

The Khans in Britistan

JAMAL AKABLI

Citizen Khan, an English sitcom about a Muslim family in Britain, accords well with Aronson's definition of sitcoms as being "not so much about the comedy of a specific situation as about certain comic characters reacting in their idiosyncratic ways to a situation designed to bring out what is comic about them."¹

Hence the appellation character comes. It is conspicuous that Mr. Khan is at the heart of the series, as is his family, and the whole plot is woven around his misadventures, which turn out to be hilarious. When first aired, *Citizen Khan* provoked a backlash in the form of hostile and adverse reactions Adil Ray had seen coming, accusing the sitcom makers of outrageously overstepping the measure, "of insulting Muslims and peddling negative stereotypes about Pakistanis, while using public money"² and of "being disrespectful to the Qur'an."³ Ray believes the issues he brings into the fore, which have hitherto been left out of focus in mainstream media, are "very sensitive" indeed.⁴ Some of the unmapped areas Ray charts include male-female relationships, gender roles in vivo, individualism and communitarianism, deracination and integration, racism, racialism and prejudice, all of which are humorously moulded into a pastiche of 'déjà-vu' likely to stir ripples of disapprobation as well as rounds of applause .

While a few voices rose in antagonism against the caricaturist portrayal of Muslims and Islam,⁵ the number of viewers phenomenally averaged four millions,⁶ attesting to the monumental success the sitcom has reaped, and therefore leading to the BBC's recommissioning of the ground-breaking series. Given the generally favourable acclaim the sitcom has received, what really matters for Adil Ray is not so much to ride out the storm as to exploit the hunger for such comedies and diffuse joy.⁷ The identification of Islam with

Fascism, of Muslims with terrorists, as well as tidal waves of violence sweeping the Islamic world have all had their sway on the director, prodding him on to write back a “counter-narrative” sprinkled with humour to counter the vilification of Muslims,⁸ a tale whose strands I will try to unravel.

From Alterity to Subalternity

“All men who feel displaced racially, culturally, and/or because of economic hardships will turn on those whom they feel they can order and humiliate, usually women.”⁹

One of the few things Orientalists and Islamists agree on highlighting is “what distinguishes Islam from the West, presenting it and its adherents, as the ‘Other’”,¹⁰ all the while forgetting that within Islam as well as in the West there are as many others as there is oppression, and treating them as a bundle is next to condemning those *othered* others within these communities. In (mis)taking subalternity for a collectivity, one forgets the “heterogeneous, gendered, classed, cultured” others.¹¹ To dichotomise the fight over power as consisting of us-vs-them the way Said does only fortifies the hegemonic discourse of “European superiority over Oriental backwardness”,¹² and loses us sight of the power struggle “between dominant and subordinate groups”¹³ within these very minorities said to be inferior/infirm. While many a Muslim would speak out against the victimisation of Muslims in the West, few voices would be raised in defense of the fair sex. Muslim women, more than anyone else, are prone to being pictured as docile, meek and lacking in agency, which underscores their confinement, communicating the falsified “impression that the subordination of women is somehow a specifically Muslim characteristic”.¹⁴ Their compliance and subservience should be viewed as part of the very patriarchal system that produces such divisions and not as inherent in the religion. Far from being an intrinsically Muslim doctrine, subjugation is a male-driven complex – Khan-driven in our case, an outcome of the inbred

sense of community life where women are relegated to the-behind-the-scenes, being acted upon rather than acting. Mr. Khan “is made to feel stronger, larger, more intelligent, when paired with a relatively smaller, weaker, dependent woman”,¹⁵ his wife. This same feeling of self-worth permeates Mr. Khan when in the company of his would-be son-in-law, Amjad.

