Little Mosque, Big Ambitions:
Intersections Between Comedy and Multiculturalism in *Little Mosque on the Prairie*

by

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the relationship between comedy and multiculturalism by considering what many commentators have called the first Muslim sitcom, the Canadian series *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (*Little Mosque*). While past studies have examined various aspects of *Little Mosque,* this project contributes uniquely to the conversation by focusing on the importance of comedy in delivering social commentary and using critical humour studies to analyze the series. While the field of humour studies tends to emphasize comedy's positive qualities, the sub-field of critical humour studies questions this assumption and instead examines how humour exists within complex systems of power, ideology, and culture. When *Little Mosque* debuted in 2007, it was novel because the majority of its characters were Muslim, a first on North American screens, and, moreover, depicted diversity within both that religious community and rural Canada. These elements offer a fertile place to study how the series depicts multiculturalism using comedy, particularly in the Canadian context. This dissertation fills a gap in existing studies by contending that the show's use of humour factors heavily into how the series delivered social commentary. Following an introduction of that outlines the theoretical framework and methodology, Chapter 1 of this thesis looks at the historical and cultural context of *Little Mosque.* Here, it is argued that Canada's history of multicultural policies, as well as its comedic culture, provided a uniquely suitable context to produce the series. In Chapter 2, *Little Mosque* is analyzed as it relates to the genre of sitcom television. With respect to offering social commentary, the sitcom is traditionally

thought to be an uncontroversial (and often conservative) genre, which runs counter to many of the aims *Little Mosque*'s producers had for the series. Accordingly, this chapter analyzes the first three seasons of the series, arguing that sitcom conventions amplify some types of social commentary while suppressing others. In the final section, Chapter 3, investigates how *Little Mosque*'s producers aimed to change the trajectory of the series in seasons four through six by adding more conflict to the storylines. Here, an argument is made concerning how cultural attitudes regarding humour shape the types of social commentary *Little Mosque* could make about racism, social inclusion, and multiculturalism. Based on this analysis, a final case is presented, contending that *Little Mosque* works more as a reflection of societal attitudes than it does to modify them. Ultimately, this allows for an appreciation for how *Little Mosque* is, and will continue to be, a piece of social commentary, albeit one that demands careful attention to how humour changes the subtleties of said commentary.

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Introduction

When *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (*Little Mosque*) debuted on Canadian airwaves on January 7, 2007, the sitcom carried both ambitious and unusual expectations for a TV comedy. Heralded by many in the media (e.g., Carter; Chideya) as the first Muslim sitcom, the series was widely discussed by news outlets, intellectuals, and viewing audiences alike, each curious about the first North American show to feature a cast of predominantly Muslim characters. In many ways, *Little Mosque* was a rather ordinary sitcom: it featured many familiar comedic tropes, the plotlines followed the standard sitcom model, and the series cultivated a "sitcom sentimentality" that attempted to affect the emotions of the audience in an upbeat and lighthearted way. However, amongst all these expected and conventional features, *Little Mosque* had an exceptionally notable element that was celebrated in the tagline for its first season: "a little Muslim twist."

When distilled to its core elements, this thesis concerns the meanings of *Little Mosque*'s "little twist" and its effects on the show's ability to produce relevant social commentary. While there are numerous ways one might interpret the meaning of the word "twist," this project contends that in order to understand the series' social importance, one must develop an appreciation for its endeavours to offer poignant social commentary through the genre of the sitcom, which, based on first impressions, may seem ill-suited to do so. Accordingly, this dissertation considers how *Little Mosque* relied on well-trodden comedy and sitcom tropes to attract viewing audiences while simultaneously trying to defy those same conventions by adding a dimension of political

and social significance. The following section outlines how I intend to answer the core question of this thesis: how does humour theory offer new perspectives from which to understand the depth and types of social commentary delivered by *Little Mosque*?

The introduction to this project begins by contextualizing the primary text, *Little Mosque,* offering background on the show, and providing justification as to why it is a salient site for research. It continues with a review of other studies on the subject and an outline of the theoretical and methodological frameworks of this study, and concludes with a presentation of the research objectives of this thesis.

Figure 1: Season One advertising (IMDb, "Little Mosque").

The Site of Analysis

Little Mosque (2007-12) is the creation of Canadian writer, documentary filmmaker, and journalist Zarqa Nawaz. Before creating *Little Mosque,* Nawaz rose to prominence with her documentary *Me and the Mosque,* which examined Muslim women's relations to

Islam's principal places of worship, mosques. Inspired by the film's success, Nawaz, a Muslim herself, reflected on her own life experiences and realized they were not depicted in mainstream media, inspiring her to create a comedy featuring Muslims as the central characters, a novel approach in North America. Initially, Nawaz wrote a satirical script that attempted to lampoon many of the most conspicuous and damaging stereotypes about Islam head-on, tackling heated issues like terrorism. In her 2014 book *Laughing all the Way to the Mosque,* she recalls how a prominent TV producer received her script during a pitch meeting,

> [The producer:] "This is the single worst pitch I've heard in my entire career," he told me.
>
> "But it's a very funny script," I protested.
>
> "Do you even remember 9/11?"
>
> "Of course."
>
> "Then you can't be serious about this screenplay," said the producer, exasperated. "You have written the one script that is not producible in the seeing world. You can't make a comedy about a Muslim hijacking a plane!" (*Laughing All the Way to the Mosque* 178)

Although this interaction with the producer was disheartening for Nawaz, it was crucial because it revealed the need for a different tactic. The interaction shifted Nawaz's focus; instead of trying to dispel stereotypes about Islam by attacking society's most insidious

misconceptions, she realized that her comedy needed to be more light-hearted and accessible to broad audiences (Nawaz, “I Made Irreverent Art about Muslims.”).

Comedy, of course, is multifaceted and its usage offers the ability to express a wide range of ideas and opinions. Although the distinction might initially seem subtle, the shift from a show that “pushed the boundaries,” for instance, one about a plane hijacker, to one that relied on drawing comedy from the mundane quirks of everyday life, such as what one does if the coffee in one’s new town is not as good as it was “back home,” was vital in getting *Little Mosque* a greenlight for production. After her initial pitch, Nawaz later noted, "Comedy comes out of the quirks and foibles of everyday life" (qtd. in Goldenberg), adding in another interview that “I want the broader society to look at us as normal, with the same issues and concerns as anyone else [...] We’re just as much a part of the Canadian fabric as anyone else” (qtd. in Mason).

Nawaz’s experiences getting the show greenlit set the groundwork for what was to become *Little Mosque*. In many respects, the sitcom was, like most others, created for entertainment, network ratings, advertising dollars, and potential syndication. Even so, its emphasis on casting Muslim characters in a new, more favourable light and its attempt to educate audiences differentiated it from other comedies at the time. These differences did not go unnoticed; as social justice scholar Ozlem Sensoy observed:

> [*Little Mosque*] also grew out of a particular social moment, 9/11, and had these pedagogical goals—teaching white folks about a different kind of Muslim person

> in the context in which Muslim men had become the new brute, the new group to be feared. (qtd. in Menon)

When *Little Mosque* arrived on the small screen, it was regularly referred to as the first Muslim sitcom in North America (e.g., MacFarquhar; Anderson; Goldenberg). The term *Muslim sitcom* is not particularly uncommon, although it is not especially well defined or understood either. Generally speaking, if most of the characters in a series identify as Muslim and have storylines that pertain to that identity, the series is labelled a Muslim sitcom.[1] For example, even though *Little Mosque* takes place in the sleepy rural town of Mercy, Saskatchewan, it is considered a Muslim sitcom for two reasons: most of the characters in the show are practicing Muslims, while non-Muslims play supporting roles. Also, due to the more prominent representations of Muslim characters in the series, many of the storylines explored how Islam fit into the traditionally Anglican farming community of Mercy, rather than how one individual Muslim character fit into the dominant culture, for example, how the character of Abed fit into the college setting of *Community*. These storylines included issues uniquely faced by the community and depictions of customs and culturally held beliefs. Most if not all of the series takes place in the town of Mercy, and it begins with a "fish out of water" story. Amaar, a young, urban

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[1] In addition to *Little Mosque*, other examples include *Citizen Khan* (2012-16), *Here Come the Habibs* (2016-17), and the more recent *Unfair & Ugly* (2018). By contrast, *Aliens in America* (2007-08) is not often called a Muslim sitcom, because even though the protagonist is a devout follower of Islam, the surrounding cast is emphatically Christian; thus, it is more often characterized as a "fish out of water" story.

imam, moves to Mercy from the big city of Toronto, and when he arrives in the small town, he finds that his congregation is facing many difficulties, chiefly that they are secretly meeting inside the local Anglican church because they do not have a mosque of their own. Using Amaar's arrival as a point of departure, the series builds a fictional world of quirky characters in ways that feel affably familiar to viewers of the sitcom genre.

