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HARAMED AND DANGEROUS: A THEMATIC EXAMINATION OF MUSLIM WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN WE ARE LADY PARTS

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HARAMED AND DANGEROUS: A THEMATIC EXAMINATION OS MUSLIM WOMEN'S REPRESENTATION IN *WE ARE LADY PARTS*

by

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ABSTRACT

Since the early days of Western media, Muslim women have been portrayed in a negative way. From belly dancers to oil-rich horny sheikhs to voiceless passive wives of terrorists. This image has led the Western spectator to associate Islam and the Muslim women's headscarf (Hijab) with backwardness, extremism, and oppression. In recent years, there has been a positive shift towards a more inclusive and authentic representation of Muslim women. This shift is the result of the post-network era which provides on-demand media outlets that challenge the dominant hegemonic production system and provide diverse and inclusive images that cater to niche groups. Movies and television series especially serve a function of cultural production, working on the shared values and cultural experiences of the viewers and audiences that consume them. Thus, movies and television series are especially powerful in reinforcing or disrupting stereotypes. Negative stereotypes contribute to society negatively by creating a sense of 'otherness': us versus them.

In 2021, the show *We are Lady Parts* first season was premiered on the American streaming service Peacock and the British streaming service Channel 4. The sitcom was written and directed by a British Muslim woman named Nida Manzoor who created the show around an all-Muslim female Punk band. The show was largely praised by critica for providing positive and representative images of Muslim women.

Using Stuart Hall's representation theory, the researcher applied a textual analysis on the show's first season to examine how these characters navigate and balance their multicultural and intersectional identities with their Islamic faith. The analysis generated three themes: agency, religiosity, and resistance. The research provided unique data for

the representations of Muslim women and how they embrace their agency and navigate through issues of religiosity regarding their Islamic faith, and resisting their community's norms and expectations that doesn't fit their identities. Using satire and profanity in their music's lyrics, the band members explicitly showcase their differences, uniqueness, and acceptance of the intersectionality of their identities as Punk singing Muslim women.

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I want to acknowledge the heroes in my life and the vital roles they had in making this dream come true my sister Noreyah and my BFF Daleana. Thank you for your unconditional love, support, and encouraging words. This beautiful journey would have been a nightmare without y'all in my life. I am blessed to have such strong and caring women in my life who believed I can do this and made sure I do. I appreciate you, ladies.

Lastly, I would like to thank myself for making it through to the end. To say that doing a Ph.D. in a second language, while being away from my beautiful kids, sisters, friends and when the world was going through a pandemic was challenging is an understatement. I persisted. I pushed myself though when everything was failing me and continued to show up when I didn't feel like it. I persisted even when all the odds were against me. Getting a doctorate is not an easy task and certainly not for the faint of heart.

I am very proud of myself and the strong woman I have become. Reham (aka; Dr. B) you ROCK! Keep it up.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this project to my two teenage boys Dawood and Sulaiman, my baby daughter Hoor (who was the main reason I chose to do my research on women's representation), my sisters Noreyah and Fatima, my best friends in Kuwait, UK, and the USA. I would like to dedicate this to the five-year-old Reham for knowing exactly what she wanted to be when she grew up and proclaiming "I want to be a doctor" on her first day of kindergarten. Well, you did it! You are now doctor Reham! Also, I want to thank my haters who were my motivators to never give up and keep pushing forward until I reached my dream. Lastly, this *Lady Parts* project is dedicated to all the Muslim 'ladies' in every 'parts' of the world. This is for all of us.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

WLP	*We are Lady Parts*

CHAPTER I – INTRODUCTION

This study examines the cultural changes in Western media depictions of Muslim women in the 21st century focusing mainly on the representation in British Media. Though there is no physical evidence that the media's role causes Xenophobia or Islamophobia, research has shown that the media plays a major role in establishing and formulating the public's views and attitudes in societies. Therefore, the media's role cannot be entirely ignored for "it has the ability to shape and influence public attitudes that could create, feed into and subsequently justify Islamophobic and anti-Muslim attitudes and expressions." (Allen, 2012, p.3).

Scharrer and Ramasubramanian (2015) suggest that the media has a fundamental educational role in informing and shaping audience members' perception over things they have never personally encountered before. They explain that audience members usually lack the ability to critically view media content for them to disregard media bias, whether positive or negative, hence, they have the tendency to internalize media bias. A plethora of studies have shown mass media to articulate dominant social values, ideologies, and changes, and that these features often lead to misrepresentation or framing minorities in stereotypical portrayals in the media (Hall, 1990; Van Dijk, 1991).

The media does not control the audience' thoughts and opinions, but it does play a significant role in suggesting to the people who "they" are, who belongs with them, and who does not (Bullock & Jafri, 2000). According to Shaheen (2003), Arabs (aka: Muslims) have been portrayed since 1896 as "Public Enemy #1-brutal, heartless, uncivilized religious fanatics and money-mad cultural "others" bent on terrorizing

civilized Westerners, especially Christian and Jews" (p.172). This led the Western audience to regard Islam as a religion of terror, violence, and danger to them. Not only that, but Western media shows Muslims to be coming from one ethnicity. They are Arabs (people whose language is Arabic) from the orient land of the Middle East. When in fact, most of the world's 1.9 billion Muslims are non-Arabs speakers from Southeastern Asian countries such as Indonesia, and South Asian countries such as India and Pakistan ("Muslim majority countries," 2022). "Only 12 percent of the world's Muslims are Arabs. Yet, the moviemakers ignore this reality, depicting Arabs and Muslims as one people and the same people" (Shaheen, 2007, p.174). It is vital, in this time and age, to highlight to the average Western audience the importance of knowing and caring about the Muslim stereotype. It is crucial because hating of "the others" or what is called xenophobia, leads to the suffering of innocent people every time the media vilifies an ethnic, racial, or religious group (Shaheen, 2007). The representation of Muslims in Western media is one of the "primary ways of defining Muslims" to Western audience (Khan & Eid, 2011, p.185).

In recent years, there have been some positive changes towards correcting the misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims in Western media through including Muslim people in the production process and by producing shows that "tell stories that are unflinchingly authentic" (Gecsoyler, 2022, para. 2; Khan & Eid, 2011). Stories that challenge earlier negative stereotypes. This positive shift is due to the fast changes to the medium's ways of consumption. Levine (2011) explains that "the disappearance of the classic network system and the program scarcity that came with it which seems to have diminished television's historical capacity to operate as the central cultural forum or site

of hegemonic negotiation that it once was" (Levine, 2011, p.177) leading television production companies to adjust to the new technologies and cultural practices where they include more diverse content with more positive representation of minorities groups to be able to compete with other competitors and attract more viewers which will translate to more ads sponsors.

In the wake of George Floyd's May 2020 murder and the increasing popularity of the Black Lives Matter movement in the United States, the British Broadcasting Chanel BBC announced in June of that year that they're investing £100 million ($124 million) of their budget over the span of three years (starting in 2021) on diverse and inclusive content, with "mandatory 20% diverse-talent target in all new commissions" which increases racial representation as well as social mobility for underrepresented minorities ('BBC Creative Diversity Commitment', 2020, para.6). In May 2021, almost a year from the BBC's announcement, Ch 4., a British public channel cooperated with Peacock, an American private streaming channel, in producing and broadcasting a six episodes series called *We Are Lady Parts*. The purpose of this study is to examine through a feminist lens how characters in *We are Lady Parts* have been portrayed against existing stereotypes of Muslim women and how the program's satire establishes an "oppositional gaze."

We Are Lady Parts

Lady Parts later renamed *We are Lady Parts*, is a British sitcom that follow the lives of an all-female British Muslim Punk band desperately looking for a lead guitarist. The series, written and directed by Nida Manzoor a British Muslim woman herself, centers around five characters; Amina, played by actress Anjana Vasan is a PhD science student who spends most of her time in the laboratory working on her experiments while

daydreaming about playing the guitar in public; Saira, played by actress Sarah Impey is a Halal butcher by day and the band lead singer by night; Aisha, played by actress Juliette Motamed is an Uber driver and a the band drummer; Bisma, played by actress Faith Omole is a radical cartoonist who plays the bass; Momtaz, played by actress Lucie Shorthouse, works in a lingerie store during the day and manages the band's social media accounts and booking schedules at night.

What makes the show stand out from all the previous "nontraditional" shows, that portrayed Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular, is that each character challenges a previous assumption on how a Muslim woman should look, how she should act, and what she can or cannot do or even talk about. Previous literature reveals that Muslim women are shown as oppressed, dependent, oriental, with no unique personality, submissive people (Donnell, 2003; Fahmy, 2004; Haque, 2010; Navarro, 2010). However, *WLP* provide a new positive look about the modern Muslim woman being highly educated, in a loving marriage, family oriented, independent, ambitious, tattooed, vaping, intellectual, having agency, and rebellious personalities while keeping connection with her faith.

This show not only challenges the stereotypic image of Muslim women, but it also challenges many aspects of the religion itself. Ronia Brahim, who is a Muslim guest writer on The Spin Off wrote, "Punk and Muslim are basically opposing identities. The former is seen as violent, profane and unhinged, the latter is a religion that values modesty, peace, and prayer. Furthermore, the show features and discusses music, queerness, dating, smoking, and tattoos – all big taboos in Islam" (Ibrahim, 2021, para.4)

and that's the reason behind the success of this show. It's an unconventional, stereotype breaking, revolutionary kind of a show.

We are Lady Parts is a band that plays punk music. Punk music is a form of rock music that is often regarded as "a protest against conventional attitudes and behavior." ("Punk", n.d.) and to have all its members be Muslim women is a form of protest to all the negative single images. Where most people think Muslim women are known to cover their head with Hijabs, the character Saira (the Halal butcher) is a non-hijabi Muslim woman that has a very short masculine haircut and her arms are covered with tattoos (tattoos are sinful).While in Islam homosexuality is a huge sin that is criminalized, in some Muslim countries by prison and some by death; Aisha is a hijabi woman who develops emotions toward a female social media influencer she met for an interview. Amina, the main character, is doing her PhD in chemistry and aspires to find a revolutionary cure to a disease and has her family's unconditional support when informing them of her membership in the punk band. Bisma, is raising her daughter with her loving, supportive, and submissive Muslim husband, while selling her comic book about women's period, while playing the bass guitar for the band. The last character is Momtaz, the team manager whose niqab (a light fabric to cover the whole face minus the eyes) doesn't stop her from working in a women's lingerie store, wearing leather jackets, fishnet gloves, vaping, running the team's social media accounts while trying to finds them gigs.

The band's audacious name is another factor that captured both the media and the audience's attention and lead to its huge success. Muslim culture is generally known and depicted as a conservative culture, especially when addressing women's issues, let alone

women's "parts". Calling an all-Muslim women band 'Lady Parts' was another form of rebellion to that culture and the expectations of Muslim women. The band's songs, written by the author and her sibling, covered some sensitive topics such as honor killing, women's hijab, and men's beard using unconventional titles such as 'Bashir with a Good Beard, 'Ain't No One Gonna Honour Kill My Sister but Me' and my personal favorite 'Voldemort Under My Headscarf'. The lyrics were intense, edgy, unapologetic, and anarchic with the hopes to empower Muslim women and present their experience as extremely diverse.

Since the premier of the show, it got nominated in the Edinburgh International Television, Peabody Awards, BAFTA TV Awards and so much more and won most of their categories. The show not only generated praise by critics from distinguished magazines such as the Rolling Stone, Time Magazine, and the Hollywood reporter but also landed high ratings by review-aggregation websites such as Rotten Tomatoes where the show scored a fresh 100% rating, 8.1/10 on IMBD and 83% on Metacritic. Roxxan Hadadi, an American Muslim pop culture critic, related the show's success to "giving Muslim women interiority in a way that were not afforded in any television….it is unapologetically broad. The show captures the fact they (the characters) are very faithful, none of the characters has a wavering of faith that results in them taking their hijab off….It allowed them to be real, raw, and horny… the varying of what does it mean to be a person of Islamic faith and how you interpret it " (Weldon et al., 2021, 2:33).

Such authentic representation helps validate the lived experiences of other Muslim women like these characters. It also leads to expanding the shallow and narrow understanding of non-Muslim audiences about Islam and Muslim women and how their

faith just happens to be part of them but doesn't define them. Such huge media coverage shows how relatable the topics addressed in the show to today's world discussions particularly around first and second generation immigrants, Muslim women, and minorities issues that has been either neglected or misrepresented. Muslims and immigrants. Such shows aspire not only to provide a platform for the voices of the underrepresented but also to change the policies that target them.

This research is significant and important for many reasons. First, the portrayals of minorities in the media remain a major concern of critical-cultural scholars (Alsultany, 2012; hooks, 2005). Such scholars noted that media present framed, structured and narrow views of the world. Stuart Hall (1997b) explained how representation is important to the production of meaning and how it is interchanged via culture. Van Dijk (1991) theorized that narratives and metaphors in the media provide symbols used to form common sense of other cultures (Ahmed & Matthes, 2017). Secondly, historical depiction of Muslim women in the media have been majorly restricted to sexist, racist, oriental, marginalized and negative images (Haque, 2010; Kasirye, 2021; Navarro, 2010). Furthermore, there is scarcity in the literature around Muslim women representation in the media that needs to be filled to diversify the data provided out there and improve future scholarly attempts (Al-Hejin, 2015). Lastly, at the time of writing this paper a big wave of protests sparked in The Islamic Republic of Iran following the death of 22-year-old woman named Mahsa Amini, while at the custody of the Iran morality police. Amini got arrested for "allegedly wearing her headscarf too loosely" (Kohli, 2022, para. 1) and violating Iranian Hijab laws. Her death attracted international media coverage from all around the world which adds to an everlasting negative image of Muslim women in the

eyes of the Western observer and this study will add to the existing literature about the importance of diversifying media representation which will help change policies targeting Muslims or Muslim women around the world.

The author believes in the importance and power of the media in challenging norms, stereotypes, and hegemonic authorities. *WLP* is a "norm-breaking" show that is vital in causing changes at the highest level in society. Today's young generation of Muslim females from around the world are in much need of such realistic, challenging, and positive media representation in the hopes that positive cultural changes will follow. Thus, this study aims to help develop some understanding on how media representation leads to establishing norms and common-sense beliefs about Muslim women and their diverse experiences and how including minorities in the production process provides an authentic and successful representation. This paper aims to fill a huge gap in literature around Muslim women representation in Western media platforms.

