aporias demonstrate that the women are fully aware of the potential their brand of Islamic feminism has to cause

offence to the Muslim community. The band members are aghast and deny the tenor of the interview's content but are nonetheless silent when Zarina insists on its validity. This emphasizes the band's dislocation within the British national context, being neither acceptable to Islam or to British society, nor in line with more radical forms of liberal Islam. Predictably, when the article is published, the Muslim online community severely condemns the band, its Islamic identity, and its politics. Although the piece overly sensationalizes the women's politics, the show carefully avoids going so far as to claim this is inaccurate. The conflicts between the women's faith practice and mainstream Islam remain intact.

In the romcom, romantic union between the protagonists alleviates national anxieties concerning alterity by neutralizing and excising those elements of difference that do not conform to the heterosexual and racial normative hegemonies of the state. The new, ideologically undifferentiated couple produced by the romcom's idealized conclusion reinforce and reconfirm the acceptable boundaries of the nation. Concurrently, representations of somatic indigestion can similarly be read metonymically as disruptions of national context. In this instance, the borders of the singular body double for the border of the state: "The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries which are threatened or precarious" (Douglas 2003, 116). Thus, gastrointestinal problems within texts can signify larger national and social incoherencies, suggesting that the normative processes of nation building have been obstructed and require correction. These manifestations of national ailments through the somatic medium are often projected onto the female body, one that is carefully policed in terms of propriety, as the sign-bearer of the national ideal. In Susan Bordo's (1990) words: "The ideal here is of a body that is absolutely tight, contained, 'bolted down', firm (in other words, a body that is protected against eruption from within, whose internal processes are under control)" (90).

We Are Lady Parts presents both forms of nation-building metaphors: the promise of romantic union in the form of Amina's quest for a husband, and the abject female body. More specifically, Amina's stage fright which causes her to vomit indicates that the promised national union through the romantic storyline of the show is short-circuited. There is no easy national and generic resolution represented by romantic success with her sought-after Muslim love interest, Ahsan. Read through this metaphor, Amina's failure to secure the object of her religiously and culturally appropriate affection signals her inability to unite the competing ideological pressures that are imposed onto her Muslim body. There is something indigestible about her attempting to engage with the band's feminism as well as staying true to the prescriptions of mainstream Islam as exemplified by her university friends and the wider Muslim community.

Conclusion: New Muslim women, new romcom conventions

By countering the narrative that Muslim women lack agency or good sense and thus require the liberating effects that embrace western ideology or that a white British male lead would bring, this show productively subverts and undermines the stereotypes so commonly associated with Muslim women. By loudly and often rudely proclaiming their identities and struggles as Muslim women through the in-ye-face, shocking, and profanity-laden lyrics of their music, these young women push

against any notion of a discreet feminism or Muslim female body. The band's voice and its overt political message are proud and loud. Using this home-grown artistic form, *We Are Lady Parts* articulates a comedic narrative about a group of unruly women who challenge the terms on which they are seen. Ultimately, this show's romance is between the band and Amina rather than Amina and her future husband, and so is a homosocial love story of finding one's place in a complex nation. However, despite the successes of the band's rebellions, the characters in *We Are Lady Parts* are conflicted. The position of a global Islamic identity within multicultural Britain is complex, as it contravenes one of the guiding precepts of western modernity – progress. In a multicultural society, this fundamental conflict may exist, but Britain's multiculturalism is bolstered by hegemonic, neocolonial impulses that decry and refute the possibility of such “backwardness” coexisting peaceably alongside what is interpreted as British values. Rather than fitting into any form of Islamic feminist approach, western feminism, or multicultural framing, perhaps the show's punk genre is best placed to capture what the women are attempting to do with their identities, for as Gololobov (2015) says: “punk indeed can be seen as a quest for authenticity, aiming at expressing the Self which cannot be appropriately expressed by other means” (77). In the final scene of the series, the band performs its largest and most successful show. Amina performs spectacularly and proudly, but she throws up, nonetheless. However, rather than allowing shame to overwhelm her, she gets right back up and keeps going. This acceptance of indigestibility perhaps best represents the show's ultimate message: to exist with incontinence, and, in the spirit of punk, to keep rocking on despite it.

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Notes on contributor

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