In the mid-2000s, the mere mention of a comedy celebrating Islam was enough to garner news coverage. Paula Zahn, an anchor for the American news network CNN, dedicated an entire segment of her show to *Little Mosque,* shortly before its debut: "A little while earlier on," began Zahn, transitioning out of a commercial break,

> we showed you how angry passions come out in the open when some people feel threatened by their Muslim neighbours. But can intolerance like that ever be funny? Well, one Muslim filmmaker says "yes it can," and she actually wants to put the "fun" back into fundamentalism. ("Barriers Broken in Congress; Muslims in America")

In the segment that followed, Zahn briefly highlighted many themes familiar in the news cycle concerning *Little Mosque.* Some of the questions she raised include: how inclusive are communities to the Muslims living within them? How can comedy shift society's perception of Islam? Is using sitcom TV a viable strategy for the education of audiences and reducing prejudices in the viewership? Moreover, Zahn's coverage was illustrative of a larger trend in news coverage, with substantial articles about the series on major international outlets, including NPR ("Canada Chuckles at 'Little Mosque on the

Prairie'"), the New York Times ("'Little Mosque' Defuses Hate with Humor"), and the BBC ("Muslim Sitcom Debuts in Canada").

Early news coverage of *Little Mosque* provided a gift to the series in the form of free advertising and cache in a television market that tends to prefer flashier, more significant budget offerings from south of the border. The series' burgeoning fame translated into immediate success in the ratings.[2] *Little Mosque* was a monumental success; nearly 2.1 million people tuned in for the debut, the most for a Canadian series since *Anne of Green Gables* premiered in 1985, more than two decades earlier (Canadian Press). Even though initial numbers dipped after the debut, audiences kept watching the series. The show ran for six seasons, concluding in 2012 after having produced ninety episodes and one holiday special. Along the way, the series also collected several awards, including a Gemini Award[3] (The Canada Award) for its depiction of multiculturalism, as well as the international Search for Common Ground Award. Perhaps a more impressive marker of commercial success, the series was a hit in syndication, with networks in more than ninety countries buying the rights to air the show (Conway, "Little Mosque on the Prairie and the Challenges of Distribution").

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[2] In the first season of the show, the viewship numbers hovered around 1 million, with the first episode garnering more than 2 million, which translated into the CBC's most watched premiere in a decade. After the first season, Canadian viewership was around 500,000, a strong number for a domestic audience (MacDonald).

[3] The Gemini Awards, like the better-known American Emmy Awards, celebrated achievement in television.

Justification for Research

When *Little Mosque* premiered, critics and audiences alike had the sense of something different about it as compared to other comedies. Where this sense came from is little mystery; in the post-9/11 era, tensions were high. Ostensibly, *Little Mosque* offered a potential source of respite, an opportunity to ease tension through laughter. The *New York Times* was typical in their reporting on the series, opining, "In an earnest manner not atypical of Canadians, one goal of the show is to explain Muslim behaviour, or at least make Muslims seem less peculiar, much as humour about Jews, Italians or gays helped those groups assimilate" (MacFarquhar). For many people, a Muslim comedy, such as *Little Mosque,* on mainstream North American television represented the next logical step in easing post-9/11 racial tensions, taking what was often considered the most vilified visible minority of the era and reaching the broader society through the shared language of laughter.

Even so, there are challenges with the notion of laughter acting as a shared language. Although it is true that all cultures laugh, *what* people laugh at is highly variable and is strongly influenced by cultural norms, beliefs, and values (Martin 26). Moreover, what might spark a chuckle in one community might trigger outrage in another. Recent history demonstrates that Muslims have suffered because of a stereotype that they cannot "take a joke" (Bloomer and Ismail; Weaver, "A Rhetorical Discourse Analysis of Online Anti-Muslim and Anti-Semitic Jokes"). This stereotype that Muslims lack a sense of humour, of course, carries certain normative beliefs about the importance

of humour as a personal trait. For instance, many have made the case that if an individual or group is thought to lack a sense of humour, they also lack emotional intelligence more broadly (Yip and Martin; Lefcourt). Some historians of social thought have gone so far as to claim that in American culture, a person lacking a sense of humour is "not simply unpleasant or bad company, but is literally an incomplete person" (Wickberg 85).Therefore, characterizing a group as deficient in humour is part and parcel to broader patterns of discrimination (Khan; The Economist Staff Writer).

Mel Brooks' 2005 film *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World* provides a salient example of people wondering if Islamic communities lack a sense of humour. The movie tells the story of Al Brooks, based loosely on the director himself, who is tasked by the American government to interact with Muslims in India and Pakistan, helped by his Muslim assistant, Maya. Having tried to understand the Muslim world via normal channels such as investigations and spying, the government wants to try something new: humour. Al is commissioned to write a 500-page report on the topic. While the film does not wholly suggest that Muslims lack humour, *per se*, it is nonetheless premised on the belief that

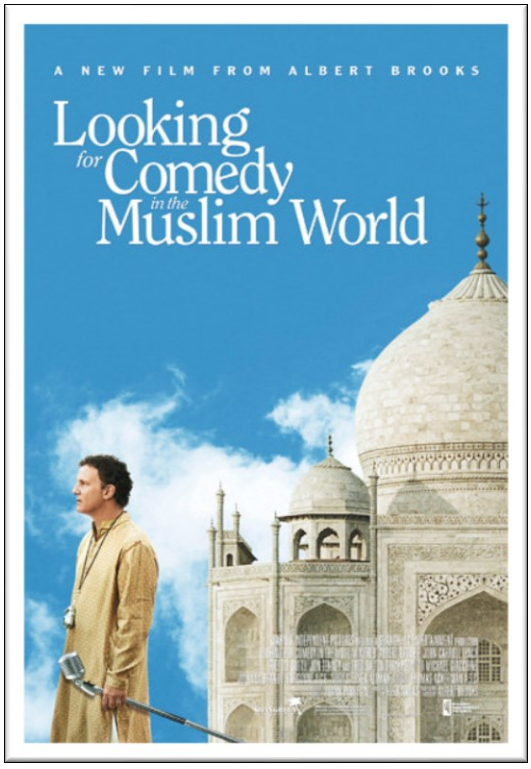

Figure 2: *Looking for Comedy in the Muslim World* film poster (Brooks).