This long-standing legacy is perpetuated from father to son so that even when women are married off, their custody and guardianship is entrusted to their husbands in an ever-lasting vicious cycle. This being said, Amjad hardly looks like the sort of man who can dominate Shazia. The more we get to know Amjad, the more certain we grow that this is a man who did not propose for Shazia’s hand. He is a child in a man’s skin. As soon as his mother comes on stage, the mystery is solved once and for all. It is perspicuous that arrangements have been agreed upon by Mrs. Malek and Mrs. Khan to marry their son and daughter off. However, Shazia’s and Amjad’s marriage does not fall in its entirety within this category of prearranged marriages as appears from the love the two nurse for each other. Amjad cannot take his eyes off Shazia, and the same is true for Shazia. If there is anything Mr. Khan resents more than squandering shillings, it is the sight of Amjad courting and wooing his daughter. The father seizes every opportunity that presents itself and uses all the energy he can muster to spoil their apparent synergy. It is mothers-in-law who usually hold a grudge against their in-laws, but Mrs. Khan comes across as loving and supportive, while it is Mr. Khan who pokes his nose into the private affairs of the would-be husband and wife. This unsettling reversal of roles is a pattern the director uses to upset and beset the audience in order to prod them on to question the obvious.

In episode 4, Shazia suggests auditioning for the vacancy at the mosque, but Mr. Khan excludes her because only a man can call for prayers. She suggests naming Amjad for the job, but her father still insists that he will only take a man.

In the same episode, Mr. Khan is starving to death and cannot wait to have dinner served out, but Mrs. Khan has made a special treat just for Amjad and so he will have to wait. Discontented, Mr. Khan reminds her of his position as the head of the house, but as a matter of fact it is Mrs. Khan who pulls the strings without much ado. Mr. Khan is no more than a puppet often ordered about by his wife. Mrs. Khan is so proud of Amjad's success that her husband's jealousy surfaces. Everyone in the family but Mr. Khan trusts Amjad, the King of Sparkhill, will go and get the promotion for the simple reason that he is the only interviewee. There ensues a squabble over chairs between Mr. Khan and Amjad. Mrs. Khan seats Amjad on Mr. Khan's chair and stabs the already jealous Khan with her remark that he is "not the only man in the house". Now that Amjad has almost become one of the Khans, Mr. Khan is stripped of his privilege as the only voice that crows loud in the house. Feeling threatened, Mr. Khan turns the mealtimes into battles for hegemony. Whatever Mrs. Khan serves Amjad, Mr. Khan wants his share of it. Mr. Khan so hates the ease with which Amjad munches the hot chillies that he can only manage a handful before gulping down a jug of water to extinguish the fire burning inside of him, that of the chillies and that of his jealousy. So jealous is Mr. Khan that he does all he can to come between Amjad and his promotion. Not only does Mr. Khan's plotting cost Amjad his job, but he also incurs his wife's wrath. But no sooner does he disastrously mess up than he miraculously patches things up. Thanks to Mr. Khan or, perhaps I should say, Mrs. Khan, Amjad got his job back and his promotion. Mr. Khan promised free advertising to the company Amjad works for if they took him back. It is not for nothing that Mr. Khan has turned himself into the laughing-stock of the community so Amjad could get back his position. It was Mrs. Khan's way of addressing him that made him do all he could to sort it out.

Episode 5: Having made the point that nothing comes between him and cricket, Mr. Khan finds himself in a pretty delicate situation. Much to his shame, he is forced out of the house in the presence of Amjad so his wife can host a group of women come to extend their

condolences to Mrs. Shafik on the death of her husband. Mrs. Khan, the ‘man’ of the house, wants him out by 5:30, but, reluctant and petulant in the manner of a child, Mr. Khan decides he will only leave at 5:45, which hardly makes a difference. To watch Mr. Khan play the man only to be slanted by his wife is sure to give rise to merry outbursts of laughter. In the presence of others, Mr. Khan pretends to be in charge, but in the privacy of the house, a privacy to which the privileged viewer has access, the reverse is true. This incongruity is at the origin of much of the laughter the series induces. However, his pretensions soon come to a halt with Alia wanting to go out. At first, Mr. Khan refuses to let her do as she wishes because he is the man. Alia notices him carrying the TV out of the parlour and threatens to tell her Mum. Mr. Khan, the king in the castle, is thus blackmailed and agrees to let her stay out late provided she does not say anything to her mother. On the question of difference between the English and Pakistanis, Mr. Khan brags out loud that it is men who pull the strings, “the kings of the castle” as he puts it. He belittles English men for doing things the way their wives dictate, and takes great pride in listening to no one but his voice, but we know better and laugh heartily as a result.

Having let Shazia down, Amjad absolutely wants to apologise for his misbehavior. Mr. Khan pedantically instructs Amjad that “sometimes women say they want to be in charge, but really they like us to be in charge”, which makes them feel “all safe and comfortable”. Mr. Khan hardly inspires safety and comfort, and so neither his wife nor his daughters can really look up to him.