CHAPTER II – LITERATURE REVIEW AND METHDOLOGY

Muslim Stereotypes

In early written and visual production, Western media presented the social, economic, and political aspects of the Arab world as foreign, subservient, exotic and oriental (Said, 1978). There is now a great deal of literature that shows how Islam and Muslims are regularly portrayed in negative ways in the mainstream media (Sealy, 2017). Muslims are usually linked with terrorism, violence, and aggression across different Western media platforms, including cable news (Dixon & Williams, 2015), newspapers (Powell, 2011), television and movies (AlSultany, 2012, Shaheen, 2006), and video games (Sisler, 2008). Such negative perpetuation not only shapes personal and national identity but is the lens through which the audiences' realities are perceived (Bhabha, 1994; Hall 1997a).

Movies and television series especially serve a function of cultural production, working on the shared values and cultural experiences of the viewers and audiences that consume them. Thus, movies and television series are especially powerful in reinforcing or disrupting stereotypes. Negative stereotypes contribute to society negatively by creating a sense of 'otherness': us versus them. Stereotypes are harmful: "when one perceives an individual as a member of a particular stereotyped group, the perceiver's mind activates the group-relevant cognitive structure and processes […] judgements and attitudes within the framework of that particular stereotype" (Abreu, Kim, Haddy, 2003, p. 691). Hall (1997a) claims that the "Other's" difference develops meanings in our minds and allows us to categorize the Other's in reference to ourselves. By categorizing

the Other, we can construct our self-identity that which we are not. Identification is "a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristic with another person or group" (Hall & du Gay, 1997, P. 2).

When one relates to a common set of characteristics of a certain person or group, one identifies with that person or group (Hall, 1997b). Further, identity questions one's representation. By representing something, we give it meaning; and by giving something meaning, we gain a sense of our own identity. Hall (1997b) also points out the problems of representation that the 'Other' faces:

People who are in any way significantly different from the majority 'them' rather than us are frequently exposed to this binary form of representation. They seemed to be represented through sharply opposed, polarized, binary extremes…. And they are often required to be both things at the same time. (p. 229)

This can be mirrored in the way Muslims are represented in the western media. There is also the expected juxtaposition of words and images representing Islam in media discourses about terrorism, war, and extreme religious ideologies. Karim (2006) argued that the primary frames used by the media in the portrayal of Muslims draw from "cultural assumptions" about Islam that have survived a long time (p.118). Overall, the portrayal of Islam and Muslims in the media is complex and at times contradictory.

After the events of 9/11 there has been a positive shift towards representing Arabs and Muslims in a more humanistic and sympathetic way in the media (Alsultany, 2013; Shaheen, 2003). Alsultany (2013) states that "Dozens of TV dramas portrayed Arab and Muslim Americans as the unjust target of hate crimes or as patriotic US citizen…that sympathetic portrayals of Arabs and Muslim American proliferated on US commercial

television in the weeks, month and years after 9/11" (p.162). While these sympathetic and humanistic depictions may signify a positive shift, it may indicate that America has moved past these events and adopted a post-racial, more accepting ideology toward Muslims, while the long-rooted representation of Muslims as terrorist, aggressive, Others has led to the support for military action in Muslim countries under the premise of launching the "war against terrorism."

Both scholars and liberation movements' advocates acknowledge the media's ability to "reinforce unequal status quo relationships, as well as to circulate new ideas and help to set political agendas leading to change" (Byerly and Ross, 2006, p.2). Therefore, those media depictions, though may have become more positive for Muslims in recent years, the racial profiling policies and immigrations policies were still discriminatory with the general public's increase support for harsh civil laws and restrictions of Muslim in general and Muslim Americans in particular (Alsultany, 2013; Saleem et al., 2017). Littlefield (2008) explains that "On one hand, our society accepts racial labels and distinctions, but it does not accept policies initiated to create a just society and, in reality, does not foster real inclusion of minority groups" (p. 682).

Muslim Women's Representation

Much of the literature that covered Muslim's depictions in the media have focused mainly on the representation of the male Muslim (Spalek & Imtoual, 2007). This could be due to the mainstream visual mediums such film, television, and the news media depicting only male Muslims when referencing Islam by casting them as terrorists, and women oppressors (Mishra, 2007). Muslim women have been portrayed in negative and limited stereotypical ways such as subordinated to men, exotic, dressed in black, silent,

often with face veils, concerned with domestic issues, anonymous, and threatening (Falah 2005; Khan & Eid, 2011; Read, 2002; Spalek & Imtoual, 2007; Watt, 2012) leading them to face “gendered islamophobia… *[due to]* their visible Muslim identity and gender performance” (Zempi, 2020, p.96). Sajidah Kutty's (1997) examined the image of Muslim women in western culture and found that three personas tend to be credited to the Muslim woman. The first is the "harem belly-dancer character," the mysterious and sexualized woman of the "Orient"; the second is "the oppressed Muslim woman," often represented as the hijab wearer or the woman who is unable to drive; and, finally, there is the "militant Muslim woman," often shown in hijab with gun and military clothes (cited in Bullock & Jafari, 2000, p.36).

Such limited representation leads non-Muslims to view Islam and especially female’s roles as homogenous and fixed. Western cultures produce a set of representations and presumptions about the Islamic act of covering for women which constructs it as a symbol of religious fundamentalism, extremism, backwardness, male oppression, and terrorism (Hametner et. al 2020; Watt, 2012; Zempi, 2020; Zine, 2006) overlooking the fact that Muslim women are diverse and can be “hijabi, non-hijabi, more religious, not practicing Muslims” (Serena cited in Kaman & Christian, 2020, p.517) causing the hegemonization of “Muslimness” or the Muslim experience (Kaman & Christian, 2020, p.517). Since many people gain most of their information about another person solely based on visual observations such as the one in the media, they don’t realize that they accept many of these images as a true reflection of the universal truths of the world in which they live in. (Khan & Eid, 2011; Ramji, 2016). Many Westerners do not realize that there are plenty of young, North American-born, Muslim women who

choose to wear a hijab for the first time even though their own mothers have never done so. (Watt, 2012).

Usually, Western media discussions about “Islamist extremism” are often paralleled with images of Muslim women wearing niqab (Zempi, 2020, p. 97) but in other context they refer to the veil when describing Muslim women. However, Western Muslim women differ from Muslim women in Eastern countries. Western Muslims embrace relaxing restrictions on male/female social interaction such as attending coeducational schools which is not the norm in the other Muslim countries. Within Western Muslim communities, women's participation in the public sphere is conditioned by several factors such as religiosity, ethnic identity, and social class which often apply contrary influences on Muslim women's attitudes and behaviors (Read, 2002). The point being made is, there is no Muslim, fixed, single, woman identity out there in the world, however, Westerners believe and act as if there is one.

For decades, Western societies were obsessed with the emancipation and the unveiling of Muslim women due to the media negatively presenting it as a sign of oppression, backwardness, and “refusal to embrace modernity” (Hametner et al., 2020; Khiabany & Williams, 2008, p.69). However, many studies have shown that Muslim women do not necessarily associate veiling with oppression or gender equality with disproving traditional gender roles (Bullock 2003; Read 2002). El Guindi (1999) accused the Western media of concealing hostility against the veil “often under the guise of humanism, feminism or human rights” (p. xi). She noted that veiling in contemporary Muslim culture is largely about identity and privacy. It may also indicate rank and status, power, and resistance. Thus, modesty and privacy are not the only characteristics of a veil

although these two elements are most emphasized in Western writings on Muslim women (El Guindi, 1999).

Fighting negative stereotypical images of them is not the only challenge Muslim women face in Western cultures. They also fight three other challenges: racism, patriarchy (from both their original and new communities) and the pressure to adapt their culture to the dominant culture (Hoodfar, 1992; Ozyurt, 2009). Muslim women find themselves looking at either Islamism or Orientalism for meaning, and when rejecting both stereotypes, they struggle with losing a sense of belonging. Muslim women's rejection of these stereotypes that would help them adapt to the Western societies leads to a new identity which is neither Islamic nor Orientalist; neither Eastern nor Western; it is a product of a Third Space (Khan, 2000 cited in Khan & Eid, 2011).

Over the past two decades, secular academics and Muslim feminists have started to challenge this standardized depiction of Muslim women by revealing significant diversity in women's experiences in the Middle East and around the world, shifting away from the Orientalist stereotype. Watt (2012) noted that "there have been greater efforts to represent the diversity of Muslim communities in North America" (p.34). This is due to the growth of the Muslim community and organizations in the West and the anti-racism, and human rights movements that provided a massive number of opportunities to underrepresented voices such as Muslims to discuss issues related to them such as terrorism, democracy, pluralism, peacemaking, feminism, and human rights in their own words (Ul huda, 2006). One area of considerable interest was showing Muslim women's participation in the public sphere with their daily lifestyles and struggles they face (Khan & Eid, 2011; Read, 2002). Those scholars and feminist activists fought 'gendered

Islamophobia' images of Muslim women (Zempi, 2020; Zine, 2004). According to Dr. Jasmin Zine, a professor of Muslim studies and a Muslim feminist activist at Wilfrid Laurier University, 'gendered Islamophobia' is any media depiction that has "re-vitalized Orientalist tropes and representations of backward, oppressed and politically immature women in need of liberation and rescue through imperialist interventions as well as the challenge of religious extremism and puritan discourses that authorize equally limiting narratives of Islamic womanhood and compromise their human rights and liberty" (Zine, 2006, p.1). Those fights and feminist resistant movements lead to the recent "wave of TV shows and films attempting to unpick the Islamophobic stereotypes often stitched into western screenwriting" that includes the show examined in this research (Dawood, 2021, para3).

Women and Humor

We are Lady Parts (*WLP*) is promoted as a sitcom. A short, six episodes, comedy series about "telling better, more complex stories" (Vasan cited in Seth, 2021, para 7). So, why would the author choses the comedy genre to address such culturally sensitive "complex" stories? Is it another way of resistance to the myth that women have no sense of humor? Finney (2014) argues that

> This myth, which might more accurately be called a misperception, has a long and firmly entrenched history. In relatively modern times, thinkers as earnest as Schopenhauer, Bergson, and Freud have disqualified women from the comic arena; when they and other men have written about humor, laughter, and jokes, they have meant male humor, laughter, and jokes. (p.1).

It was perpetuated in the British literature for over 300 years that women lacked a sense of humor and if any women showed a sign of succeeding in this genre the would be regarded as a lower Strata of men with most critique overlooking them as they don't relate to the different level of emotions highlighted in the comic text (Barreca, 2022).

So, what is comedy? The word *comedy* is a derivation from the Greek verb meaning "to revel" (Hoy, 2022). The Oxford Dictionary defines comedy as "entertainment consisting of jokes and sketches intended to make an audience laugh; a film, play, or program intended to arouse laughter" ("Comedy", n.d.). Comedy can be displayed in several forms such as stand-ups, sitcoms, rom-com, parody, cartoon, satire, sketches, dramedy, and many more. According to 20th century philosopher Henri Bergson, laughter is concerned with humans as social creatures, rather than as private individuals: its goal is to correct these socially 'inconvenient' mindsets gently but firmly. We laugh at people who are too odd or too rigid to allow for societies to evolve and improve themselves. It is in this sense that laughter is corrective "Society holds suspended over each individual member, if not the threat of correction, at all events the prospect of a snubbing, which although it is slight, is none the less dreaded. Such must be the function of laughter." (cited in Herring, 2020, para.40).

Therefore, comedy is distinct with making people laugh at culturally sensitive topics to cause positive change that leads to societies evolvement. Bergson and Barreca, theorists of comedy explained: "Comedy is social… Comedy is based on shared experience, attitudes, and values; creates in-groups and out-groups by mocking aberrations from the norm or the norm itself" (cited in Finney, 2014, p.6). However, a good joke is not enough to get the intended effect. "Comedy theory must account for the

fact that jokes and other funny elements of media often need help in order to achieve maximum effect. Without the presence of established, comedic industrial codes and narrative conventions, viewers may miss humor for lack of preparation" (Marx and Sienkiewicz, 2018, p. 135). Meaning, for a joke to be successful, it needs to be delivered within a context and in a format that is familiar to the targeted audience.

Women were expected "to be nice", and comedy is anything but nice. Comedy deals with serious, aggressive, and controversial topics using ridicule and humiliation in private and public settings. Therefore, it was not the act nor the place for "nice" women to be. For women to be successful comics in a way that achieve significant recognition, they had to become involved with serious things. Therefore, after the first feminist movement in the 19th century where feminist movements pushed for equal rights in several areas including the right to vote, many women felt empowered, and that sense of power was vital to the construction of humor which subsequently led to an increase in numbers of female comics (Finney, 2014). Feminist turned comedy into a shaping tool as they paired it with anger (Barreca, 2022). Having the power and the equality in rights that were exclusive to men increased women's autonomy and self-confidence to dare the social norms and become funnier not only in the privacy of their home but also in public spheres and through media.

Nowadays comedy is not only regarded as a way to spread happiness but also as a tool to cause change by informing the public about sensitive issues. Humor is useful for addressing issues that are new or especially sensitive to the public (Chattoo & Feldman, 2020). Through the use of humor, the negative judgement or stigma that surrounded those issues instantly disappear (Bobel, 2020). Meyer (2000) explains that with humor

> an accepted pattern is violated, or a difference is noted-close enough to the norm to be nonthreatening, but different enough from the norm to be remarkable. It is this difference, neither too shocking nor too mundane, that provokes humor in the mind of the receiver… people obtain humor from the "surprise" of a new perspective (p. 313)

In their book titled *A comedian and an activist walk into a bar: The serious role of comedy in social justice* Caty Borum Chattoo and Lauren Feldman (2020) argue that "Comedians who say something serious about the world while they make us laugh are capable of mobilizing the masses, focusing a critical lens on injustices and injecting hope and optimism into seemingly hopeless problems" (p. 2). Meaning that using comedy to address serious issues is an effective way to cause change in society.

As stated earlier, for women to cause change, post the first feminism movement, they had to do it through comedy. You don't jump a sprint, but you start with a marathon. For women that marathon started with wining their right to vote, and equal rights. Then they moved to sprint the comedy realm in the hopes of more and better changes. At first, they started in the privacy of their homes and later on they took it to the public sphere through several media platforms such as televised comedy shows, published humorous poets, and stand-up comedy performances at comedy bars. Chattoo (2016) explained "Entertaining or comedic portrayals of serious issues open the door for audiences to pay increased attention to subsequent serious treatment of issues in traditional news media" (p. 4). Seilkhanova (2020) noted that "if the information is presented in an enjoyable way, there is a greater chance that the new knowledge will stick with the viewer and encourage further interest in the subject" (p.2). Though comedy is causing change in

societies with every show, stand-up, movie, etc.; it is not easy for a comic female to reach success in the comedy world without self-deprecation.