Muslims and Americans will generally fail to share comic tastes. In one scene, Al performs some standup for a local audience, telling a rather feeble joke: “Why is there no Halloween in India? They took away the Gandhi” (Brooks). In his typically thoughtful manner, critic Roger Ebert reasoned that the film’s joke had less to do with whether other cultures had a sense of humour than it did with North American audiences’ ability to show cultural sensitivity and awareness reliably:

> The film never identifies a Muslim (or Hindu) sense of humor, but then again Brooks never does anything funny, so maybe that's why. Of course, they have a sense of humor in India, because the best-selling English-language novelist in the country is P.G. Wodehouse. If you don't know who Wodehouse was, that's all right, you didn't know who Gandhi was, either. If you knew who Gandhi was but still don't get the Halloween joke, that may have been because you were pronouncing "Gandhi" correctly. (Ebert)

The movie, in the end, is an ill-conceived post-9/11 proxy measure of the relatability of Muslims to the typical North American audience, a measure that equates humour with being relatable and good-natured. However, it offers an illustration of some of the sentiments that existed at the time.

As Yasmeen Khan points out in “Does Islam Have a Sense of Humour?” the past decade has witnessed a protracted effort to challenge this misled belief that Islam dislikes comedy. According to comedy fan Tosifa Mustafa, "There's nothing better than having a laugh. I love going to see comedy, but people seem to have this impression that Muslims

and comedy don't go together; that somehow we can't reconcile humour with our faith" (qtd. in Khan). *Little Mosque*, of course, is a notable example of a comedy that challenges the wayward belief that Muslims lack a sense of humour.

However, events such as the *Jyllands-Posten* Muhammad cartoons controversy in Denmark in 2005 and the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks in France in 2015 can make it difficult for those unfamiliar with Islam to discern contextually dependent and highly political incidents from the whole. As is expected in any large and diverse group, the Islamic community is varied in their opinions on politics, music, and other things, including comedy (Amarasingam; Michael). Karl-Heinz Ott and Bernard Schweizer performed an empirical study comparing individuals from different religious backgrounds. Based on their results, they concluded that "the perception that Islam generally predisposes its followers against humour must be qualified and largely rejected: considering all answers, the average funniness rating of the Muslims is similar to Non-practicing, Atheists, and Agnostics, and it surpasses Christians" (27). Nevertheless, studies do not necessarily change public perception, and there is a lingering sentiment that Muslims "can't take a joke."[4] Nawaz was intimately aware of such stereotypes when developing *Little Mosque*. She addressed this as the series premiered, tapping into the zeitgeist by remarking, "Nobody has done a comedy about Muslims before, so [audiences] are not sure how to

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[4] There is a growing body of literature that suggests that as more Muslims pursue careers in comedy, this belief that Muslims "can't take a joke" is slowly fading (Hirzalla and Zoonen; Zimbardo), although this was not the case when *Little Mosque* began.

take it, […] Some non-Muslims wonder, 'Are we allowed to laugh?'" (qtd. in MacFarquhar). More crucially, the pertinent question prompted by Nawaz's remark is better articulated as follows: how can comedy be used as a tool of social inclusion?

This thesis aims to gain a better understanding of whether *Little Mosque*'s unique mixture of lighthearted sitcom humour and Islamic themes opened productive spaces for social commentary concerning multiculturalism and social inclusion or, in contrast, if it merely rearticulated current realities in sitcom form. While some scholars have found that *Little Mosque* altered the political and cultural landscape by making it more inclusive (Vukasovich; Albański; Eid and Khan), others wonder if the change is more superficial than substantial (Osborne; Doyle, "Goodbye, *Little Mosque*"; Cañas). A nuanced approach to these various positions is essential in considering why these differences exist. The following section discusses earlier literature on *Little Mosque*, considering different points of view and varying opinions, and identifying a gap regarding appreciating the series from the perspective of humour studies.

Existing Research on *Little Mosque*

This section provides a summary of various crucial trends in the existing literature on *Little Mosque on the Prairie* and the key ideas that can be drawn from those trends. This review then leads into a perspective that can benefit from closer attention: humour studies.

Aside from humour studies, the least developed field of study about *Little Mosque* is its educational elements. Social psychologists Sohad Murrar and Markus Brauer have

considered how the series functioned as "entertainment-education," which they describe as "television, radio, theater, literature, and other media to alter consumers' attitudes and behaviors in desirable ways by embedding persuasive messages in the narrative" (1). Although they recognize potential in this area, they also note that it has not been studied extensively. Using a representative pool of participants, Murrar and Brauer found that those who watched *Little Mosque* displayed fewer prejudicial feelings towards Muslims (17), although they also expressed concerns about who would be attracted to this style of series, as it might not be to everyone's taste. Understandably, Murrer and Brauer express worry that those potential audience members who may hold prejudicial views would not find the show initially appealing and abstain from viewing in the first place (19). Siyin Liang, a scholar in the field of adult education, explored the viability of *Little Mosque* as a tool for international students from China to learn more about Canadian society and multiculturalism. While Liang found *Little Mosque* promising as a tool for integration into Canadian society, she raised concerns that many learners may lack the capacities to critique and find the nuance in such texts (99). Neither study, however, features a critical discussion of the role of humour. For instance, Murrer and Brauer do not mention how a comedic discourse can alter the way individuals understand media messaging. Liang's work, in contrast, is more representative of other studies on *Little Mosque,* in that it infrequently mentions comedy and humour, but it fails to differentiate how distinctive styles of comedy can alter how ideas are received and interpreted. For instance, even a passing familiarity with various comedy styles tells us that an off-hand remark delivered

sarcastically is markedly different from a message delivered in a carefully crafted stand-up routine or, for that matter, a serious and sincere newscast (Sankey): while themes, and even the words uttered, may remain consistent, humorous inflection changes how the message is understood. Accordingly, considering comedic techniques and examining the influence of humour in the series will meaningfully contribute to the scholarship on *Little Mosque*'s social commentary.

Another issue discussed in the literature on *Little Mosque* relates to the production of the show. The preeminent scholar in this area is Kyle Conway, who began his study of *Little Mosque* with a series of blog posts that were later adapted into a much longer book project, *Little Mosque on the Prairie and the Paradoxes of Cultural Translation.* Conway's work is comprehensive and exceptional in many respects; in particular, his structural analysis of how *Little Mosque* found production opportunities in Canada based on exhibiting elements of multiculturalism provides valuable insights:

> *Little Mosque* demonstrated to policy-makers and members of Parliament—people whose interpretations of multiculturalism carried weight—that the CBC was upholding its mandate. That is, the policy's influence was visible in the effect it had on network executives' decisions about whether to produce or renew the program. ("Little Mosque, Small Screen" 652)

In his book, Conway relies on the concept of saleable diversity, which he defines as emphasizing the universal human traits of a particular group, rather than what makes a group unique, to be more relatable to the general public (Conway, *Little Mosque on the*

Prairie). To his credit, Conway's work is wide-ranging, and although it is mostly in the area of communications and market demands, he does briefly address the sitcom genre and the series' reliance on comedy as essential to its success. In particular, he rightly suggests that humour can make unfamiliar ideas, such as Islamic culture for many non-Muslims, more understood and accepted. But even though Conway identifies these relationships between humour and understanding the series, the scope of his work does not allow for an in-depth investigation of how these relationships function. What needs to be extended from Conway's work is articulating the role of humour in relation to these wide-ranging themes.

Christopher Cwynar and Sarah Matheson look at *Little Mosque* as an example of the sitcom genre. Cwynar posits that the sitcom opened space within the media for *Little Mosque* as both locally relevant and pertinent outside of Canada. He suggests that *Little Mosque* represents an attempt to show Canadian multiculturalism within a medium that is overdetermined by American cultural industries (42). Ultimately, however, his work seems to be more focused on the genre of the sitcom than specifically on *Little Mosque,* with the latter being used as a robust example of the former. Matheson takes a different but related approach, focusing more on how the show used sitcom TV to represent individuals rather than broad groups and national interests. In doing so, she makes a compelling case for why *Little Mosque* is both celebrated for its depiction of multiculturalism and criticized for not being nuanced enough in that depiction and, consequently, normalizing certain aspects of hegemonic multiculturalism.