The last episode of season one reconfirms the view that Mr. Khan is no ruler in his house although he pretends the contrary. Everyone pleads with Mr. Khan to turn the heating on, but he adamantly refuses because he is the one who pays the bills. Mrs. Khan requests him to do as he was told, but he decides to keep it off. Mrs. Khan then takes the matter into her own hands and turns it on. Beaten on his turf, Mr. Khan agrees just this once, as he always does, because today coincides with their wedding anniversary.

In a conflict of interests, Mr. Khan wants to invite no one but Mr. Javed, a successful Pakistani businessman, to Shazia's wedding, but his wife insists on sending the invitation to the Parvezes, their old neighbours. In his usual tone, Mr. Khan asserts that he is the man of the house; he is the one who pays for everything, and so he should invite whoever he pleases. For a while, we watch dumbstruck/flabbergasted as the hen-pecked husband, who takes himself for a man, revolts only to recede before the all-domineering presence of his wife. His refusal is a mere acquiescence in disguise. He will not buy the stamp, but he will send the letter from the mosque, free of charge. This incongruity between what Mr. Khan says and what he does shows him to be flawed and human, something audiences will enjoy watching as the bully gets bullied.

In an unexpected gesture, Mr. Khan finds himself handing the invitation to Mr. Javed instead of posting it as he promised he would. Dave, who knows Mrs. Khan will not appreciate this move, teases Mr. Khan, but Mr. Khan sermonises about how it is men who are in charge in Pakistani couples. In a rejoinder that exposes him as a fraud, Mr. Khan admonishes him not to tell her because for one she will not cope with it, and second she will have him sleep on the sofa downstairs.

Mrs. Khan inquires about whether or not her husband has sent out the invitation, Mr. Khan vacillates, but when cornered he lies to his wife in the House of God. To atone for his sin, he sins further by making up a story that soon spreads about an in-existent love affair, a thing as he calls it, between his daughter and Imran, the boy "with the funny eye". Mr. Khan would say anything to avert his wife's rage even to the detriment of his daughter's happiness. He blasphemes further and further by answering the phone in the mosque while others are busy praying. Amidst people praying within earshot, Mr. Khan once more tells everyone of his daughter's incestuous affair. The rumour spreads like fire over Sparkhill, and Mrs. Khan buys it and even pictures the perfect scenario of how it must have happened. She does not feel sorry for her daughter as much as she feels sorry for herself for not being able to show up her face at

the women's day group meeting. As soon as Mrs. Malik catches wind of the adulterous affair Shazia had with Imran, she pays the Khans an unwelcome visit. Mr. Khan has nothing to say to clear his daughter's name of accusations he has started, and that may ruin her forever. Instead of facing up to it, he runs like a chicken to the kitchen to get Mrs. Khan to deal with the situation.

In fine, it seems only right to fall back on Bhabha's words as regards "supremacy as a way of articulating conflict" which derives from "a very hierarchical and vertical reading of the representation and practice of power", one that revives "the binaries of subordinated/dominant, minority/ majority."¹⁶ The storyline of *Citizen Khan* constructs a vision of a community¹⁷ where nothing is to be taken for what it seems, not even power. Men, one concludes, can relax their grip on power only in private, but in public they hold on to it, exercise it and put it on display. This said, the presumption that men rule because they crow louder in the house is here forthwith disconfirmed, as are many of our misjudgments, yet in the public sphere it appears that women have a long way to tread before they can pretend to the same status men enjoy. Looking in retrospect at episode three, community members are no better than Mr. Khan in their treatment of women as second-hand citizens. As the meeting of the representatives of the community proceeds, we witness a lucid and lurid case whose protagonists or, perhaps I should say, antagonists are none other than the representatives of the 'Muslim' community. Not only do they childishly quarrel over chairs, but they also unanimously deny the women a much-needed minibus and bigger ladies' restrooms while they agree to squander the money on a giant screen where they can watch cricket. These community leaders narcissistically represent nobody's interests but their own, to the detriment of the women who trust they will. That women have been absented from this meeting confirms that community leadership is exclusively masculinist,¹⁸ and therefore women have to vie for more equality. The mosque, the house of God, becomes an enclosed space that shuts women out and