However, with the revolution of the second feminist movement in the 20th century, women took over and demanded more rights, more media space, more inclusion, more opportunities to display their perspective on the world around them. That's exactly what the *We are Lady Part*'s producers did for Muslim women. They provided them with a platform and the freedom to present their sides of the story. To paint a realistic, genuine, and authentic picture of themselves for the world to admire. The show producers did so by assigning a Muslim woman to write the show. They also including other Muslim women in the productions process from selecting the actresses, choosing the location, and directing the episodes. The comedy show *We are Lady Parts* marks a huge milestone for the Muslim women's movement.

The Socio-cultural Factor

Muslim migration to Europe is not a recent trend. In fact, Muslims migrated to Europe in the late 1940s to cover the European countries labor shortage and help in the reconstruction process of their devastated cities at the end of the Second World War (Khader, n.d). However, there has been a rapid increase of Muslim immigration to Europe in the past two decades, mostly by refugees and asylum seekers, which lead Islam to become the second largest religion in contemporary Europe ("Europe growing Muslim population", 2017). The majority of Islam followers are first- or second-generation immigrants (Laurence & Vaisse, 2006). According to Croucher and Cronn-Mills (2011), Muslims are expected to make up between 5 and 15% of several European states including the United Kingdom's population by 2025.

Khader noted that there has been a process of feminization of Muslim immigrants entering the country in the late 1970s and 1980s, through Muslim men bringing over their female family members, which increased the visibility of migrants in public space and attracted European ‘s attention (e.g., veiled women, beard men, etc.). This increased visibility triggered European’s anxiety fearing the effect of such presence on the European identity and culture (Khiabany & Williams, 2008, Khader, n.d.). Khader explains “in Europe, at least since the 1980s, migration has become an issue, mainly because two-thirds of the migrants are Muslim. Indeed, everything related to Islam in Europe became a cause of anxiety” (para.14).

It is in this context that far-right parties in European states emerged and started to gain support by presenting migration and immigrants as a threat “due to economic competition, cultural identity, security concerns, and crime” (Hellwig & Sinno, 2017, p.3) who aim to weaken liberal democratic societies, their values, and practices (Statham & Tillie, 2018). Muslims are perceived as a problem on two accounts; their religion and their numbers and the Right-wing parties are chanting nothing else. To provide a glimpse on the effect of such chant on the general public, in 2014 a Facebook page titled “Patriotische Europäer gegen die Islamisierung des Abendlandes” which translate to “Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the Occident”, or for short ‘Pegida’, attracted approximately 25,000 people to the streets of Dresden, Germany to chant “Against the Islamisation of Europe” (Garrelts, n.d.; Khader, n.d;). Pegida’s ideology spread, not only in Germany, but also internationally and sparked the foundation of Pegida movements in so many other European states such as Norway, Holand, Bulgaria,

Italy, Switzerland, France, the United Kingdom, and even the United States (Garrelts, n.d.).

What Pegida did is identifying all immigrants as Muslims and all Muslims as immigrants and labeled them as a threat to the "Christian culture of Europe". This led a widespread assumption that the rise of Muslim immigrants' population in Europe will eventually make "this infidel continent part of the domain of Islam" (Agnon de Albatros cited in Khader, n.d.). In reality, nearly half (47%) of all recent immigrants to Europe are non-Muslims making Christian the second largest group of immigrants (Europe growing Muslim, 2017). The Muslim population constitute roughly 5% of the European general population, however, they believe it's more than that. For example, in the United Kingdom, British people overestimated the number of Muslim people living in their country "The public thinks that around 1 in 6 Britons are Muslim, when actually fewer than 1 in 20 are and while trends indicate people's estimates may be moving in the right direction, they are still overestimating by quite a distance." (Mortimore and Gottfried, 2018, para. 6). Most of these misconceptions are garnered from the far right, and biased media.

Far-right groups around the world are known for their heavy use of any form of media, whether it's mainstream media (i.e., TV, radio, newspapers) or alternative media (i.e., websites, Twitter, Facebook, etc.) to spread their anti-multiculturalism ideologies through "drawing on the post-colonial notion of the Other" (Atton, 2006, p.573). Those alternative media platforms are free tools for anyone with an opinion and who wants to share it with the masses. Such an easy to access tool, turned out to be a legal safe weapon that extremist used to attack their targets without getting in direct legal troubles. For

example, Pegida's founder Lutz Bachmann used Facebook to launch his anti-liberal, anti-immigrants, and Xenophobic movement to spread his Islamophobic ideology to his targeted audience "We had set ourselves as a goal to enlighten people about it [i.e. islamisation] via our Facebook page" (cited in Garrelts, n.d.).

Many previous studies examined the effects of media on shaping the mass's opinion by setting the agenda for their thoughts and discussions (Atton, 2006, Baker, Gabrielatos, and McEnery, 2013). In a 2006 research, results showed that almost three-quarters (74%) of adults in Britain stated that they either know "nothing or next to nothing about Islam" and 64% of them claimed that what they do know about Islam they got it from the media where 91% of the media coverage considered negative (Allen, 2012, p.2). The British negative coverage included connecting Islam and Muslims to parallel negative and derogatory discourses about the "uncivilized", "alien", "threats" to the civilized white Christian Western culture and its values. Such racist discourse, heightened after the July 7th attacks on the London transit system by a small group of young radical British born Muslims.

Embracing the stand that the American media took against the "Other" culture post the events of September 11, several British media reinforced an existing unfavorable and negative perceptions and attitudes towards Islam through extreme racist rhetoric and negative representation. Comparing the attack to the United States September 11 attack and calling it 'Our 9/11'. *The Sun*, Britain's most widely circulated populist tabloid newspaper, even went as far as comparing it to WWII:

> Adolf Hitler's Blitz and his doodlebug rockets never once broke London's spirit. Years later, the capital was bloodied but unbowed by two decades of deadly

> attacks by the mad bombers of the IRA. So, yesterday's outrage by the fanatics of al-Qaida -- Britain's 9/11 -- will achieve only one end.... To make this nation ever more determined that those who violate our way of life must never win. . . The government must act without delay, round up this enemy in our midst and lock them in internment camps. Our safety must not play second fiddle to their supposed 'rights' (cited in McGuinness, 2005, para 4)

Though there was no clear direct finger pointing at the Muslim community in Britain, it was implied that since the attackers were followers of Islam that the Muslim community must have provided them "succor". Such rhetoric constructs Islam as a 'threat' and Muslims as "domestic terrorist" implying that the "Other", regardless of them being born in England, are still 'foreigners' and 'outsiders' because they do not align with "our way of life" (Ahmad, 2010a, McGuinness, 2005; Sian, Law, & Sayyid, 2012). Associating Muslims with violence and terrorism has formed many of the issues and debates around Islam compliance with Western standards and influenced the views on Muslim population in the West and Muslim affairs with wider society (Cerchiaro, 2022, Duderija, and Rane, 2019).

Following the attacks, Dr. Fauzia Ahmad noticed that several British mainstream media paid special attention to examine Muslim women' image, rights, and roles in Islam, and used it to repeat the 'modern secular Christian culture' versus the 'traditional conservative Muslim' dichotomous framework. She explains:

> I question whether those projected images of Muslim women reflect lived realities, or merely reflect a victim-based pathology of Muslim women selectively

> maintained by mainstream media…These examples highlight how Muslim women's bodies, their apparent "victimhood", and ironically, their perceived threat to the "British values" continue to remain a source of fascination in the media and government-led agendas (Ahmad, 2010, p 14).

The vilification of Islam and Muslim women by the British media increased hostility towards Muslims and led to more segregation. Vazaiou (2020) argued that

> The increasing Muslim migration flows in Europe during the last decades, together with the recent sharp manifold crises and dramatic events that took place around the globe, have exposed a great uneasiness with regards to the presence, accommodation and socio-cultural integration of Muslims within European societies, leading to divergences over cultural and religious matters, and thus phenomena of panics and of deep communal segregation among populations (p.1)

However, in the following months post the attack, the British government alongside many other European states, worked diligently with Islamic organizations and other faiths communities towards more inclusivity.

The British government started communicating with the minorities' youth and women, setting laws to protect their freedom to follow their culture and to practice their faith, and by putting into effect the Government's strategy, that was published a decade earlier, that focuses on increasing race equality and community cohesion. Such actions increased Muslims involvement in the political and the mainstream media scene. As a result, Sadiq Khan who is the son of a Pakistani immigrant bus driver, became the first Muslim mayor of London in 2016 (Castle, 2016).

An increase of Muslim involvement was also seen in the media industry, as many Muslim writers, producers, and actors started pushing the industry to reject 'offensive' and 'toxic' stories in favor of counter narratives that are exciting, authentic, and "multifaceted" (Gecsoyler, 2022). Furthermore, recent studies has showed that second generation Muslims are more liberal and adopting of mainstream cultural norms than their forging born parents and that non-Muslim don't see all Muslims as a monolithic community and instead they acknowledge their difference, diversity, their level of adherence to the same traditions and outlook on life just like non-Muslims (Ivarsflaten and Sniderman, 2022; Ng, 2022). Such adaptation, inclusivity and involvement within the mainstream culture led to the production of smash hit TV shows with positive representations such as *Man like Mobeen* (2017), *Muzlamic* (2019), and *We Are Lady Parts* (2021). Other productions by Muslim writers are coming on BBC and ITV's screens including a series called Count Abdullah which is expected to be released in 2023.

The main focus of this study is how Muslim women are represented in Western media. Thus, Hall's representation theory is the perfect fit and will be applied using a feminist lens.

Representation Theory

What is representation? Stuart Hall defined representation as the process by which members of a culture "produce meaning through language" (1997b, p.16). It is the collection of signs, which we use to make meaning in order to understand, and describe the world, through a wider set of values and ideologies. These meanings are not fixed; they are the production of society's norms and values. Since they are defined by the

norms of society and thereby filled with social meaning. Representation is important because cultures are always formed through signs, meaning and language, which makes language a symbolic form of representation. Stuart Hall's representation theory states that there is not "one essential, fixed or true meaning against which we could measure" a true representation of events or people in a text, but there are many ways that those can be represented (Cited in Jhally, 1997).

Stuart Hall (1997b) listed three approaches to understand the representation of the world: reflective, intentional and constructionist approach. The reflective approach states that the language we use to communicate with each other carries the true 'real' meaning of the object, person, or event because language performs as a mirror to the world. Visual signs, or what is referred to as iconic signs, usually have some sort of straightforward resemblance to the physical form of the person, object, or event they represent. Iconic signs are less difficult than the spoken or written ones as the latter's do not sound or look like the things they are referring to. He explains "the letter T.R.E.E., does not look anything like trees in Nature, nor the word 'tree' in English sound like 'real' trees" because the relationship between these systems of representation is arbitrary in which any collection of letters can hold the same meaning (1997b, p.21).

The intentional approach to representation implies that we enforce meaning on the world through the language we use to describe it. Swiss Linguist Ferdinand de Saussure argued that there is not a real natural relationship between the sign, its meaning and concept but it is the society that constructs the meaning and different languages produce different systems of social reality and that with time it seems natural (Storey, 2015). Here, the meaning is constructed by organizing signs into a system of representation. Hall

argued that the meaning "is constructed and fixed by the *code*, which sets up the correlation between our conceptual system and our language system in such a way that every time we think of a tree, the code tells us to use the English word 'tree'" (1997b, p.21). These fixed codes are assigned by society through language and grammar systems.

Structuralists describe language as a social institution made of a collection of formal rules that manages the distribution of power in societies (Storey, 2015). Language and grammar systems control meaning and ideologies and creates a form of differences. Saussure was a structuralist whose interest was the underlying rules that govern how culture is practiced and meanings are made. Saussure coined the term semiotics to identify the science of studying signs and meanings. Saussure and Barthes are influential figures that established the study of semiotics. Saussure believed that our construction of reality was organized through language. Language is basically a system of symbols and codes, or signs that function by providing information. Barthes uses the term "signified" to refer to concepts that signs represent. Saussure was a structuralist and focused on the grammar and organization of signs as well as the individual usage of signs or langue/parole. For example, when you are talking to someone, the words you chose to use to encode your message will reflect exactly what you intended them to reflect. Hall argued that although we are able to produce messages to reflect our intentions; the framework of knowledge of the message's cultural context limits its meanings (1997a). Cultural theorists study texts and practices of everyday life (Storey, 2015). In John Storey's book titled Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: An Introduction (2015) he defined culture "as the work and practices of intellectual and especially artistry

activity…The study of culture is about the text and practices whose chief function is to signify or produce meaning" (p. 2).

Byers & Dell (1992) noted that to understand culture is to examine its "process through which people circulate and struggle over meanings ascribed to social experiences, social relations, and themselves" (p. 191). The public creates and re-creates cultural meanings through communication. The study of culture sheds a light on the importance of how meanings are made in society. Du Gay et al. (1997) stated that "we give things meaning by the way we present them. The principal means of representation in culture is language. By language… we mean any system of representation-photography, painting, speech, writing, imaging through technology, drawing-which allows us to use signs and symbols to represent or re-present whatever exists in the world in terms of a meaningful concept, image, or idea" (p. 7). Du Gay et al. (1997) underlined the importance of studying semiotics and its role of representation in producing meaning and a system of representations. Emphasizing the examination of media text, to understand its vital role in shaping ideologies and organizing society. While structuralism analyzed language and grammar systems, semiotics analyzed the behavior and non-linguistic where they regarded the symbols as language. This led to applying semiotic readings on advertisements, movies, television shows, news, and other forms of media similar to the one applied on language. (Foss, 2017; Storey, 2015).

Critical and cultural scholars noted that systems of representation for example language, signs, and images are controlled by certain hegemonic economic, political, and social structures. Derived from Karl Marx's theory; Antoni Gramsci theorized the concept of cultural hegemony (1971). Cultural hegemony is the idea that those who

control socializing institutions, such as the media, establish rules, norms, and ideologies about the social order. Gramsci (1971) used the concept of hegemony to address the relationship between power and culture under capitalism (Foss, 2017; Storey, 2015). He argued that the power of capitalism is not only about the economic power, but also the power over how people think and act. Gramsci (1971) noted that those who control social, political, and economic resources use their power to ensure that society ideology and beliefs align with their social, political, and economic ideas. As a result, those ideas become seen as the norm. One of the ways those groups with ideological power do so is through the media.