The final group of studies focuses on issues of cultural representation. Since *Little Mosque* was ground-breaking in its portrayals of Muslim characters on primetime television, many scholars from fields such as religious studies, political science, and sociology looked at a medium they typically would not have explored. Much of the academic work on *Little Mosque* investigates the religious authenticity of the show. Alternatively, academics often reflect on the scope and range of the Muslim identities represented in the show, considering the extent to which it uses stereotypes and stock characters (e.g., Hussain; Hirji; S. Kassam; Eid and Khan). The central concerns in both such approaches are based on the "accuracy" of the series' depictions of fundamental tenets of Islam. For instance, Faiza Hirji raises concerns that "all of [*Little Mosque*'s] Muslims seem to practise the same way—if there are Sunnis and Shias, who would differ in their understanding of how an imam is appointed, or in the specifics of their prayers, this is not made apparent" (44). This type of criticism is not novel; this sort of observation has been made earlier about how expressing only parts of one's cultural identity is, at best, a difficult compromise. Nasrin Rahimieh notes that for one significant minority group represented in *Little Mosque*, Persians, "we find ourselves either in a playful act of cross-dressing, or an oppressive masquerade which threatens to erase our specificities" (167). Rahimieh's point is well taken, and strong parallels can be made to *Little Mosque* concerning Muslims in a wider sense. In this vein, Shelina Kassam was damning in her appraisal of the show's underutilized potential, claiming that

> despite its [commercial] success, longevity and desire to be quasi-educational, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* does not deliver on its considerable potential to articulate a more nuanced politics of representation. The sitcom, in my view, reaffirms key norms, engages in politics of authenticity, and reinforces hegemonic messages both within Muslim communities and Canadian society. (623)[5]

While accurate in some respects, Kassam's analysis stops short of explaining how sitcoms function, and if *Little Mosque* challenges us to think about sitcom humour in a new way. In other words, it is not enough to understand *that* humour and sitcoms reproduce hegemony; attention should also be paid to *how* the medium does so and, further, if it is possible for the genre to be understood and utilized differently, as *Little Mosque*'s producers intended.

This literature review identifies limitations that stem in part from an incomplete understanding of how comedy alters a text and the types of social commentary it can offer. It is valuable to observe themes, ideas, and social relevancy as presented in *Little Mosque,* but examining how these themes take on different ideological facets when represented in comedy brings another level of understanding to the discussion. Sandra Cañas concluded her analysis of *Little Mosque* on a point that I intend to address in greater detail throughout this thesis:

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[5] I use the term "Muslim community" to refer to peoples sharing a common faith. I do not wish to suggest that these peoples are otherwise homogeneous or without ample diversity.

> Perhaps this [left out complexity] is the political limitation of the professed multiculturalism of the series: the form of the cultural text—a television comedy—can only use satire, parody, and mimicry in comedic ways that, while challenging the Orientalist discourse of the Muslim Other, *produces its own silences*. (209; emphasis added)

Without being overly critical of Cañas, I identify several questions that have not yet been considered: what are these ideological silences? How does comedy produce them? What does this reflectively say about *Little Mosque*'s ability to provide social commentary more broadly? Although perhaps incidental, Cañas' observation is telling; much is left to be said about how humour adds a twist to our appreciation of a cultural text.

As Cañas notes, Edward Said's notion of Orientalism sheds additional light on how *Little Mosque* can be interpreted. Said, building on Michel Foucault's notion of discourse, argues that patronizing representations of the East were historically constructed to serve imperialist agendas. As such, the Orientalism uses fictional depictions and stereotypes of the East, creating a non-Western (or, perhaps more aptly, non-European) Other that is weaker, more irrational, and exotic than its counterpart. Said makes this point rather poignantly, discussing how Arabs are too-often depicted in the media,

> In newsreels or news- photos, the Arab is always shown in large numbers. No individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences. Most of the pictures

> represent mass rage and misery, or irrational (hence hopelessly eccentric) gestures. Lurking behind all of these images is the menace of jihad. (285)

Cañas rightly identifies that *Little Mosque* challenges these stereotypes, but also correctly notes that challenging these stereotypes have their own set of limitations. Media scholar Jennifer Chao expands on these ideas by arguing that by resisting the stereotypes outlined by Said, *Little Mosque* falls victim to a binary reduction that is familiar to readers of Said. She contends that show strikes a compromise between drawing on a familiar binary but, ultimately, failing to rebuke the issues Said identified decades earlier,

> Much is gained for Muslims in being made funny and banal, but something may also be lost. In its eagerness to remedy a belligerent post-9/11 visuality Little Mosque also has to render Muslim identities and Islam' safe' and acceptable for a Western and later global audience. (41)

Ironically, Chao's main contention is *that Little Mosque* never entirely dispels Muslim stereotypes identified by Said, but by challenging them, the show also reaffirms their existence. Chao's analysis shows that the political subtext of the series equates "good" Muslims with those who have successfully integrated into Canadian society. So, while the series can oppose various damaging stereotypes, it also relies on those very same stereotypes: that there necessarily needs to exist the category of "bad" Muslims that are not depicted in the series. Therein lies a limitation of the show, insofar that while the series may "normalize" Muslims, it does so only on the precondition that this normalization is through the lens of Western ideals. As she concludes,

> When this [normalization] is accomplished visually it adopts an oppositional stance against the previously-hostile visual legacy. However, it also reveals that these identities can be made ordinary only because they are shown to be compatible with a Western and secular worldview. In the process the show reinforces Western secular hegemony rather than problematising it. (42)

In other words, while *Little Mosque* looks to challenge longstanding issues stemming from Orientalism, it inadvertently reaffirms its core tenet, that the West is superior to the East.

While this section covers much of how *Little Mosque* has been explored, there is still much to be said about the series. In particular, scholars have so far paid little attention to how the series functions comically, particularly concerning how comedy frames social and political commentary. The upcoming section looks at these issues more directly, considering the theoretical considerations for the project at hand.

Theoretical Considerations

General Motivations

This thesis draws on aspects of cultural studies, a field that seems intuitive on the surface. Cultural studies, however, approaches the study of culture in a particular way. For present purposes, this thesis is part of a tradition reaching back to the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) at the University of Birmingham, established in 1964 under the leadership of Richard Hoggart. What made the CCCS notable was its focus on popular culture and everyday life. While there were others who studied such topics,

the CCCS offered a space in which similarly interested scholars could collaborate. Moreover, because the CCCS focused more on themes and topics than on approaches and methodologies, scholars from various disciplines helped shape cultural studies' eclectic quality; a wide variety of analytical approaches, including literary studies, sociology, psychology, semiotics, to name only a few, fall under the umbrella of cultural studies.

Broadly speaking, the CCCS was part of a more substantial shift in academia that placed a higher value on studying mass and pop culture. Earlier theorists of pop culture, such as F.R. Leavis, Matthew Arnold, and Theodor Adorno, often treated pop culture with disdain, regarding it as culturally inferior to more "refined" forms such as classical music and canonical literature. Underlying their dislike of pop culture was the belief that it failed to cultivate the "right" attributes in a person. Worthwhile culture, in the eyes of Arnold, was "the best that has been thought and said in the world" (8), and pop culture, which was made to be accessible, enjoyable, and often disposable, did not cultivate well-rounded individuals. It was, in every sense, an elitist attitude that was rooted in the belief that pop culture was made primarily to placate the working classes and purposefully keep them from actualizing their full potential. Hoggart, however, marks a shift in tone. In discussing multiple meanings for a cultural object, for instance, he outlined his belief that audiences understand pop culture beyond the dominant messages put forth by the culture industry:

> we have to try and see beyond the habits to what the habits stand for, to see through the statements to what the statements really mean (which may be the

> opposite of the statements themselves), to detect the differing pressures of emotion behind idiomatic phrases and ritualistic observances … [And to see the way] mass publications [for example] connect with commonly accepted attitudes, how they are altering those attitudes, and how they are meeting resistance. (qtd. in J. Storey 58)

Attitudes such as Hoggart's were a sea-change in studying popular culture, and were built on by other members of the CCCS such as Stuart Hall, Angela McRobbie, and Paul Gilroy. Though their techniques and methods of studying culture varied, there were common threads in their approaches to cultural studies that are still relevant today. Cultural studies is not value-neutral; they privilege particular views and highlight issues of class, gender, race, and other factors. Ziauddin Sardar identifies five critical attributes of cultural studies: examining cultural practices as they relate to issues of power and dominance; understanding the social and political contexts from which culture arises; understanding and challenging the divisions between localized and universal knowledge; making ethical evaluations of culture; and using pop culture as a place of both analysis and political action (12).