the donations that should go to those in need are wasted over the community leaders' whims and caprices. Islam, like the women who are being used, is used as a pretext to assert male hegemony in domains where women are devoiced. This divisive and subversive gendering of roles only serves to cement the same old patriarchal rules and reinforce the position of men as the custodians and sole guardians of women. What is more is that the day group meetings the women keenly hold in their houses should be held in the mosque. Parity also requires no such curtain wall between the affairs of women and those of men, and hence the necessity of remapping the impermeable space of the mosque. The mosque ought to be envisioned as a public arena where both men and women engage in a fruitful debate. The sacred space of the mosque therefore "frequently employed to construct, control, discipline, confine, exclude and suppress gender...difference preserving traditional patriarchal...power structures."¹⁹

References

¹ Linda Aronson, *Television Writing: The Ground Rules of Series, Serials and Sitcom*, p. 13. Australia: Australian Film Television and Radio School, 2000.

² Retrieved from <http://www.thenews.com.pk/Todays-News-2-129198-Watchdog-considers-probe-into-BBCs-Pakistan-comedy>

³ Tara Conlan, "Don't allow yourself to be offended". Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/sep/29/citizen-khan-adil-ray-sitcom>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ In his article "Last of the Dinosaurs" published in 2013 in the South Asian Journal of Popular Culture, vol. 11, issue I, Tahir Abbas speaks fervently against the institutionalisation of stereotypes and the misrepresentation of Muslims, which I have come to regard as an act of dismantling, cloaked to tickle, tease and appease our fear of our Muslim next-door neighbours. Some Muslims may have felt offended, but this should in a way suggest that that's the way the two million people living in Britain have felt. <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14746689.2013.765221#.VELTibDz3QA>

⁶ Retrieved from <http://www.digitalspy.co.uk/tv/news/a402141/new-tricks-series-nine-launches-with-78-million.html#~p0pQ38Vm58p14U>

⁷ Tara Conlan, “Don’t allow yourself to be offended”. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/media/2013/sep/29/citizen-khan-adil-ray-sitcom>

⁸Tufayel Ahmed, “A Counter-narrative to Islamic-State Conflict”. Retrieved from <http://www.mirror.co.uk/tv/tv-news/citizen-khans-adil-ray-says-4542825>

⁹ Arturo J. Aldama, *Disrupting Savagism: Intersecting Chicana/o, Mexican Immigrant, and Native American Struggles for Self-representation*, p. 140. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001.

¹⁰ Humayun Ansari, *Muslims in Britain*, p. 4. UK: Minority Rights Group International, 2002.

¹¹ Hamid Dabashi, *Postorientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror*, p. 160. USA and UK: Transaction Publishers, 2009.

¹² Edward Said, *Orientalism*, p. 7. London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

¹³ James Porter, “Culturalist Formulations”, p. 177. In John McLeod, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Postcolonial Studies*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007.

¹⁴ Humayun Ansari, *Muslims in Britain*, p. 14. Great Britain: Minority Rights Group, 2002.

¹⁵ Linda Martin Alcoff, *Feminist Theory and Social Science: New knowledges, new epistemologies*, p. 24. In Nancy Duncan ed., *Bodyspace: destabilizing geographies of gender and Sexuality*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996.

¹⁶ Homi K. Bhabha And David Bennett, “Reflections on Culture In Between”, p. 40. In David Bennett, ed., *Multicultural States: Rethinking difference and identity*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

¹⁷ Homi K. Bhabha, “Culture In Between”, p. 34. In David Bennett, ed., *Multicultural States: Rethinking difference and identity*. London and New York: Routledge, 1998.

¹⁸ Humayun Ansari, *Muslims in Britain*, p. 15. Great Britain: Minority Rights Group, 2002.

¹⁹ Nancy Duncan, “Renegotiating Gender and Sexuality In Public and Private Spaces”, p. 128. In Nancy Duncan ed., *Bodyspace: destabilizing geographies of gender and Sexuality*. New York and London: Routledge, 1996.

About the Author

Jamal Akabli has been teaching since 2003. He is currently working at Ibn Sina Technical high school and the American Language School in Kenitra. He obtained PH.D. from Ibn Tofail University. His main area of interest ranges from postcolonial studies to performance arts passing through the representation of Islam and Muslims in Western discourse.