Canadian communication theorist Marshall McLuhan stated that “The medium is the message" (2012, p. 203) shifting the focus on the importance of, not only the message or text in media, but also the medium that carries the cultural message. The medium plays a role in how effective the message is in shaping ideologies. Fredric Jameson (1979) and Stuart Hall (1997a) both noted that there is a major connection between the public’s social setting and the meanings they obtain from cultural texts such as television shows, movies, newspaper, and other form of printed journalism. These cultural texts are the signifying practices that shape realities, meanings, norms, representations and how they are propagated to the public by the people in power (Campbell, 2016, Hall, 1997a).

Critical and cultural media scholars linked these shaped realities, meanings, and representations by elite groups with the concept of cultural hegemony. Fürsich (2010) argued that “Since representations can produce shared cultural meaning, misrepresentations in the media can produce negative consequences for political and social decision-making and can be implicated in sustaining social and political

inequalities" (p.116) which means that media platforms are significant forces that normalizes hegemonic ideologies in societies. Van Dijk (1991) explained that through media platforms, class-dominating groups with ideological power control the means of representational productions that produces cultural meanings, in which they shape how minorities of a specific ethnic group, and their issues are presented to society, leading to misrepresentation of these groups in the media. As a result, the representation of minorities in the media continues to be of a major interest for critical and cultural scholars (Alsultany, 2012)

Barthes expanded on Saussure's work to include other symbols within the study of communication such as non-verbal symbols that includes facial expressions and body language. He also had a political purpose of examining signs and meaning. Barthes' mythologies, provides a useful framework for uncovering hegemonic ideologies or myths. He was especially concerned with the concept of myths and targeting hegemonic norms. He used the concept of myth to make explicit the ideologies that are naturalized in society. He did this by looking at the denotation and connotation of words. Denotation refers to the primary signification and connotation is the secondary. For example, a denotation for a dog is a four-legged animal that barks. A connotation for a dog, in a Middle Easter culture like Kuwait is an insult, a degrading name used to cause humiliation to someone you despise. Barthes says that myths exist at the level of connotation because ideologies can be challenged or interpreted in other ways than their denotation.

Hall's constructionist approach to representation is reflective in his encoding and decoding framework. He employs semiotics within an ideological criticism by using

Barthes ideas of denotation and connotations and creating three types of readings or positions for understanding text and images. The first reading occurs at the denotative level and is called the dominant or hegemonic reading. In this reading, the receiver decodes the message as the sender intends for it to be decoded. Hall considers this the ideal type of reading for the messenger and the ultimate goal for advertisers. When interpreted this way, it appears as natural or inevitable.

The second reading occurs at the negotiated level. In this reading, the receiver interprets the message from the dominant reading, but also creates their own exceptions to the rules. In a negotiated reading the audience may understand the dominant, but also realize that other motivations are involved. Campbell (2003) argues in his analysis of a Budweiser commercial that it is important to remember that a global corporation's main objective is generating profits. After September 11, Budweiser aired a commercial during the half time of a Super Bowl game that paid attribute to those who lost their lives. At the level of Hall's negotiated reading, Campbell (2003) argues, "The world's largest brewer, was looking to do more than pay tribute…and establish itself as a compassionate, patriotic corporation. It was also selling beer" (p. 59). In *WLP*, it is important to remember the motivations behind Channel four's diversity initiatives and the socio-historical positionality of streaming in post-network era.

The final reading occurs at the oppositional level. In this case, the receiver "detotalizes" the dominant reading and it is "retotalized" in an alternate framework (Hall, 1997b, p. 60). The oppositional reading occurs when the audience deconstructs the dominant reading and interprets the message within an alternate framework. Hall (1980) argues, "One of the most significant political moments…is when events which are

normally signified and decoded in a negotiated way begin to be given an oppositional reading" (p. 138). Hall (1980) calls this process the "politics of signification" (p. 138). bell hooks concept of the oppositional gaze as it applies to *WLP* will be investigated more in this section by examining satire and music lyrics, such as one of their song titles, "I want to F*** a terrorist."

According to Jhally (1997) Stuart Hall believed that "ideas matter, they are worth struggling over, they have something to tell us about and can influence the world" (Jhally, 1997, p.3). In short, language has power to cause change. Hall recognizes the connection between messages and power and argued that those who have power in the society influence what gets presented and how it is represented to the public through the media. He believed that not only messages and power are connected but they operate together at the same time.

Stuart Hall proposed a cultural studies approach to examine the media for ethnic and racial representations as a means to challenge "the power of the dominant meanings ascribed to those representations, meanings that serve the interests of the wealthiest and most powerful members of a society." (Campbell, 2016, p.12). Therefore, this research will apply Hall's critical approach alongside bell hook's oppositional gaze using textual analysis to examine Muslim women representation in *WLP* to provide answers to the research question. Hall's framework in conjunction with bell hooks' provides complimentary frameworks for analyzing representation as it applies to minorities in the media. Both frameworks seek to uncover hegemonic ideologies in media texts by establishing alternate or oppositional readings or gazes.

Methodology

I introduce the method chosen to examine this topic and the rationale for the data I chose to analyze. It is my hope that this research will start a conversation in the political, entertainment and academic world around challenging the stereotypical representation of Muslim women and encourage more positive and realistic representations. As this was an international hit, and this research focus is to understand the characterization of media depictions of each main character in the show, a qualitative textual analysis was chosen to identify themes in order to understand the overall meaning behind them.

I chose to take the qualitative route because qualitative analysis frequently examines culture as a story-telling method in which a specific texts or cultural objects (i.e., a TV show or a Punk music) intentionally or unintentionally connect themselves to greater stories at play in the society. Qualitative research provides different approaches to collecting and analyzing the data while providing "an in-depth, socio-contextual and detailed description and interpretation of the research topic. It covers a broad range of approaches with a wide variation in concepts, assumptions and analytic rules" (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016, p.100). Qualitative methods can also uncover and provide much more about the social norms of a particular group, and their social concerns. This paper applies a Textual discourse analysis method because is a qualitative method that is largely used in mass communication studies particularly within the cultural studies to reveal the preferred meanings encoded in a text. In another words, textual analysis is helpful in collecting data to understand how other cultures interpret these data to make sense of the world around them. According to McTavish and Pirro

(1990), research employing qualitative textual analysis aims to examine the language and visual characteristics as communication tools while focusing on the content's meaning of the text and visual. Hall (1997b) identified the media as a tool used to create meaning through the process of the "signifying practice" where the media provides meaning and represent events, situations, or types of people in ways that aligns with the ruling class's ideologies. Hall's (1975) argued that the media's text created through the signifying practice does not reveal the real meaning, and the "encoders" (producers) cannot control how the audience will interpret the message (Steiner, 2016). Hall theorized that media texts have multiple meanings that differ depending on the audience's social and cultural background that determine how they read or "decode" them. Steiner (2016) noted that "Hall's main point was that meaning-making is not a function of individual psychology, but rather socially governed cultural codes shared by a community; these are multiple, contradictory, dynamic" (p. 108).

Following Hall's explanation of textual analysis as an alternative research method to content analysis, this method became a key tool for cultural media scholars to examine how meaning are made by analyzing media text (Bainbridge, 2011). In media and cultural studies, textual analysis helps the examiner to understand texts (magazine, television, advertisements, film, etc.) in order to collect information about meaning-making practices, and understand how different cultures interpret reality (McKee, 2003). Textual analysis helps researchers by providing them the tool to explain the dominant meanings assigned by a text, the different meanings decoded by the audience, and the intertexts referring back to other texts (Brennen, 2013). Therefore, in a textual analysis, it is not about the text itself, but what that text aims to represent (Curtin, 1995).

This research is focused on how Muslim women are represented in the sitcom *We are Lady Parts (WLP)*. A critical approach was vital to understand the social construction of power and the propagation of dominant ideology of Muslim women's image in this sitcom. A textual analysis method is useful in a critical framework because it provides a tool to look beyond texts and take into consideration the sociocultural and the institutional contexts (Carvalho, 2008). One of the approaches to textual analysis is the thematic analysis and is utilized as an organizing tool in cultural studies. A plethora of research showed that there is a scarcity in positive representation of Muslim women in the media, making the unique data of this show very important to examine in search of themes to compare with the previous literature (Khan & Eid, 2011; Fahmy, 2004; Haque, 2010; Navarro, 2010;).

Themes are used as "attribute, descriptor, element, and concept. As an implicit topic that organizes a group of repeating ideas, it enables researchers to answer the study question. It contains codes that have a common point of reference and has a high degree of generality that unifies ideas regarding the subject of inquiry" (Vaismoradi, Jones, Turunen, & Snelgrove, 2016, p.101). Thus, arranging the study around major themes will allow the researcher to address and answer each research question individually. The researcher can approach thematic analysis through the process of coding, where the scholar identifies data patterns and relationships that are relevant to each of the research questions. "The point of coding is to identify relevant data within the entire dataset to answer the research questions" (Damayanthi, 2019, p. 5). Lastly, thematic analysis is flexible when changes occur allowing for new themes to show in the data. Guest, MacQueen, & Namey (2011) noted that in critical studies "the thematic analysis moves

beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focuses on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes" (p. 9).

The goal of thematic analysis is mainly to summarize and paraphrase the dataset either as a whole or in relation to a particular research set of questions. As part of the textual analysis method this research used themes to organize the findings. Thematic analysis provided an efficient process to generate themes from qualitative data. In the thematic analysis process, codes identify data related to the research question. Codes are the smallest element of the thematic analysis process that helped the researcher make connections to larger patterns of meaning, supported by a central organizing model (Clarke & Braun, 2014). Themes are the most important elements in the thematic textual analysis method, and it offered a framework for the researcher to organize and report their analytic observations. Clarke and Braun noted that "The aim of textual analysis is not simply to summarize the data content, but to identify, and interpret, key features of the data, guided by the research question" (2014, p.2). They also note that in the textual analysis process, throughout coding and theme development the research questions can evolve too.

The examination of the storyline or the narrative is fundamental to textual analysis. Boyd, Blackburn and Pennebaker noted that "The essence of the narrative is the story it tells" (2020, p. 3). This study included all six episodes in the first and only broadcasted season of the show *We are Lady Parts (WLP).* This show deserves scholastic attention because representations of Muslim women, as previously stated, is scarce in the media. The reason behind choosing the first season is that it reflects the creator's goal in

portraying Muslim women without previous critics or audience feedback nor network pressures based on ratings. Thus, providing a unique representation and genuine data.

The first stage of analysis is organizing and preparing the data. In this stage, the researcher viewed each episode of *WLP* multiple times. The first viewing contained, what Stuart Hall calls, "a preliminary soak." In the initial screening, the researcher viewed each episode of the *WLP* and let it resonate. In the second viewing, the researcher began taking initial notes and memos about each episode, including the characters, plotlines, the music and lyrics, visual elements, verbal and nonverbal communication and key events. In the third viewing, the researcher began immersing herself in the data, which involves in-depth coding. During this stage, the researcher must "absorb and marinate in the data, jotting down reflections and hunches, but reserving judgment" (Tracy, 2013, p. 188). Next, the researcher transcribed the relevant material from each episode. At this phase, the researcher critically evaluated the episodes and transcribed the important scenes that helped in generating the themes. Finally, the researcher examined these themes using Hall's theoretical framework to help in answering the research questions.

The socio-cultural context of *WLP*, along with traditional tropes of Muslim women in the media, framed the coding process and evolution of themes. Additionally, Stuart Hall's representation theory and bell hooks' oppositional gaze provide a theoretical lens for decoding this media text. When viewing episodes of *WLP*, the researcher documented scenes that contradicted previous tropes of Muslim women, such as "the oppressed," "exotic," and "pious." These tropes have dominated mainstream mass media throughout the previous decades, effectively homogenizing Muslim women's lives. This homogenization of present Muslim women as flat characters or people who are either

oppressed by their male guardians with little to no agency, or the dueling depiction of the "sinful exotic belly dancer/temptress" with the pious religious woman covered from head to toe. The pious religious woman is traditionally painted as someone to fear, as a potential terrorist, or someone who fades into the background of anonymity. In each case, they are presented as flat characters who fulfil their roles without internal or external struggles over desire, competing cultural norms, religion and secularism, and other ideological aspects that humanize mainstream white characters.

The researcher began noting "instances" of contradiction within the text in which main characters exhibited an internal or external struggle with traditional media tropes, religiosity, and culture (previous and current). After collecting and coding these "instances," the researcher compared them and evaluated their properties and dimensions. Through this process, themes emerged that were robust and saturated. The three dominant themes that emerged were: agency, religiosity, and resistance. To understand the process more thoroughly, an example is necessary. Agency emerged as a theme through coding instances of contradictions of previous media representations. After key instances were identified, they were transcribed. For example, Amina meets with Ahsan in a cafe without supervision and Saira is portrayed as sleeping with her boyfriend in a scene where they are talking on her bed. Both instances go against religious and mainstream media portrayals. When comparing these two instances, the vary along the lines of properties and dimensions. While Amina and Saira are engaging in haram experiences with men, Amina's actions are less egregious than Saira's in both Western and Muslim cultures. However, in Muslim cultures, both women would be considered "whores" or "sinful women" regardless of the level of interaction outside the institution of marriage.

CHAPTER III - THE AGENCY OF MUSLIM WOMEN

After looking at the episodes critically, this research found that the show had three themes: Agency, Religiosity, and Resistance. The themes helped in answering the research questions proposed in this study. The author will address each theme in the next chapters.

WLP is a series emanating from a political context in which "nationwide debates questioning the compatibility of Islam with Western culture and the prerequisites for the inclusion of Muslim citizens and migrants in the national body politic, have repeatedly focused on gendered symbols and relations" (Lepinard, 2014, p. 205). Lepinard (2014) explains that the current political climate encourages a return to assimilationist practices, rather than cultural heterogeneity or diversity. She argues that within this context, a focus on gender equality as a national achievement in European countries, has placed traditional Muslim women at odds with assimilation practices that are politically desirable in the West, such as unveiling. These issues have also led to debates over conceptions of female autonomy for Western and Muslim women.

Multicultural feminists critique a liberal concept of autonomy on the basis that it succumbs to the pitfalls of ethnocentricity and cultural relativism. Citing Uma Narayan's work on Surfi Pirzada Indian women, Lepinard (2014) suggests that Western feminists often view Muslim women through the "prisoner of patriarchy" trope or through the "dupe of patriarchy" trope in which women consent to being oppressed. She suggests that the third trope, "bargaining with patriarchy" is the only one that accurately describes both Muslim and Western women's relationship with patriarchy. She states, the ability "to be reflective about their practices of veiling is a sufficient indicator of their autonomy, an

autonomy that can coexist, as it does for Western women, with the fact that their desires are partly "deformed" by patriarchal norms and structures" (p. 211). *WLP*, as a series, addresses these constraints of navigating the intersectional identities shaped by their relationship to Islam, patriarchy, and secular Western ideas and values, especially surrounding feminism, gender, and sexuality.