Cultural studies is constituted more by its general motivations than its specific methods, so that comparative literature fits well within the aims of cultural studies. Although comparative literature may, at first glance, sound as if it ought to focus on the written word, this is not necessarily the case. Comparativist Hans Saussy explains that comparative literature is a fluid field that is more invested in locating relevant objects of

study than it is deepening the understanding of one text in isolation. For Saussy, comparative literature is "[r]eceptive to changing definitions of 'literature' to a degree unmatched but any other literary field, and also apt to reconsider its assumptions in response to newly prominent areas" (12), and television has a place within this literature because literariness extends to whatever can be read textually, "even the Socratic dialogues of Archie and Edith Bunker" (17).[6]

Comparative literature and cultural studies are similar in their valuing of works that, in generations past, would fly under the canonical radar. Both recognize that there is no inherent value in the distinction between what might otherwise be called "high art" and "low art." For Fedwa Malti-Douglas, what matters is one's ability to thoughtfully use theoretical models in new places and unexpected ways, "beyond the verbal word into a visual universe … beyond what we normally define as literature into a wider variety of texts" (175). Calling it a "wonderful kaleidoscope," she reasons that "high art can be analyzed alongside cinema, which can be analyzed alongside the comic strip, which can be analyzed alongside the written word" (182).

Little Mosque fits the above criteria insofar as it represents a rich text that appeals to both cultural studies and comparative literature. Based on the thoughts of Marshall Brown, the series has the additional benefit of moving into an area of comparative literature that presently demands more attention: humour. Brown, like Billig, noticed

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[6] The Bunkers were the star couple of the classic sitcom *All in the Family* (1971-79), who were known for their theatrical (and funny) bickering.

that quite often "serious" works are privileged over more "light-hearted" ones. Brown makes the case, with which I agree, that texts are naturally multifaceted in meaning, particularly those that rely on humour. Accordingly, he makes a case for better understanding comedy in a way that resonates with this study:

> It behooves us to be mindful that humor translates worse than anything else. (The English translators of Freud's study of humor had to find substitute jokes.) That is true interculturally and interdiaclectically. One guy's joke is another man's slur. But the arrow points both ways. If each culture (each group, each individual, each moment) has a way of making meaning, they also all have to deflate meaning, of mimicking their colonizers, their bosses. (256)

Little Mosque has many of the qualities that Brown speaks about; in particular, the series looks at ways that meaning is made, challenged, and reinforced through multiple understandings of culture.

The Specifics of Theorizing Little Mosque

As is evident in the literature review, little attention has been paid to understanding *Little Mosque* from a humour studies perspective. This lack of consideration of humour theory is not new; scholars in this relatively small field have observed this trend for many years. It was only twenty-five years ago that, in *Taking Laughter Seriously,* Jerry Palmer made a case for academics to more carefully consider the intricacies in comedy: "Taking humour seriously: the paradox is striking. Why take

humour seriously at all?" (1). The study of humour has progressed in the years since Palmer's book, though many of the developments in this field have been relatively recent.

Humour, like the weather, is subjective: some people love the intense heat of the summer sun while others prefer a cool autumn day. Also like the weather, humour is not a location but is a circumstance that creates and shapes feelings. Noël Carroll suggests linkages between experiences, and he identifies the comic experience as, effectively, an emotional state:

> When one is joyful, for example, everything takes on a happy cast. The grumpy old man next door appears quaint rather than nasty. Analogously, sustained comic amusement can put us in a comic mood, one in which we perceive something incongruous in everything that comes our way. (57)

Carroll's reference to seeing the incongruity in everything we encounter is an important aspect of humour theory. For the purpose of this project, it is worthwhile to more concretely describe these main theories and explain how they were utilized in *Little Mosque*.

A simple way to think about humour is to analyze what elicits a state of comic amusement and work backwards. Following this logic, humour is composed of the features of the objects of comic amusement that incite that state (Carroll 8). The main theories of what spurs comic amusement are superiority, relief, play, and incongruity. The superiority theory is often the starting point in discussions of humour because its philosophical roots can be traced back the furthest. The ancient Greek thinkers were

notoriously distrustful of laughter. Plato argued that comedy should be tightly controlled in an ideal state so as not to undermine the earnest business of politics (*Laws* 7: 816e). Not alone, Aristotle, Epictetus, and others of the era shared similar views about the precursory beliefs to the formalized superiority theory, which evolved later. This formalization is typically associated with western philosophy during the seventeenth century, notably the works of Thomas Hobbes and Rene Descartes. Holding characteristically pessimistic views of humanity in general, these thinkers regarded laughter as a signal of the ill-intentions of humour; in short, humour came from a deprived position because people were, simply put, flawed and coming from an unstable place. Hobbes, for instance, said of humour:

> Sudden glory is the passion which makes those grimaces called laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleases them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves…And therefore much laughter at the defects of others, is a sign of pusillanimity. (Part I, chap. 6)

The notion that humour is at the expense of someone or something, even our former selves, is central to the superiority theory. Put succinctly, laughter expresses a feeling of superiority relative to whatever is the cause of the laughter—other people, the laugher him/herself, or memories of a different event.

In many circumstances, one can readily see the applicability and appeal of superiority theory. Someone slipping on a banana peel—a cliché of slapstick comedy—is

a classic example. That said, there are circumstances to which the superiority theory seems ill-fitted. It is possible, for instance, to draw on counter-examples from slapstick:

> In the silent movies of Charlie Chaplin, Harold Lloyd, and Buster Keaton, the hero is often trapped in a situation where he looks doomed. But then he escapes with a clever acrobatic stunt that we would not have thought of, much less been able to perform. Laughing at such scenes does not seem to require that we compare ourselves with the hero; and if we do make such a comparison, we do not find ourselves superior. (Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor")

Relief theory can help explain instances of humour for which the superiority theory seems poorly suited. In relief theory, humour arises from the feelings a person experiences when nervous energy or stress is removed, when something grave becomes something trivial. The best-known proponent of this theory is Sigmund Freud, who built on ideas by other philosophers, such as Herbert Spencer, to devise a theory which postulated that humour relies on what he called "joke-work." Joke-work, for Freud, refers to how humour can side-step cultural expectations to engage an idea or issue indirectly. To illustrate, Freud uses one of his favourite jokes: "Two Jews met in the neighbourhood bath-house. 'Have you taken a bath?' asked one of them. 'What?' asked the other in return, 'Is there one missing?'" (55). For Freud, the joke allowed Jews to express anxieties about their cultural identity in a way that would be difficult to accomplish in straightforward speech and was, in his view, a healthy expression. This is not to say, however, that the same joke is entirely innocent. Told by a cultural outsider, this joke

takes on some obvious anti-Semitic tropes, relying on disparaging stereotypes of Jews, such as being underhanded and cheap. Context matters, and the importance of context allowed Freud to distinguish between innocent and tendentious jokes. Where innocent jokes have no real cultural motivation and simply attempt to provoke the good feelings associated with the endorphins released during laughter, tendentious jokes sidestep cultural constraints that normally restrict certain types of speech, so that they "evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible" (147). Ultimately, however, although relief theory has uses in particular circumstances, it has generally fallen out of favour as a broad theory of humour. There has been little support in science to suggest that humour primarily functions as a "pressure valve" for the unconscious and, furthermore, there seem to be many instances in which laughter might arise in situations or people that are relatively stress-free (Carroll 41–44).