Providing an exposition of the main characters is essential for explaining how each character exhibits agency in the face of contradicting structural and institutional barriers associated with traditional Islamic religious values and those of Western modernity. This show depicts five Muslim females as the main characters: Amina, Saira, Aisha, Bisma, and Momtaz. Through the depiction of each character, the author, Nida Manzoor, seeks to display each character's struggle navigating the line between traditional Islamic values and those of a feminist-punk rock British band. Navigating this line is not easy for any of the characters, with each representing a unique struggle at the intersection of various identities. Manzoor's ability to depict each character's unique intersectional dilemmas bring authenticity and genuineness into the series. Women, regardless of religion, are subjected to rules that dictate their mobility, rights, bodies, etc. For Muslim women in Western societies, Manzoor's series adds the complexity of intertwining gendered discourses with those of "neoliberal citizenship and imperial nationalism that are couched in rhetoric's of Western modernity" (Maira, 2009, p. 632).

In this section, I utilize cultural critic Stuart Hall's theories regarding representation to examine the theme of agency by providing an exposition of each character, including the author's preferred reading for each character. The primary character and protagonist of the series is Amina, a 26-year-old full-time microbiology

Ph.D. student at the prestigious The Queen Mary University of London. Amina is portrayed as coming from a middle-class first-generation Indian immigrant household with open-minded and intellectual parents. While they identify as Muslims, Amina's mother does not cover her head with a hijab, unlike Amina, who does. In the early episodes of the series, Amina is depicted as much more conservative than her parents.

Amina and her family love music, and enjoy singing, though music and singing are considered sinful in Islam. They are also big fans of Don McLean, the American punk musician, famous for the hit song 'American Pie'. Amina teaches guitar to underprivileged kids as a charity work though she personally struggles with performance anxiety that leads her to vomit in front of an audience. Amina is depicted as smart, dreamy, and extremely talented with guitar but also super naïve in social settings. Saira describes her as, "mad skillful but doesn't know it, a total freak but in a really normal person way." Amina initially comes across as an ordinary, conservative, and shy Muslim woman.

Although Amina is presented as a Ph.D. student focused on her career, Amina is obsessed with finding a man to marry, mirroring these aspirations to those in her social group. Everyone in Amina's friend circle is either married, engaged, or about to be engaged (because "good" Muslims do not date). Amina's parents, unlike many traditional Muslim female's parents, are not pressuring her to find a husband and are almost antagonistic toward her endeavors to secure one. She constantly mentions feeling like a "sad lonely spinster" for not being able to secure a husband. She alludes to the fact her life is incomplete without a husband. While in a normal Muslim household, women are usually dependent on the male members, Amina is depicted as independent from her

parents and pays minimal attention to their opinions on her life decisions. However, she is extremely dependent on her girlfriends' opinions, particularly her best friend Noor.

As the show's protagonist, the focus is on Amina's struggle between being ideal conservative Muslim woman and ideal marriage material or explore her personal passions that are considered haram (sinful), such as playing a musical instrument or being a member in a female punk band. This struggle over agency and identity is evident and foreshadowed in the first scene of the first episode. In this scene, the audience is presented with the ritual of an arranged marriage meeting at Amina's house. This is important because of the dichotomy that Amina is going to be faced with throughout the series between being a good conservative Muslim or following her desire to become a punk musician and the incompatibility of these two aspirations.

In the arranged marriage scene, Manzoor is shedding a light on the diversity of Muslim families by showing the potential spouse and his family to be more conservatively attired. The suitor's parents are dressed in pale colored traditional Muslim outfits and their son is in an all-black thobe (Muslim men outfit) and wearing a kufi hat over his head, while Amina is in pastel color outfit and her parents are in multicolored Western looking attire. At one point, the mother of the potential spouse asks Amina "do you always dress like this? Bright colors and everything?" which surprises her parents to which her dad pulls out his glasses to check her clothes' colors and her mother jumps in her defense "oh, no no. She's usually much more modest. And her skin usually is a lot clearer but she's, you know, premenstrual." Her dad then adds "She sweats a lot but she's very fastidious" (Manzoor & Pocock, 2021, 1:16). When the other family showed disgust at their explicit response, Amina's mother picks up a guitar near her and hands it to her

daughter and asks her to play some music (to show off her talent to the prospective spouse), which shocked his family as music is considered haram (sinful). The arranged marriage scene demonstrates how different Muslim families are in the West. Where some are showing signs of assimilation to their host country and absorb its culture like Amina's parents, and others have kept tie with their home culture and keep close-in group ties.

Amina's character, while shown to be the normal geek, people pleaser, quiet and well-behaved Muslim woman, inside her is this wild, super ambitious, hardcore guitar player that she keeps trying to hide from her friends to maintain her social status with them and to not diminish her opportunities of finding "self-respecting, God-fearing Muslim man" to marry her.

Throughout the series, Amina learns more about her ambitious and passionate side as it becomes more evident the longer she is around her bandmates. Despite her attempts to balance or suppress her passion to maintain a halal lifestyle, she eventually is forced to choose between her collective fold or her passion for music. The two being incompatible with one another.

In the series, she holds a secret crush towards Ahsan Alcaf, who goes to her university and later finds out he is the little brother of one of the band's members. Amina's character, though unique, does represent the dreams and struggles in the life of a typical Muslim woman where she's pressed to conform to the cultural norms of getting married the typical "Halal" way or allowing her heart to make the choice. After concluding that she's miserable without her band or Ahsan being in her life, Amina's decides to rejoin the band in their live performance with Ahsan being in the audience. Glaveanu (2009) argues that resisting hegemonic representation can occur when

providing people with social power and individual agency. As such, Amina's character contests the homogeneity of representations of Muslim women by Western media through her choice of pursuing her passion for punk music. The character also contests the collectivist and religious constrictions around Muslim women, as Amina maintains her faith identity while also participating in an activity considered sinful (haram).

Throughout the series, Amina's mom is shown to be a very loving parent that supports her daughter's dream. She is distinctive because Muslim mothers usually tend to raise their girls to mirror them in looks, and ideology, where they conform to the Islamic cultural norms. However, Amina's mother encourages her daughter to draw her own path in life and write her own story without falling under anyone's influence (aka:Noor). Her mother is shown very progressive, educated, mischievous, and brazen. In one scene in episode two she engages in a conversation with Amina while she's getting ready for her dinner date with Ahsan,

> Mom: There is more to life than husbands, you know!
> Amina: Mom, please. I am not in the mood.
> Mom: You know what I mean? You go chasing all these brothers, but do you ever think for a second will they care for your need?
> Amina: What?
> Mom: You know! In the bedroom. Your feminine requirement. Wink wink! Nudge nudge!
> Amina: Ok. This is inappropriate. Grossly in appropriate.
> Mom: It's my parental duty to talk openly about the bees and the trees.
> Amina: No. no it's not ma. No one's parents do that.
> Mom: Well then, I won't be blamed if you run to Syria and married a jihadi because we didn't have "the talk"
> (Manzoor & Pocock, 2021, 7:57).

Amina is not wrong; it is highly unlikely to find a Muslim mother who would talk to her single daughter about finding a man that would meet her "feminine requirement" in

the bedroom. Having “the talk” or talking about the “bees and trees” is an uncomfortable subject to discuss with your daughters while they’re single especially since the general expectation of Muslim women is that they won’t have sex until they are married. There is not much benefit to drawing their attention to this beforehand. This is understandable when learning that “women’s sexuality is seen as strong, active, and dangerous to the Islamic social order” (Mernissi cited in Maumoon, 1999, p.272). However, when learning about how a recent study showed that Muslim women are being represented as financially dependent, uneducated, house wives and sexual objects (Kasirye, 2021) one can understand Manzoor’s choice of representing such image and providing more realistic and liberal representations of Muslim women by depicting them having the agency to do and talk about their bodies and their sexual needs. She is challenging the negative stereotypical of Muslim women and pushing such topics to be the new norm.

The next character is Siara, who is depicted as the most hardcore punk band member. In episode one Saira is shown to be from a Pakistani ethnicity. She identifies as a Muslim but doesn’t wear a hijab. Her body is filled with tattoos, and she smokes, and plays the guitar with the band all of which is considered haram. She works as a butcher in a Halal butcher shop for employment. She enjoys her job because, as she puts it, “sawing carcasses gets the creative juices flowing” (Manzoor & Pocock, 2021, 5:36). Saira is the band’s lead vocal, and guitar player. The band is her life. The show depicts her as hardheaded with anger issues. Though has a blue-collar job, she is very intellectual and well versed in poetry. She was shown in episode four participating in poetry night and reciting the revolutionary Pakistani poet Faiz Ahmad Faiz.

Saira had an older sister who passed away but had a great influence on her love of punk music. Saira lost connection with her family due to her "still doing the music" Saira is a hardcore feminist, anarchist, and has an antiestablishment persona who's core reason behind brining the band together is not fame but "to speak our [women] truth before we're mangled by others bullshit ideas of us. Our music is about representation. It's about being heard" (Manzoor & Pocock, 2021, 6:10). Saira most explicitly documents her navigation through life as a Muslim woman who is free to exercise her right to be autonomous and make her own decisions.

Saira's character exemplifies this agency and autonomy the most in scenes involving her relationship with Abdullah. She has been in a sexual relationship with Abdullah for over six months and refuses to label their relationship because it's a patriarchal institutional arrangement. In one scene in episode two, Saira and Abduallah are sitting on her bed together talking about how desperate Amina was to be married. Saira says, "She's gagging for a husband, it's kind of intense." Abdulla responds, "Hm! I mean, what's wrong with wanting to get married?" Saira, explains, "For one, marriage was invented by men as a way of making alliances with other men. "Here, marry my daughter and I'll give you a couple of camels and this cheese bread." Cheese bread? It's a tool of the patriarchy. That's just my opinion" (Manzoor & Pocock, 2021, 12:33). Saira's character appears to know herself and her values and does not actively navigate between the competing ideologies, as Amina's character does. However, Saira's character serves as an argument that these competing ideologies can also be compatible. Though she appears the most Westernized, she is also the most religious. Hall (2003b) explained that regardless of one's shared cultural identity with their group, in this case Saira's Muslim

identity with the rest of the band members, “there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’” (p.70).

Her job as a butcher has never been assigned to a Muslim character on television before. Meat cutting has always been regarded as a male’s trade. Female butchers are an uncommon sight in this male-dominated industry let alone a Muslim female butcher. This is the author’s way of showing the versatility of Muslim woman in doing the roughest jobs and not necessarily falling under the perfect Muslim template. Saira’s also shown independently from her family and living by herself. This is unique because Muslim women usually live with their family until they get married. However, she is likely not held to that because she’s going against her family’s wishes by playing in a punk band.

Momtaz, unlike Saira, is the most fully covered character on the series. She wears a Niqab, in which her body is covered from head to toe (face, hands and all). Yet, she vapes, wears heavy metal studded boots and lacey gloves. She is the band manager who also handles the band’s social media accounts and arranges their gigs. Momtaz, or as the band members call her Taz, also works as a salesperson at a lingerie shop. Her career choice is ironic because she is completely covered, yet sells skimpy lingerie intended for sexual foreplay. Also, the fact that she works in such a shop where there is a chance of sex toys and books being sold, is the author’s way of breaking the norms of talking about sex and sexy clothes among Muslim women. In episode one, Momtaz is portrayed using a lady’s thong as an arrow when an older Muslim woman enters the shop and approaches her with a soft low tone “Excuse me” said the older woman “what do you have in….36 d” in which Momtaz responds with “That depends. What sort of bra are you looking for? We’ve got recreational, titillation, factual, respectful, shag me kindly, shag me hard.” The

women look confused, so Momtaz asks “sport?” The woman hesitates and then responds: “Shag me kindly?” Momtaz says, “Excellent choice” (Manzoor & Pocock, 2021, 7:58). Such representation of conservative looking Muslim women being daring with their language and career choice is unique as it shatters the “Good Muslim” limiting image and expand it to include a diverse characters and personalities. Momtaz ultimate dream is to own her own record label company. However, just like Saira, though she doesn’t have a white-collar job she’s very intellectual. In several scenes, she uses foreign phrases such as “Mea culpa”, which is the author’s way of shattering negative stereotype associated with fully covered Muslim women being regressive and uneducated.

Momatz is determined to put the band on the map and does whatever it takes to land them a gig so they can be heard. Momtaz’s character also navigates her agency and identities through projecting an appearance of extreme conservativism, while being rather risqué in her band and lingerie professions.

Aisha is the drummer of the band and the only Middle Eastern character in the show. She is of an Iraqi descent and has a younger brother named Ahsan that Amina has a crush on. She is also depicted as closeted lesbian on the show, which is unknown until she meets Zarina later in the series. Ashia is not the first gay Muslim character on television, as there were a few gay characters that came before, such as Adena El-Amin a hijabi Muslim lesbian character in *The Bold Type*, Rahim the gay Muslim character in *Love, Victor*, and Navid the gender-fluid Muslim character in *Here and now*. According to Shabnaj Chowdhury (2018) “a rising trend of queer Muslim characters has been emerging on screen but surprisingly falling under the radar” (Para.2) and this can be due

to them being casted as secondary characters or in supporting roles. Ashia's case is unique because she's one of the main characters of the show with a major role in the plot.

Ashia is shown as coming from a middle-class family where she is self-employed, driving her own Volkswagen car to provide transportation services to people as an Uber driver. Ashia's character is shown wearing bold eyeliner, super confident and a foul-mouthed person. She's shown constantly wearing a traditional Iraqi bisht (long cardigan) on top of her heavy metal graphic t-shirts and leather leggings and boots. When Muslim women are depicted in Western media they're usually oppressed, with no personality, wearing black traditional abbaya (Muslim woman's dress), and rarely ever talk and when they do talk it's usually in lower tones and asking in a polite way using proper "good Muslim" vocabulary and Aisha is the opposite of that image.

Aisha doesn't ask but demands things from not only her band members but also her younger brother. In Muslim households, the male member (younger or older than females) has more authority over his female family members, which Manzoor challenges by depicting Aisha demanding and bossing around her younger adult brother Ahsan. In episode two Ahsan is being forced by his sister and Saira to ask Amina on a dinner date via voice message to trick Amina in joining the band and becoming their lead guitarist.

> Ahsan: I don't understand why I have to do this.
> Saira: You recked her [Aisha] car you owe her.
> Ahsan: it was barley even a scratch.
> Aisha: She ain't gonna shut up until you've done it so for both of our sake dine this loser.
> Ahsan while checking Amina's profile on the dating app: She seems interesting. Not my usual type.
> Aisha: Oh, sorry. We are fresh out of manipulative narcissists.
> (Manzoor & Pocock, 2021, 3:00).

Many Muslim men, while being depicted very negatively by Western media, were raised to believe that they are culturally and religiously better than women, that since women carry their names they belong to them, and they should act following that code. However, Hall explains that "One implication of this argument about cultural codes is that, if meaning is the result, not of something fixed out there, in nature, but of our social, cultural and linguistic conventions, then meaning can never be finally fixed" (1997, p.22). That's why Manzoor approaches the Muslim man masculine identity by presenting a more liberal, educated, understanding but passive character such as Ahsan. It is her way of breaking such negative representation of them while providing them the agency to re-draw their image and what does it constitute to be a Muslim man.

Bisma, is the only Black band member from an African ethnicity and the only married with a child character in the show. Bisma identifies as a Muslim and wears a turban over her head. She is the band bassist and peace maker when any conflict arises. Bisma is a stay-at-home mom by choice and a cartoonist by trade. She sells her comic that celebrates femininity titled "The killing period: The apocalypse Vag" as a hobby. She's shown to be a hippy and an environmentally friendly person. She is shown cooking vegan food and helping raise money for the Syrian kids' charity. She's kind, sweet, mature, and motherly. Her relationship with her husband is based on mutual respect and love where they're both raising their girl to be a strong independent and feminist human being. In episode four of the show, Bisma's husband while seated next to his daughter on their kitchen bar was trying to convince Abdullah to "cut and go" his relationship with Saira for hiding some aspect of her personal life from him and because she is "always putting the band first" in which Basma responds "So you've just said, in front of our

female child no less, if a woman puts her work before a man it is reason enough, as you put it to "cut and run"?" Her husband: "No, no You have done it brilliantly babe. You've got the family unite and the art both co-existing in happy symbiosis, right!" Bisma with a skeptical smile: "Daughter, I think we should depart from this place before we shock on the fumes of this toxic masculinity" (Manzoor & Pocock, 2021, 6:40). This defies the stereotypical representation that the Western media has been perpetuating about married Muslim couples' relationship that is based on male dominant and oppression.

Bisma is shown as an outspoken person who doesn't shy away from talking about women's bodies, the monthly cycle, mood swings, etc. She is seen in episode one trying to encourage the young generation to embrace all the changes that their body goes through "Sisters don't hate your bodies. Your blood is your friend" (Manzoor & Pocock, 2021, 8:58). Bisma is unique in terms of how comfortable she is in talking about her cycle in public and in displaying it in her booth in the middle of an open market filled with Muslims. Muslim communities are conservative, and these topics are frowned upon and not discussed in public.

Hall (2004) argued that positive representation presented by an individual from within the group being presented, in this case Manzoor for the Muslim community, provides "an imaginary fullness or plenitude, to set against the broken rubric of our past. They are resources of resistance and identity, with which to confront the fragmented and pathological ways in which that experience has been re-constructed within the dominant regimes of cinematic and visual representation of the west" (p.70). Therefore, Manzoor's depiction of Bisma is breaking so many stereotypes about how strong and independent

married Muslim women are. That they have agency over whether they want to work or stay at home to raise their kids. This progressive depiction of a bad ass mom that can raise her child, practice her hobby and be a part of a punk band is unique and much needed to show that not only single women can do everything, and that marriage doesn't hold an ambitious woman back from reaching her dreams.

Noor is not a member of the band, but she plays an integral role in Amina's life decisions. Noor's character is one of the antagonists to Amina's character. Noor is shown as coming from a middle-class family and has been Amina's best friend since they were kids. She wears her hijab in different styles and is the fashion coordinator to Amina when meeting with potential husbands. During the entire show, the author sheds a light on the influence of peer pressure on Muslim women's decisions and how it leads many of them to hide their true personality to keep their social circle around them and not feel outcasted. Noor is shown super confident, and that Amina looks up to her and trusts her judgment. Noor is more conservative than Amina and is shown to be more of the good Muslim that everyone praises and wants to be around.

However, halfway through the show Noor is revealed to be the antagonist because once she finds out that Amina is a member of a punk band, she cut ties with her. After some reflection, Noor then refuses to give up on Amina being a copycat of herself. Noor tries to reconcile with Amina under the premise that the other band members fooled her and that she (Noor) will help her get back to her "true self." Noor symbolizes the conservative Muslim community that won't accept the reality of the independency of Muslim women and the association of their religion with music.

As stated earlier in this chapter, Muslim women just like Western women are fighting for their agency against a hegemonic patriarchal world. Through the lens of Hall's representation theory, the author found three themes including agency. According to Korteweg (2008), "Agency requires an underlying sense of self, as well as an ability to assess the impact of one's actions on future outcomes and the impact that past actions have had on present conditions" (p.437). In *WLP*, the characters were portrayed as agentic, which deviates from traditional media representations of Muslim women. In the series, these women display their dynamic agentic characteristics by choosing the person they love, type of employment, and by following their passion for playing punk music in a band. Unlike previous representations that portray Muslim women as mindless, dependent, weak and static, Manzoor constructs her characters as strong, intellectual, and agentic women. These women use their agency to navigate contradicting cultural norms, levels of religiosity, and various identities related to gender, sexuality, and marriage. This progressive representation of Muslim women captures the reality of traversing through difficult ideological contradictions about what it means to be a "good" Muslim woman and being oneself in a Western culture.

Importantly, this series provides Muslim women with representations that provide diverse portrayals of these internal and external struggles over identity. Representation of culture and characters that are relatable, has been impactful for several minority communities, most notably the LGBTQIA+ community. For Muslim women in Western societies, seeing these representations provide role models or scripts for discussing and navigating through these struggles. Additionally, these representations are "inclusive" in the sense that they allow Western audiences to view Muslim women dynamically. Instead

of static and stereotyped background characters, these women are relatable. These representations may lessen the experience of Muslim women being “othered” and instead include them into the experience of women struggling over aspects of their identity within patriarchal societies.

CHAPTER IV – LEVEL OF RELIGIOSITY

In Western media discourses, Muslims have often been portrayed negatively and stereotypically, particularly women because the hijab is considered problematic, a sign of backwardness and refusal to integrate with the civilized West. Werbner (2007) argued that "the hijab raises a series of questions about meaning, diasporic mobilizations, identity, multiculturalism, cultural difference, political Islam, gender, agency, transnationalism and globalization" (p. 173). In media discourses the focus is often on Muslim women attire to present them as "passive victims of traditional patriarchy or as cultural outsiders" (Ryan, 2011, p.1046). These depictions of Muslim women operate largely unchallenged because their voices are frequently excluded from public debates (Bilge, 2010). This show is a great opportunity in providing a platform for those voices to be heard.

The second theme shown in *We are Lady Parts* is level of religiosity. According to Mokhlis (2009) "Religiosity is an intricate concept and a variegated human phenomenon, and seems to cover considerable ground such as behaviors, attitudes, beliefs, feelings and experiences." (p.77). There is no adequate set that scholars could agree on to measure individual's religiosity, therefore, these measures are subjectively developed by each researcher to fit their research objectives. Thus, this research chose to focus on prayer, clothing choice, and behaviors to measure the religiosity of each character.

Studies show that faith is the most important part of the Muslim religious identity (Abdo, 2017). Praying is one of the signs of a Muslim's level of religiosity, alongside attire, and observing dietary restrictions. Muslims are required to pray five times a day, to

wear “modest, free from impurities, and…not to display their finery” clothes (Abdul-Wahid, 2017, para. 3-4) and not to drink alcohol or eat pork. Failing to follow these roles, to some Muslims, you cannot claim to be a Muslim.

In *We are Lady Parts*, the author, Nida Manzoor challenged an existing monolithic image associated with Muslims in general and Muslim women in particular by showing the characters coming from diverse ethnicities, shades of colors, interests, taste in fashion, educational background, sexual orientation and with different level of religiosity. In *We are Lady Parts*, the band members are shown to navigate their Western, non-traditional, self-constructed and diverse identities within their Islamic faith.

Taking Amina for example, appearing like the “good Muslim” in her clothing choices, manners, and surrounding herself with conservative Muslim friends but also, looking for a man who loves playing golf, naming her guitar Fabio after a romantic novel’s male character, and constantly daydreaming about having Westernize romantic encounters with her crush, Ahsan Al-Caf. This was Manzoor’s way of showing the intersectionality of Amina’s Muslim but Western identity. Amina thought it’s “inappropriate” for her mom to have “the talk” with her but was fine in episode three to ask Ahsan, who’s faking being in a relationship with her at Noor’s engagement part, to keep lying and say that he “pray [s] at the local mosque just in case they ask.”. Amina was depicted living a double life where she’s battling her “Muslim good girl” identity imposed on her by her Muslim peers and her “Western punk girl” identity that she came to find it within her after hanging out with Lady Parts. Her excessive efforts to keep both lives separate was a connotation of what Muslim women in the West go through to not

feel excluded by their community when developing a new non-traditional identity that doesn't confront with the Islamic traditions.

In episode six, Amina is shown miserable while seated in a restaurant with a new potential husband that Noor set her up with. Amina, worried about people judging her, starts a scene in which she looks like she's in a dating show and being rated by a group of Muslim- looking strangers on whether she deserves to find love or not with the man seated in front of her. The potential husband starts the conversation with "so, I heard you're in a band, bad girl, ha?" the judges are buzzing his answer Amina looking at the camera "what? I am not bad." The man says, "No, you're naughty. Playing naughty music." The judges continue buzzing and Amina looks at the potential future husband and says, "It's not naughty music. It's meaningful. It actually has something to say." The man says, "I bet. So, do you give blow jobs?" and the dating show scene ends and now they're shown back in the restaurant. Amina asks, "what did you say?" The man repeats, "Do you, you know, give blow jobs?" Amina shocked at his language throws her napkin at him and tells him "Fuck this!" Then she storms out and join the band in their live performance (Manzoor &Pocock, 2021, 15:50).

This was the author's way of resisting this arranged marriage system that many Muslim women are forced to embrace as the religious ritualistic way of doing things. It's her way of challenging the "good Muslim" image and the high expectation of Muslim women when there is lower risk for Muslim men who don't fall under the same image. Amina's use of profane language in front of a man in public was her way to break from all these religious rules that bind her from making the right choice because it's not the religious choice. It's her way of breaking free from her community's expectation and

accepting her true identity of being both Muslim and a member of a Punk band without feeling the need to pick one over the other.

Saira's is another character that challenges the stereotypical image of how "good" Muslim should look. She's tattooed and doesn't cover her head with a hijab, yet she is shown praying more frequently than any other character in the show. Also, she's in a sexual relationship outside marriage with her "boyfriend," a fellow Muslim man named Abduallah, which is considered sinful in Islam. Nonetheless, all her band Muslim members are accepting of her relationship and don't judge her about it. In a real context Muslims don't establish relationships outside marriage (aka boyfriend/girlfriend) and don't get in a sexual relationship outside marriage as it will often lead to the woman being honor-killed. Saira, however, doesn't seem to struggle with her identity as a Muslim who has sex outside marriage, plays music and sings Punk lyrics. Saira is a representation of modern day second generation Muslim women in Western culture who have woven their multicultural identities together and don't see them exclusive from one another.

Momtaz is shown living in a sketchy neighborhood with her grandmother who knows about her involvement with the band and supports her. This is extremely unique taking into consideration the generational gap and the tolerance level that her grandmother holds in comparison to older Muslim generation in real life who are more conservative, observant and attached to their traditional cultural values than their kids. While Momtaz's outfit makes her appear as the most religious Muslim character of the show, she was never portrayed praying and she wears nail polish. Muslim women can't pray when having nail polish because in the Islamic sunnah all Muslim must wash their

hands before prayers and the nail polish will prevent the water from touching the nails therefore, women who have it on can't pray. Even when all the other band member were praying in episode one, she was depicted sitting behind them taking selfies. In episode six, Momtaz is shown in a back alley of a bar asking for a gig for the band but the owners wouldn't look past her outfit. The female owner asks Momtaz, "if someone is forcing you to wear that you should say so." Taz overlooking her comments says, "I am just looking for a gig for my band." The female owner asks, "Is there is someone you need us to call?" Taz replies "mm, yes, please. I am desperate, please please help me. I need a slot for my band urgently or who knows what might happen." The male owner asks, "are you taking a piss?" Taz scoffs, "Damn it!" (Manzoor & Pocock, 2021, 8:39).

Post 9/11, there was a raise of racist attacks on people who would appear to be Muslims. Therefore, many Muslims living in the West opted to look Western and not show their religious affiliation through men not growing beard or women not covering their head with a hijab. Momtaz, is shown not only to cover her head but all of her body (excluding her eyes) which is the extreme conservative Muslim look. With all the bullying she encountered for her "statement look," that didn't deter her from still seeking a gig for her band. Manzoor even depicted her in the same episode visiting a conservative Muslim senior center to ask for a slot for their band. They're shocked at her actions that contradict her conservative appearance and they kick her out. Momtaz is an untraditional character and a powerful message from the other to the young Muslim generation and the Western world that Muslim women are determined, persistent, should not be judged by their look, and that fulfillment looks different from one person to another.

There is common image that Muslims are homophobic. However, a Pew research poll showed that there has been an increase among Muslims in accepting homosexuality. The study showed that more than 50% of Muslims in America support accepting homosexuality in the society (Pew Research Center, 2017). Jumping on the wave of providing representation to this LGBT community, Manzoor created Aisha. Ashia is shattering the oppressed heterosexual, man dependent, child barer Muslim woman as she's not only super independent but a lesbian that seeks no man for marriage. Ashia is very outspoken and fearless. In one scene, in episode one, she's portrayed driving three drunk white males and they started harassing her for being a Muslim woman Uber driver. When one of the passengers asks her if her "dad made her do this job" (implying oppression and low income) instead of ignoring his comment and keeping silent like a "good Muslima", she responds by "Yeah, he said if I don't drive simple, dickless, pissheads around he will send me to Iraq to marry my cousin." (Manzoor & Pocock, 2021, 7:17) Her response took the white male passengers by surprise. Aisha, while appearing confident in most aspects of her life, is shown weak when navigating her sexual orientation in front of the social influencer Zarina who later becomes her girlfriend. Zarina, who was writing her first article as the new cultural editor for the website Yellow Tongue tried to get Aisha to come out under the premise of making "all the queer kids who will feel so seen if you just said who you really were" (Manzoor & Pocock, 2021, 8:44) but she was not yet comfortable enough to do so.