Play theory is treated as distinct from other theories of humour, although a case can also be made to treat it as a sub-category of relief theory. First proposed by Max Eastman in the 1930s, the play theory also privileges humour's ability to release stress, but it relies less on the unconscious and more on the physical act of playfulness. Noticing that many animals seem to "joke around" like humans, Eastman suggested that "we come into the world endowed with an instinctive tendency to laugh and have this feeling in response to pains presented playfully" (45). In difficult situations such as critiques, apologies, or admonishments, the play theory treats humour as a type of "social lubricant" (Morreall, "Philosophy of Humor"). John Morreall uses the following example of a debt

collection as an illustration for this theory: “We appreciate your business, but, please, give us a break. Your account is overdue ten months. That means we’ve carried you longer than your mother did” (*Comic Relief* 117).

In effect, the play theory suggests humour is an antidote to seriousness, although, to the theory’s discredit, at times it is not entirely clear what in a humorous situation is meant to be understood as “serious.” Nor is it clear, as Carroll suggests, what kind of play is germane to humour (44). So, as with superiority theory and the more common understanding of relief theory, it seems best to refer to play theory in only specific cases in which it is evident that an instance of humour is explicitly related to play and playfulness.

The last theory of humour, incongruity theory, tends to be the most widely used today. Incongruity theory suggests that humour relies on a disconnection between expectation and reality. The crux of incongruity theory, as provided by Immanuel Kant, is that “[i]n everything that is to excite a lively laugh there must be something absurd … Laughter is an affection arising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing" (54). Incongruity is necessarily a comparative notion; in this sense, humour arises from the discord between what is believed or expected and how the world is or ought to be. Referring to Freud’s earlier joke about the bath and analyzing it from an incongruity perspective, the humour arises from the double meaning of “taken a bath,” not referencing stereotypes about Jews, which is not at all to say that the readings are necessarily exclusive. Incongruity is an elastic concept in that its explanatory power can

be supplemented by drawing from other theories in a way that is not true in reverse. Moreover, incongruity is the most promising theory of humour because it places a greater emphasis on *what* causes laughter as opposed to *why* one laughs. Looking for incongruity allows one to isolate the structure of what causes humour—an incongruous disconnect—without supposing an emotional or unconscious motivation for doing so. As such, this thesis seeks to identify humour using the incongruity theory and, where applicable, use context to determine when and where to supplementarily apply other theories and perspectives.

Critical Humour Studies

Although these theories of humour offer various tools for analysis, there are other factors at work when studying comedy. As with any object of inquiry, the study of humour involves differing perspectives concerning what is emphasized and which elements are put under consideration, even if similar theoretical tools are used in each. Accordingly, various sub-sets of humour studies exist. Psychological humour studies, for instance, look at how humour affects the brain, while managerial humour studies explore how comedy can be used as a tool to better run organizations, to name only two of many examples. This thesis relies on critical humour studies and outlines the shape and structure that result from this perspective.

Critical humour studies are relatively new and often overlooked and neglected compared to other perspectives (Abedinifard 3). In 2005, Michael Billig published the seminal work of critical humour studies, *Laughter and Ridicule*. Billig's book outlines what

differentiates critical humour studies as a subfield, focusing on identifying those issues that are not thoroughly explored in the contemporary academic discourse. Usually, humour studies treat humour as something that is inherently positive, and regards scholars and studies of its negative aspects as misled outliers (see chapter 2 in Billig). In *Redeeming Laughter*, Peter Berger provides an excellent example of what Billig characterizes as the prevailing attitude towards humour:

> the experience of the comic presents a world without pain. It is, above all, an abstraction from the tragic dimension of human existence. There are exceptions to this, for example, in so-called black humor, though even there the painful realities dealt with are somehow neutralized as they are translated into comic terms. By and large, from the worlds of benign humor to the counterworlds of folly there is a suspension of tragic facts. (Berger 194–95)

This attitude of suspending tragic facts, Billig argues, was based on dubious assumptions and created obstacles in understanding humour in all its wide-ranging forms.[7] By tracing

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[7] Various reasons exist as to why these assumptions exist; however, two are noteworthy. First, humour is often erroneously conflated with laughter. Where humour is a social construct, laughter is a function of biology that releases endorphins and feelings of well-being. Although they often coexist, there are many reasons laughter is triggered; terror, for instance, can cause laughter but is hardly funny. Nonetheless, given how often they happen simultaneously, it is not difficult to see how the good feeling accompanying laughter was aligned with humour. Secondly, in an argument unique to Billig, one can make the case that an upbeat view of comedy is part of a larger trend towards psychology meant to improve our mood and allay the pressures of the modern world (16). Accordingly, humour became thought of as instrumental, used to deflect dissatisfaction, rather than seen for its full breadth.

the history of humour theory, Billig demonstrates that our contemporary attitude towards comedy has not always held sway, and that is possible to understand humour in more ways than we presently do.

Practically speaking, assumptions about the positive nature of humour have meant that those types of comedy that are cruel, degrading, or politically or ethically dubious are merely "unfortunate negative appendages to the essentially good entity of humour" (Abedinifard 7). In the inverse, this assumption also suggests that when an instance of humour is predominantly understood as good or positive, there is little need to examine further how that humour functions.

Critical humour studies remind us that first impressions do not always tell the full story. Billig offers this warning: "there is a cloud in the blue skies of the positive world. Not all the positives in the world may be in alignment. Some negatives may possibly have positive outcomes and vice versa. It is unrealistically optimistic to presume otherwise" (22–23).[8] Following Billig's work, a slowly growing number of academics are turning their attention to critical humour studies. Sharon Lockyer and Michael Pickering summarised what they deemed an emerging field, arguing:

> Challenging the notion of humour as an absolute good means that humour cannot be taken as a form of discourse or performance that is isolated from other

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[8] I borrow two terms from Billig and Berger in this thesis: sociopositive and socionegative. Sociopositive elements bring people together, while socionegativity divides people (Billig 26; Berger 57).

> discourses or from wider configurations of sociality and social relations. Humour may at times provide distraction or diversion from the serious sides of life or from entrenched social problems, but it is not separate or separable from the broad spectrum of communicative forms and processes or from the manifold issues surrounding social encounter and interaction in a multicultural society. Sexism, racism, homophobia, and other kinds of prejudice and bigotry are not exonerated by their appearance in comic discourse; indeed, they may be more effectively communicated, disseminated, and reinforced by being articulated under the wraps of humour and comedy. (818–19)

Critical humour studies posit the view that humour should be understood as something that can be socionegative, despite a predominant view that suggests otherwise. One may hear someone say something like "don't say that, that's not funny" as an attempt to challenge humour that cannot be construed as sociopositive. Important insights are missed if we only look for how humour creates positive feelings at the exclusion of those instances that make someone feel bad. To summarize this view, it is worthwhile to return to Billig as he outlines his central thesis:

> The argument will be that an ideological pattern can be detected across these [social science and humanities] genres [...] The less pleasant faces of humour – its so-called negatives – tend to be pushed aside. In some cases, this neglect is so striking one might even talk of textual repression. (10)

Based on Billig's work, scholars have paid closer attention to those jokes that encroach on "good taste" by reaffirming the nasty aspects of morally suspicious topics, as opposed to challenging them, and thereby run the risk of what Billig called "textual repression" (e.g., Kuipers; Weaver, *The Rhetoric of Racist Humour*). This attention is understandable; it makes sense to analyze cultural texts that are likely to have suppressed interpretations. However, critical humour studies also function in reverse, because we can also ask about what is repressed through humour in texts that are upbeat, lighthearted, and seemingly devoid of malice. Accordingly, this thesis will bring critical nuance to those pieces of humour that are perceived as generally light-hearted, as sociopositive. Past studies, both broadly speaking and more specifically concerning *Little Mosque*, have overlooked the numerous ways a text can harbour alternative, repressed ideologies in comedy that are less likely to offend and cause controversy, and, consequently, are less likely to be placed under academic scrutiny. At its core, this added level of scrutiny is the foundational lesson of critical humour studies: that one needs to examine those ideological messages that often fail to get proper attention.