This is understandable given that homosexuality it is considered extremely haram (sinful) in Islam, criminalized is some Muslim countries by death, and could lead to honor killings in some families. However, in this show the band members are shown to

be supportive of this relationship and actually pick on Aisha whenever she leaves the band rehearsal to meet with Zarina. Aisha has a brother, Ahsan who is never shown in any scene when Aisha and her girlfriend are together or when Aisha is talking about Zarina in the "lover" context which was the author's way of highlighting how homosexuality is still a taboo or uncomfortable topic to talk about among Muslim family members. Regardless of her sexuality, Aisha maintains her attachment to her roots through wearing the Iraqi bisht, and to her religion by wearing the traditional hijab and praying with the band members.

With all the diverse Muslim characters in the show, Manzoor didn't forget to include the character of the traditional good Muslima. This character is Noor who is shown like the modern good Muslim woman. She is living her truth where she seeks to live her life to an ultimate of Islamic perfection and pushes her friend to live that too. Noor is shown as a typical Muslim wife who asks permission from her husband before making a decision (on inviting Ahsan to her engagement party) and keeps her social circle very halal by only hanging out with female fellow Muslim women.

Noor knows about Amina's obsession with playing the guitar and asks her to hide it and keep her image halal to raise her chances of finding a good Muslim man. However, Noor hosts an engagement party alongside her fiancé (not officially her husband) where they play the "getting wed" playlist which is a Western custom that is not common among Muslim cultures as "mixing of unrelated men and women is religiously unlawful" in Islam (Maumoon, 1999, p.272). However, when she finds out through Zarina's misleading article that Amina is in a Punk band, that she wrote a song called Bashir with a good beard because she "is horny", and that her actions generated negative backlashes

towards Muslim women, Noor and her group of girlfriends boycott Amina for feeling betrayal.

This was Manzoor's way of implying the Muslim gaze over Muslim women's daily actions and decisions. Muslim women are accepted among their people as long as they keep the "good obedient halal Muslim" image in front of the public but will get alienated and treated as "freak" when shattering such image by reinforcing a negative one in front of the dominantly Christian society. The 'Muslim gaze' was the reason behind Amina's decision to live the double life for a short period before making the bold decision of living her true self.

Religion is a vital component of culture that permeates every part of the lives of individuals whether one is religious or not. However, people's level of religiosity differs from one another based on ones' understanding and interpretation of the religion. Khan (2014) explains that the "differences in religious affiliation impact how people behave, what choices they make, what code of ethics they follow and their outlook on life" (p.67) and through the characters, the author Nida Manzoor showcased that among the Muslim community the level of religiosity is not "an all or none quality but every individual has a certain degree of it" (Khan, 2014, p. 68).

This realistic representation of the different levels of Muslim women's religiosity help diminish the former stereotypic negative image associated with Muslim women's hijab or niqab being a sign of conservatism, backwardness, and oppression. It depicts them to the Western spectator as "the girls next door", that they're just like "us" and should not be treated as the "other". In this sense, Muslim women can identify as both Muslim and British. Manzoor integrates the lives of her characters into British popular

culture in such a way that her characters have relatable jobs, music preferences, hobbies, crushes, and friendships. This integration has been largely absent in mainstream media, as representations of Muslim women have been seldom and when present, their characters are underdeveloped and in small stereotypical roles.

CHAPTER V – WOMEN'S RESISTANCE

The third theme in the show was resistance. Lila Abu-Lughod defines resistance as "signs of the ineffectiveness of systems of power and of the resilience and creativity of the human spirit in its refusal to be dominated" (1990, p.42). Her definition aligns with bell hook's oppositional gaze. Hooks' oppositional gaze can be understood as the oppressed person's rebellious desire to not only look [back], but for that look to change reality. She argues "the ability to manipulate one's gaze in the face of structures of domination that would contain it, opens up the possibility of agency [to resist]" (Hooks, 1992, p. 116). Manzoor's way of resisting the negative image associated with Muslim women in a satirical way was through the lyrics of the band's songs. Anne-Marie Mingo noted that music was women's form of resistance in the 1960s during the rise of civil right movements. She explains "Leading others in song gave these women space where very often they were prohibited from positions of power and leadership… It's about finding ways for all of us to creatively articulate what we're feeling, longing for, hoping for, and even criticizing. That can all happen through music. It can bring people together the way other things can't." (cited in Bohn, 2019, para 4 &18).

The author/director stated that she wrote the show for "the women who weren't actually on TV that I wanted to represent and show on TV. Oftentimes, I haven't been so thrilled with the representation on TV of Muslim women as oppressed and lacking agency, and often lacking joy and humor." (Manzoor cite in Ravindran, 2021 June, 4). Thus, she chose to write her first show under the comedy umbrella.

This approach becomes obvious in the band song titled "Voldermort Under My Headscarf." The lyrics of that song are mocking the non-Muslim Western fear of Muslim

women's hijab (headscarf) is Manzoor's way of making fun of that fear and everything that the West associates with it. Western media has constantly focused on the veil of Muslim women, and often linked it with women's oppression to perpetuate Islam with malevolence (Alexander, 2016). Samantha Feder (2013) argued that the veil serves as forms of resistance to their wearer, as it allows them to challenge Western perception of beauty standards, contest the sexual objectification of their bodies and assert their religious identity.

> I'm sorry if I scare you, I scare myself too
> You find me terrifying, could it be you know who?
> What could I be hiding? Voldemort's alive.
> He's a live. He's under my head scarf.
> Does other headgear scare you too?
> A hat? Helmets? Nah, just you!

Voldermort is a fictional character and the arch antagonist in the *Harry Potter* novel series. The band's use of the villain [Voldemort] being the creature living under their headscarf is their way of making fun of the women's oppression link that is made by the West. Comparing it to a hat and a helmet was the author's move of implying that the veil's function exactly like a hat or a helmet in terms of covering the head but because of its religious symbol the Western media demonized it causing the Western communities to fear what it's appearance in their countries means to their Christian identity and cultural norms.

Manzoor believing that humor breaks the barriers in discussing taboos, she sheds a light on some of the taboos of the Islamic community such as honor killing. One of *Lady Parts* songs is titled "Ain't No One Gonna Honour Kill My Sister but Me" where Manzoor combines elements of humor and urgency for change with the lyrics:

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
It's an honour killing, it's an honour killing
It's an honour killing, it's an honour killing
I'm gonna kill my sister (Die, die, die)
Do you wanna kill her, mister? (She's mine, mine, mine)

In these lyrics, the band members are mocking the brutal act of honor killing that is common in Muslim countries and among Muslim diaspora in the West. During the same year *WLP* was released, the British newspaper 'The Guardian' published a report about the rise of HBA "honor-based abuse" among the Muslim community in the UK by an alarming 81% since 2016 (Siddique, 2021). Honor-based abuse [honor-killing] results from Muslim women not following their families' expectations or their communities, and in some cases for not following their government's expectations of them. Since honor killing is commonly linked with Islamic countries and Muslim communities it was crucial for Manzoor to address it in one of the band's songs.

This song is the band's way of shooting back at the patriarchal Muslim culture that embraces strict gender roles that are reinforced by laws and customs that keep women in a position of inferiority (Kulczycki and Windle, 2011). The humorous listing of the reasons behind this honor killing which is stealing the eyeliner or stretching out shoes with her big feet is the band's critique and illustration of the triviality behind the honor-killing of Muslim women, some of which are "contacting persons of different faiths, initiating a separation or divorce, being a victim of rape, and even such alleged misdemeanors as flirting" (Kulczycki and Windle, 2011, p.1443). The band's punk feminist perspective on honor killing further attacks the patriarchy within Islam by

suggesting that it is their responsibility to kill a sister, “Do you want to kill her, Mister? She’s mine, mine, mine.” Because all honor-killing cases are performed by a victim’s close male relatives, a female honor killing another female is beyond cultural comprehension. These satirical lyrics problematize hegemonic ideologies prevalent within patriarchal cultures, such as Islam.

As noticed, there was frequent use of humor and profane language not only in *WLP* lyrics but also in the member’s dialogues throughout the show. Which can be interpreted as the bands way of bearing the ‘pain’ caused by the rejection of their Muslim-Punk identities from some members of their social circle and the Muslim community. Swearing also can be funny, liberating, and stimulate emotions (Bergen, 2016). The use of profane words is a form of resistance and it’s heightened in the punk rock genre.

Cursing or swearing are labeled (bad words) and in punk music they use them to shock, to challenge, to break the rules of society, and to imply urgency to cause change. That’s why when Aisha’s girlfriend and famous social media influencer Zarina was asked to help launch the band’s name by writing about their music, and after listening to them play, she labeled them as “The Bad Girls of Islam: Haramed and dangerous” in her article. In more conservative Muslim communities, music is regarded as a sinful act and so is swearing, meaning, if you do both you’re regarded as a bad Muslim.

The lyrics of “Fish and Chips for Tea” illustrate the complex experiences of Muslim women as they navigate between Western culture and Islamic values in terms of assimilation as it pertains to feminism, xenophobia, racism, and cultural imperialism.

I am alpha and omega
I am Nintendo, Sega
I am Babylon, Iraq
I'm Hackney after dark
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 brain)
I'm the glint in the milkman's eye
I'm your mama when you make her cry
Existential, who am I?
Fuck it, let's get high
I float like a fart in the air
I stink like your dad, don't care
I'm a P.O.C. (person of color) B.A.M.E.(black, Asian, and minority ethnic)
D.O.A. (dead on arrival) P.T.S.D (post traumatic stress disorder)
I'm a P.O.C. B.A.M.E. D.O.A. P.T.S.D
Broken by the empire, raised by
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

The author Nida Manzoor, being the product of immigrant parents herself, made sure to highlight the identity struggles of second-generation Muslim immigrants in their new historically Christian homeland with a song she co-authored with her siblings titled 'fish and chips' (Pickard, 2021). Post WWII, Muslims migrated to Europe to help with the labor shortage to rebuild the damaged cities, hence the reference to being Hackney in the dark. Hackney is a type of stallion noted for its high stamina and quickness that made it suitable to be used as a war horse in the 15th century and later used" for everyday riding [work horse], and subsequently typified as the sort of horse available for hire" in the early 20th century (Watts, 2016, para. 2). Just like the Muslims that were brought [hired] to Europe to help with the everyday work of building the destroyed cities.

By the time Muslim men settled, they started bringing over their female family members which increased their visibility in public spaces (e.g., veiled, face covered women) and attracted European ‘s attention (Khader, n.d.). I am a woman, I am a creature, is a reference to how white Europeans regarded Muslim women. Similar to how Americans first regarded Native Americans as primitive and savage ‘creatures’, Europeans regarded the newcomers of Muslim women as such for all their strange, non-white looks, manners, and not resembling the girl next door.

Muslim women are required by their faith, culture, and community to be the synonym of virtue and purity. A heavy expectation to carry, especially since any act of engagement with males outside the marriage institution is regarded as bad and sinful like listening to music and being a member of a Punk band. The lyrics I’m Madonna [innocent], I’m the whore [sinful] refer to the identity negotiation Muslim women go through to gain their community’s acceptance and blessing. Many aspects of acceptable European female behavior and traditions are considered haram, in Muslim culture; thereby presenting a challenge for assimilation and maintaining a reputation of a virtuous Muslim woman.

Muslim women’s lives are extremely polarized and monitored into the dimensions of the Madonna and the whore, resulting in them constantly navigating an impossible line between purity and sin around every corner. Listening to music, playing in a punk band, dating, not wearing a headscarf, speaking too loudly, having an opinion contrary to Islamic clerks result in being perceived as whore, while it has very little consequence in Western culture.

In recent years, the growth of the Muslim immigrant's population in Europe was paralleled with growing attention from the media and public discourse particularly on the role played by second generation Muslims who were born and raised in Western countries and their level of assimilation, acculturation, and involvement in violent actions (e.g., terrorist attacks, riots). The lyrics, I'm a zombie queen, I will eat your brain, refer to the negative and violent stigmatizations in the media of Muslims in Europe. Being conceived as foreign and religious invaders of a pure and Christian Europe, Muslims are perceived to be infecting conventional European values, norms, and mores with variations of their traditions. The fear of the colonizer becoming the colonized, is evident in the use of such a vicious metaphor of a zombie eating a brain. The fact that she labels herself as the zombie queen, further emphasizes the symbolism of female Muslims as an extreme threat of infection to European customs and traditions. The xenophobia and nativism spreading across Europe supports their fear that their Christian traditions and customs are being perverted by a growing presence of Muslim culture infiltrating their everyday lives and rituals.

The young generation of Muslims growing up in Europe go through an existential phase where they negotiate and develop layered identities that are constantly challenged by negative prejudice from their Islamophobic host societies that treats them as the misfits of the motherland. The band reference this problem by singing I'm a P.O.C.- B.A.M.E.- D.O.A.- P.T.S.D to show case how this white racism and xenophobia towards them as (P)eople (O)f (C)olor is shadowing (D)eath on their opportunities in having an easy assimilation experience (U)pon (A)rrival to this host land which caused them (P)ost (T)raumatic (S)ymptom (D)isorder which subsequently lead them to lean on marijuana to

get high in the effort to forget their negative experiences. Giuliani, Tagliabue and Regalia (2018) explain that

Second generation Muslims need to negotiate multiple issues pertaining to identity processes, and need to combine feelings of belonging to their ethnic and religious community with those to the host country. Furthermore, they face these challenges within a social and political context characterized by terrorist events and growing religious discrimination (p.67).

However, all the discrimination and hostility to their presence didn't stop the growing Muslim community from developing a multicultural identity that helped them actively network with the mainstream society, participate in the political scene, commit to being part of the society and identifying as citizen of the homeland (Maxwell, 2006).

Many Muslim immigrants to Europe came from Middle Eastern, North African and South Asian countries with great history such as Babylon, Iraq. Those countries, at a certain point of history, were colonized by Western countries such as England [British empire] where they were subjected to imperialism that was marked by efforts to spread Christianity and European economic values to indigenous societies forcibly. The start of the new imperialism of the nineteenth century marked the growth of this movement as imperial states worked hard to implement their legal, educational and political systems inside their colonies. Also forcing the colonies to embrace their societal traits such as language, and family traditions through harsh laws and colonial policies (Du Bois, 2005).