Multiculturalism

> ***Mayor Popowicz****: Ah! It's not gonna be one of those multi-culty snoozefests with lying speeches and bad skits, is it? No offence.*
> ***Amaar****: [with thick sarcasm] I'll cancel the camel ride.*
> ***Mayor Popowicz****: [perking up] Camel ride?*
> *(Kennedy, "The Open House")*

In the third episode of *Little Mosque,* "Open House," the new imam, Amaar, has high hopes that the community of Mercy will come and learn more about Islam. Despite his enthusiasm, Amaar initially has a difficult time convincing townsfolk to visit, as evidenced by his interaction with the town's mayor, Ann Popowicz, quoted above. Mayor Popowicz is skeptical of the open house, not for nefarious or suspicious reasons, but simply because she has had many experiences with what she considers tired and clichéd celebrations of multiculturalism. Decades have passed since the federal government began multicultural policies in 1971 and, perhaps, for some Canadians, the idea has become "background" noise, something present but not at the top of their minds. Even so, multiculturalism is still a crucial issue for minorities facing impediments to integration, as continues to be the case for Muslims. Amaar's joking attitude towards the mayor is a metaphor for *Little Mosque* more generally; he attempts to shift expectations and attitudes about what to expect concerning multiculturalism, through a joke.

This thesis draws attention to how multiculturalism offers a specific context through which *Little Mosque* ought to be understood. However, it is useful to explain how the theme of multiculturalism is being used in this study.

At its core, multiculturalism is a political philosophy that responds to the opportunities and challenges that arise when a society possesses a high degree of diversity in its population, particularly cultural and religious diversity. While the term can be descriptive, showing a straightforward reality where there is a recognizable diversity in a society,[9] it is more often used prescriptively, outlining a model society in which minorities keep their collective identities without being wholly assimilated into the dominant culture (Song). Perhaps no other country is as associated with multiculturalism as Canada. The country's commitment to multiculturalism is a legal cornerstone of the nation, and it is enshrined in law that the government must "recognize and promote the understanding that multiculturalism is a fundamental characteristic of the Canadian heritage and identity and that it provides an invaluable resource in the shaping of Canada's future" (Government of Canada 3(b)).

However, the devil is always in the details. Despite the legal assertion that the country will "ensure that all individuals receive equal treatment and equal protection under the law, while respecting and valuing their diversity" (Government of Canada 3(e)), what equal treatment looks like in practice is a matter of debate, as is the ongoing question as to how fully Canada has achieved this ideal (cf. Bibby; Fraser; Appiah). One

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[9] This descriptive notion of multiculturalism, for instance, would include a "melting pot" of assimilation, for which the goal of diversity is to create homogeneity in one culture, a strategy associated with the United States. While society has multiple cultures - amalgamating into one, if the theory holds true - this fails to resonate with the more popular understanding of the term.

common critique of multiculturalism is its inherent paradox: how can a society build cohesiveness by celebrating difference? Seyla Benhabib, for instance, carefully builds a case as to why multiculturalism must be carefully contemplated, and also why it is not an automatic panacea for globalized societies:

> Multiculturalism involves a 'reductive sociology of culture' that 'risks essentializing the idea of culture as the property of an ethnic group or race, it risks reifying cultures as separate entities by overemphasizing the internal homogeneity of cultures in terms that potentially legitimise repressive demands for cultural conformity. (4)

Benhabib is not saying here that multiculturalism is a failed experiment, but rather that observation of the phenomenon reveals its complicated reality, of which *Little Mosque* is a product. A significant motivation of this thesis is the belief that analyzing *Little Mosque* sheds new light on aspects of multiculturalism, particularly its depiction in a lighthearted comedy that appears in the medium of sitcom TV, which is itself often criticized for relying too heavily on clichés, stereotypes, and reductionism (Mills). Since the role of humour in depicting and commenting on multiculturalism is relatively underexamined, this project's discussion of *Little Mosque* as a specific example will help to close this knowledge gap.

Methodology

On the small scale of a single joke, scholars have proposed a three-stage process for understanding humour. On first hearing a joke, people will first contextualize what

they have heard. Psychologists discuss this process in terms of schemata, which effectively means that people search for clues to understand where a joke is coming from, contextually speaking. The second stage, detecting incongruities, is the process of finding how a joke is mismatched with expectations in such a way that multiple interpretations are possible. The final stage resolves these incongruities by deciding which interpretation is privileged (Deckers and Buttram). Fans of stand-up comedy immediately recognize this process, albeit in a different formula: setup, punchline, and payoff. By way of analogy, the framework of this project loosely follows a similar three-stage analysis of understanding context, focusing on the content of what is being presented, and finally analyzing the relevance and importance of what has been said in a broader social perspective.

To accomplish the above, this project uses the methodological framework of depth-hermeneutics, designed by John B. Thompson. Structurally, depth-hermeneutics follows a familiar organization for those in the literary field: context, analysis, and interpretation. Thompson formalized his model based on what he perceived as a lack of focus in cultural studies; he found that studies of cultural phenomena tended to privilege certain aspects of analysis over others. Some research, he argued, focused on the cultural and historical context at the expense of spending adequate time interpreting ideological concerns and, of course, other studies focused too much on those concerns and did the opposite. Depth-hermeneutics accounts for potential gaps by working in distinct stages:

sociohistorical analysis; analysis of form; and, crucially, the synthetic re/interpretation[10] of ideology and beliefs. The goal is to build towards an ideological critique in the third stage that is both grounded in context and supported in the analysis that, importantly, offers tangible findings on which future studies can build, contributing to the larger body of research.

Socio-Historical Contextualization

The first stage of this discussion pays close attention to the contextual backdrop of *Little Mosque*. Thompson succinctly describes this stage as intending to "reconstruct the social and historical conditions of the production, circulation, and reception" of the cultural object under consideration (282). In particular, Thompson forefronts the spatiotemporal settings (how something is understood in a specific locale; in this case, Canada); the fields of interaction (how people and cultures interact with one another); and the social institutions that simultaneously allow and restrict how the cultural object is created and understood (282–83). Ultimately, to analyze these elements means to consider how the political landscape, power relations, and embedded social beliefs frame the understanding of a given piece of culture.

The point of this first stage is not to exhaustively cover a topic but, instead, to offer a conceptual framework from which to examine an issue that is neither overdetermined

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[10] Thompson uses the term "re/interpretation" to make clear that this ideological discussion is happening in a domain that is "already interpreted by the subjects who make up the social-historical world" (289).

(lacking the possibility for interpretation) nor underdetermined (under which nearly any interpretation is possible). Accordingly, this stage begins by identifying a central topic in *Little Mosque*: Islam in Canada and the inclusion of Muslims in the nation's social fabric. The thesis continues by contextualizing these issues within the broader framework of multiculturalism, and develops a unique argument about Canadian humour as part of this context. I contend that Canada's comic sensibility offered the necessary conditions for *Little Mosque*'s production, ones that were unlikely to be encountered elsewhere.