Manzoor's reference to being broken by the empire refers to the forcible actions of imperialism and colonization, while the second part of this lyric, raised by MTV, references cultural imperialism and hegemony. Naseer et. al (2014) argue that cultural

imperialism describes the process of one culture dominating another through the spread of their culture, largely via the media. They state, “Media has a direct impact on cultures by mesmerizing viewers with entertainment cultural products, fast music, popularizing different fashions, lifestyles, language, and cultures” (p. 523-524). In this way, media function as hegemonic tools for establishing the status quo in Western countries, and covertly challenging the cultural norms of non-Western societies. Manzoor wants to showcase how the second-generation immigrants who come from broken [colonized] countries were indoctrinated [raised] by Western media to fully assimilate and embrace the Western values as their own where a real member of British society would enjoy fish and chips [British] instead of tea [Asian].

The most outrageous and shocking lyrics of the series occur in the final episode. Zarina, a social influencer hired by Momtaz, presents the band as “The Bad Girls of Islam: Haramed and Dangerous.” During a series of individual interviews with each of the band members, Zarina asks challenging questions about the intersection of their punk, feminist, and Muslim identities. In the article, she twists their words and presents them as infidels of Islam. An example of Zarina’s duplicity, occurs when she interviews Bisma about being a “stay at home mother.”

“So, your husband prefers that you don’t work?” Zarina asked Bisma.

“What? No. No.” Bisma responded in surprise.

“So, you’re choosing not to work?”

“Well, yeah.”

“And is this you trying to uphold traditional Muslim value?”

Bisma was shocked by the question “What? No. No. Traditional values? No, fuck that.”

In her online article, Zarina wrote that Bisma said “Fuck traditional Muslim values” without providing the context of her answer. Manzoor made Zarina’s character be the antagonist where her role was to problematize their chosen identity against their Muslim identity and how these things are not adding up. Zarina’s article results in a social media backlash against the band. Manzoor depicts this backlash through a barrage of tweets hurling insults toward the band members asking them to “f*@& off. This is GREAT BRITAIN”, that “This is not representation… take it down! #ladyparts #fakemuslims”, making them “Just some #FAKEMUSLIMWOMEN @lady-parts”, and that they “Should be banned! #ladyparts #fakemuslims”.

Amina is the last band member to find out about Zarina’s misrepresentation of the band and discovers this through a hostile confrontation from her best friend Noor and her group of friends after they found out about her being a member of a Punk band. In the article, Zarina indicates that Amina wrote a song called Bashir with a good beard “because she is horny.” Noor and her friends thought that Amina “betrayed them” because her involvement in this band gives a negative representation that will increase “all the hate we get as Muslim women”.

In response to Zarina’s article, Saira angrily grabs her guitar and shouts for her band mates to suit up for practice. The band members suggest putting out a response to defend themselves against Zarina’s article, but Saira thought they should do it through a song she was working on called “I want to fuck a terrorist”. The band members argued that this will support Zarina’s claim of them, but Saira’s response was” If they think we

are the naughty girls of Islam desperate for attention let's give the people what they want… They will see what they want to see right?". Then, Saira wails on her guitar and belts out the following lyrics:

> I want to fuck a terrorist. I want to fuck a terrorist.
> They're sexy and tough I like when they blow up

Saira's response encompasses bell hooks oppositional gaze as she uses extremely satirical and shocking lyrics to fight back against the unjust misrepresentation of their band. bell hooks' oppositional gaze theory states that black [brown] people have the tool of looking back to challenge the power dynamic that white media uses to maintain the stereotypic images of black [brown] people in mainstream media. They do so by creating a representation of blackness in the media through developing black content, by black creators, targeted to black audiences (hooks, 1992).

Similar to bell hooks' oppositional gaze in this song Manzoor is trying to provide Muslim women the tools and agency to claim the power over their bodies. When Muslim women are mostly covered up head to toe, they can still choose to get involved in a sexual act outside marriage. To challenge the patriarchal expectation of them being quiet, polite, and innocent by singing their physical needs loud and clear using profane language such as "I want to fuck a terrorist". Though such actions are normal among Western societies, they're regarded as sinful and an act of the bad apples [Muslims].

Post the events of 9/11, Muslim men were targeted by racist white people based on their appearance. Any brown beard man was assumed to be a terrorist (aka. Muslim) and faced hostility in public. Manzoor's choice of the word terrorist in the song was to highlight the effect the media has on Westerners' perceptions of Muslims where any

media coverage will cause a wave of hate towards Muslims. Since Zarina's article labeled the band members as "The Bad Girls of Islam" why not engage in a "bad" action like sex with a "bad" Muslim man like a "terrorist" and cause their community the damage expected from them.

The use of satiric lyrics here falls under bell hooks oppositional gaze theory because humor or comedy is corrective. Satire challenges these socially inconvenient and rigid mindsets gently but firmly by making people laugh at culturally sensitive topics to push them to positively evolve and improve. Bergson and Barreca, theorists of comedy explained: "Comedy [satire] is social… Comedy is based on shared experience, attitudes, and values; creates in-groups and out-groups by mocking aberrations from the norm or the norm itself" (cited in Finney, 2004, p.6) and Manzoor does exactly that to the Muslim norms not only in the entire show but particularly in the song's lyrics.

This show resists the derogatory portrayal of Muslim women that has been perpetuated in Western media. Islam (2019) argues that "Orientalist discourses have largely shaped how Muslim women have come to be represented in western visual media as oppressed, subjugated or foreign" (p.214). However, the advent of streaming services helped reshape the media content towards more inclusivity and realistic representation of minorities including Muslims. The Muslim author and producer of *WLP* utilized this new tool to reshape the dominant images spread via orientalist narratives.

Through this positive representation, Nida Manzoor was successful in portraying Muslim women to the Western spectators by showing them actively involved in different activities that resist the dominating orientalist images. Through the use of profanity in the dialogues and the song's lyrics, the author was pushing for a more realistic and inclusive

representation of today's Muslim women. She was pushing for eliminating the taboo surrounding women's issues among the Muslim community such as honor killing, dating, and sexual desire. This will help women connect on several levels outside religious affiliation.

CHAPTER VI - CONCLUSION

> "The representation of women in the society, especially through mass media has been the most delusional act ever done on the grounds of human existence."
>
> Abhijit Naskar

It is vital that Western media becomes more inclusive and provides an open source and platform for minority groups to tell their authentic stories. Grossberg (2010) argues that cultures and identities are made and remade through tools of communication. Images and texts in the media are used to understand different cultures and identities. In this research, I sought to fill a literature gap for media representations of Muslim women by analyzing the British show *We are Lady Parts* (*WLP*). After over a century of painting Muslims in the image of "the Other", along came *We are Lady Parts* to repaint this image where the "other" is now one of us.

The concept of representation proposed by Stuart Hall brought clear implications for media and cultural studies, particularly regarding character analysis, criticism of negative representations of marginalized groups, and calling attention to the social role of stereotypes. Much of the previous literature focused on Muslim representation in general, or Muslim men, while scant attention is paid to Muslim women's representation or opinions. Such gender-imbalanced representation of members of the community can reinforce harmful gender stereotypes. With increased visibility of Muslim women in Europe and around the world, it is important to showcase their racial, ethnic, and ideological diversity. Additionally, it is necessary to understand how they navigate and

balance their multicultural identities with their religious identity in a world that does not see beyond their headscarf.

Bell hooks (2003) explains that the "dominated culture *[who]* has tried to keep us all afraid, to make us choose safety instead of risk, sameness instead of diversity. Moving through that fear, finding out what connect us, reveling in our differences; this is the process that bring us closer, that give us a world of shared values, of meaningful community" (p. 197). Nida Manzoor bravely accomplished hooks' charge to challenge hegemonic ideologies regarding representations of Muslim women, even in the face of harsh and potentially fatal consequences. She overcame her fear of being judged by her Muslim community, the fear of perpetuating a misrepresentation of them, and of failing this once in a lifetime opportunity. She chose to be risky and push through her fear as she revealed the diversity of the Muslim community. She portrayed their identities, which brought the community together to celebrate the show for its originality and authenticity. Presenting the mothers, the butchers, the smokers, the gays, and the geeks; this show was a step forward toward presenting Muslim women as dynamic and complex characters.

This research provided unique data for the representations of Muslim women and how they balanced the intersectionality of their multicultural identities. The navigated through issues of religiosity regarding their Islamic faith, while also embracing Western culture, within a largely Christian society. *WLP* breaks away from stereotypical representations of Muslim women that are simple and demeaning by giving them depth through complex intersectional identities. *WLP* shows that Muslim women can be happily married, stay-at-home mothers, self-employed, homosexual, dreamy science geeks, vaping niqabis, non-hijabis, in male dominating careers, and still claim a Muslim identity.

A qualitative textual analysis of the sitcom six episodes revealed three themes: agency, religiosity, resistance. This critical analysis shows how *WLP* contradicts the stereotypical image of Muslim women appearing oppressed and with no agency over their bodies or life decisions that has been perpetuated in Western media. It presents how diverse Muslim women's experiences and identities are despite sharing similar values. It shows how they are still their own group with separate identities, levels of religiosity, and sets of beliefs. It also exhibited how Muslim women in the West experience identity mixing, "mutliplness," and how they navigate and resists many different expectations from their family, community, or the culture writ large. Hall (2003b) argues that "we cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about 'one experience, one identity', without acknowledging its other side; the differences and discontinuities" that provides, in this case the Muslim identity, its uniqueness (p.70).

This study also highlighted the role that the humor plays in breaking the barriers of tackling taboo subjects among Muslim and Western women. Using satirical lyrics, the author Nida Manzoor, shed a light on topics that have challenged Muslim women lives. Some examples from these lyrics are: the vilification of their headscarf, societal honor killing, the association of Islam with terrorism, and being second generation Muslim immigrants.

Hall's representation theory and hooks' oppositional gaze, showcase how Nida Manzoor addresses the question of how these women navigated their intersectional identities and pursued fulfilment by chasing their dreams and maintain a strong relationship with their Islamic faith. While Manzoor's series contributes to diverse representations of Muslim women, more efforts are needed to provide a wider context to

the Muslim image, especially when serious consequences remain for women taking off their headscarves, loving who they choose, and acting without male guardianship.

> The progress that's being made by a few of us doesn't paint an overall picture of progress if most of the portrayals of Muslims on screen are either nonexistent or entrenched in those stereotypical, toxic, two-dimensional portrayals (Riz Ahmed cited in Pulver, 2021, para.3).

Religion has always been one area that is still too sensitive to ridicule in the mainstream media. Ever since the Charlie Hebdo incident is Paris, people have been questioning whether Muslim's have a sense of humor and if they can take a joke. This analysis shows that Muslims can indeed take a joke, laugh at themselves, and at others' ideas of them. This analysis shows how *We are Lady Parts* helped shatter the glass ceiling of Muslim representation and showcases a more relatable image of the numerous ways of being a Muslim woman where there is no one size fits all. Instead, there is a massive garden of funny, smart, dark, lovable women in the Muslim community.

Throughout history, people have utilized humor to push social boundaries by openly discussing traditional norms through social critiques of power structures and racism. Comedy's ability to change behaviors and practices may enable the cultural shift that our societies need. Manzoor's choice of employing the comedy genre was uniquely situated as a tool to share her view and provide an authentic and realistic representation of the challenges, and the intersectionality of Muslim women in the West. This representation is controversial not only for Western Muslims, but especially for those living in Islamic countries. This analysis of the series provides unique data to the existing

literature on humor and how it causes both social and political change around the representation of Muslim women.

With all the positive and authentic representations that Manzoor tries to cover in her first short season, there were several elements that need to be addressed. One of the most noticeable elements is the lack of white people throughout the series. The plot takes place in Britain, which is a predominantly white country. The lack of white people in city scenes and in public space is likely intentional for the purpose of showcasing Muslim actors. When white people were shown, they were mostly men (only two white female characters had minor roles in the season) and they appeared as sexist, racist and Islamophobic when encountering any of the Muslim characters. This aspect is unrealistic in terms of depicting few whites within the show as almost exclusively racist. In a sense, the author missed an opportunity to integrate these communities. However, the exclusive focus on the Muslim characters and showing people of color is likely Manzoor's attempt to fight against the White Patriarchy, as bell hooks described.

The author also romanticized the level of independency given to Muslim women where they have minimal encounters with their family members. Muslim communities are mostly collectivists. In the show, aside from Amina (the main character) none of the other characters showed any excessive interaction with their family members. Almost all the characters had minimal scenes with relatives, which contradicts the reality of Muslim women who rely heavily on their social circle. Also, the author showed that most of the characters show a lack of understanding about their religion. For example, Amina calling prayer a hobby or Ahsan not knowing the location of any mosques or the name of any imams in his predominantly Muslim community. According to Hjarvard (2007) "The

increased presence of religious themes in the media… *[is]* a negation of the ideas that secularization is the hallmark of high modernity" (p.3). This could be Manzoor's approach to provide more secular and modern interpretations on what constitutes the 21st century Muslim woman.

WLP is only a series with six episodes, which leaves a limited airtime to cover the huge diversity of such a big population like Muslims and the roles that Muslim women play within that community. With that, the author chose to depict the only married main character in the show as a stay-at-home mother, though admittingly doing it by choice, will continue to perpetuate the domestic image associated with Muslim mothers.

Limitations and Future Studies

First, I would like to admit that my research was biased as I am a Muslim woman living in the West and can identify with almost every character of the show which was the drive behind my interest in this show. As a member of a distinct gender, race, religion, culture, marital status and sexual preference, my analysis of the texts doesn't match with a diverse audience. This bias can lead to misreading of the findings that reflect my own experience, values and assumptions, rather than those of those more diverse audience. However, I do believe that my unique reading of the show as a Muslim woman is a vital analytical instrument in this cultural research and to Muslim Feminist research.

Second, this research data is limited by the fact it only examined one show with one season. Therefore, the data cannot be representative of the fuller media landscape. In the future, scholars should examine the unique ways sexuality intercepts Muslim women's religious experiences and identity. This study found a scarcity in research about

Muslim LGBTQIA+ in general and around women of that group in particular. Further research is required to examine married Muslim women's representation outside their household setting to provide a more diverse look on how they manage to have a successful career and fulfilling family life. I would encourage future scholars to look into how Muslim women facilitate humor to discuss their sexuality, martial status, their career choices, and their family and community expectations of them. There are plethora of areas that need to be examined by scholars when it comes to Muslim women's representation in the media, more than this paper can recommend.

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