Analysis of Little Mosque's Form

During Thompson's second stage, the focus of study turns to closely examining primary texts in whatever form they take. In practice, this often means selecting the most influential characteristic of the material under review, such as its genre or medium. However, when a piece of analysis is pursued in isolation, this stage runs the risk of becoming "an abstract exercise" (Thompson 285); therefore, the investigation of *Little Mosque* in this stage is grounded on how ideas and issues discussed in the previous chapter are manifested in *Little Mosque,* through the use of representative episodes as case studies. Accordingly, this phase of investigation shows how *Little Mosque* presented social commentary through the genre of sitcom television, focusing heavily on the first three seasons of the series.[11]

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[11] In Chapter 2, I cover in greater detail why I have chosen to separate the first three seasons of *Little Mosque* from the final three. Briefly, the rationale for this shift comes from the producers' decision to move away from the traditional sitcom form after the third season in an attempt to maximize the impact of their social commentary.

Practically speaking, the sitcom has three critical elements: setting, characters, and storylines. For each of these elements, I compare and contrast how *Little Mosque* adhered to, and strayed from, the expected genre conventions of sitcom television. Over the course of six seasons, ninety thirty-minute episodes were produced, adding up to well over fifty hours of TV viewing. The number of viewing hours and the scope of *Little Mosque* provided a broad array of text and background while representative selections of the series are used to illustrate my specific arguments. Any textual study carries an inherent risk of viewing one text in a vacuum. Accordingly, some corollary texts were also selected to enrich analysis and add comparative elements to the project. The reasoning behind this is twofold. First, a comparison to other programs allows me to more definitively state what is unique to *Little Mosque* in the Canadian context and what is not. Secondly, the comparison of different sitcoms and explication of distinctions help to produce a more thoughtful analysis. Ultimately, considering other sitcoms is illustrative of the themes, issues, and ideological spaces *Little Mosque* did or did not address.

The second stage of analysis explores specific examples of humour from *Little Mosque.* Rather than relying on discrete jokes, I will focus on what Salvatore Attardo calls joke cycles. Joke cycles link singular jokes thematically, making an aggregate basis for analysis (Attardo 69). After themes are identified, specific examples are drawn from episodes to illustrate how the jokes were constructed. This process includes, but is not limited to, determining who or what functions as the "butt" of jokes, how the jokes allude

to familiar comedic tropes, and how the jokes are intended (to varying degrees of success) to be funny.

The themes present in the case studies are analyzed from a variety of possible ideological interpretations. Throughout my work in humour research, I have found a natural affinity between the polysemy of jokes and understanding that ambiguity through the process of decoding, a strategy popularized by Hall. He reminds us that finding multiple interpretations does not imply that they are all the same:

> polysemy must not, however, be confused with pluralism. Connotative codes are not equal among themselves. Any society/culture tends, with varying degrees of closure, to impose its segmentations, its classifications of the social and cultural and political world, upon its members. (13)

As such, my analysis proceeds on the assumption that jokes have dominant or preferred meanings that support society's status quo, those which are understood as common sense. This model was also utilized to identify oppositional readings, in which a person perceives a message in a way that is contrary to its intention. However, much of my analysis proceeds based on the awareness that the most illuminating way of understanding *Little Mosque*'s humour is often by finding negotiated perspectives, those readings that accept certain features of the dominant understanding while rejecting others. For instance, when something is understood as humorous, there must be some "buy-in" from the audience, meaning that, at the very minimum, people must accept that what is being presented is intended to be understood as a joke. However, what

differentiates humour from other styles of communication is that it prioritizes incongruity and ambiguity. Thus, humour holds much potential for various negotiated readings. It is predicated on the understanding that audiences *must* decode its message, which means, among other things, distinguishing what is meant to be taken seriously and what is being used as a comedic tool.

The Re/Interpretation of Themes and Ideas

Thompson's final stage of analysis, re/interpretation, builds on previous work. As he explains, the first two stages look to break down, analyze, and unveil patterns, whereas re/interpretation stresses how texts partake in the "creative construction of meaning" (289). This stage of analysis considers the second half of *Little Mosque* (seasons four through six). During these latter three seasons, the show's producers made a conscious effort to provide social commentary aimed at creating social change, in contrast to the first three seasons, which were more educational in their motivation. Therefore, the analysis at this stage discusses how comedy both supports and hinders such aspirations by interpreting how these messages build and/or depart from what was established in the earlier seasons, in which producers used more traditional sitcom conventions.

Specifically, Chapter 3 discusses *Little Mosque's* aspirations to produce social commentary through the continued use of critical humour theory, identifying how abstract ideas such as the nature of belief and the improved social inclusion of minorities in Canada deliver specific sorts of social commentary. As in Chapter 2, these issues are explored by discussing representative episodes of *Little Mosque,* which function as case

studies. Finally, this analysis serves as a basis to look towards the future in the conclusion, which offers several potential suggestions for further research and study.

Position of the Researcher

This project originated in 2009, when I was living in Vancouver, British Columbia and completing my master's thesis, which considered how dark comedies such as *Curb Your Enthusiasm* offered a fresh style of social commentary as compared to sitcoms of previous eras. One evening, I recall going downtown with a friend to watch *Hockey Night in Canada*, which, at the time, was also a CBC property. During a break in play, an advertisement for *Little Mosque* ran. As it played, I overheard a man sitting at another table, who dramatically sighed and exclaimed to everyone within a fifteen-foot earshot, "I can't believe they get their own show!" I was, of course, disheartened at the sentiment, but not entirely surprised; prejudice exists nearly everywhere, including the stereotypically liberal city of Vancouver. While I was familiar with the show, I had not yet watched more than one or two episodes when it first premiered, even though I had enjoyed those episodes. However, since I was working on sitcoms and comedy research, I made a mental note to rewatch *Little Mosque* to gain a greater appreciation for the show and to better understand how it might (and might not) oppose xenophobic attitudes such as the one I overheard that night.

In November 2011, I had the good fortune of taking a comparative literature course on popular culture with Dr. Asma Sayed, who I am also fortunate to have on my supervisory committee. Dr. Sayed lectured on *Little Mosque*, which again piqued my

interest in the show. I am grateful that she helped me focus by encouraging me to look at the series as an example of the sitcom form for a term paper, which provided a path toward this thesis.

I was thus aware of the excellent research potential contained in *Little Mosque,* but there is slightly more to be said about my motivations. One question I have often received revolves around a predictable sentiment: "Why are you interested in studying *Little Mosque* when you're not a Muslim yourself?" The most obvious answer is that I find the intricacies of the topic fascinating, and humour theory was my focus even before coming to this specific project. However, this is only a part of my interest in *Little Mosque.* I believe this project resonates on a human level and that issues concerning social justice are inherently valuable. *Little Mosque*'s ambitions, whether fully realized or not, appealed to my sense of what was an ethical ambition for Canadian society. Accordingly, I come to this project as a person invested in building communities in which social equity is a given.

On reality of research in the social sciences and humanities is that any study worth pursuing must account both for those things that seem readily familiar and accessible, as well as for those things that take more careful time and consideration. However, in many respects, I am also well situated to conduct this research precisely because I did not grow up in an Islamic context; as a born and raised Canadian with settler origins and rural roots, I am one of the primary target audiences *Little Mosque* hoped to reach. From this perspective, I am well suited to this project and believe that it is valuable within a broader discourse.

Chapter Summaries and Key Research Questions

This dissertation is divided into three main chapters, each addressing distinct aspects of *Little Mosque* and how humour plays a significant role in its social commentary. Chapter 1 outlines the social context from which *Little Mosque* originated. Briefly, this chapter answers a central question about the origin and development of *Little Mosque:* why was the Canadian context relevant to the creation of the show? In answering this question, the discussion considers the experience of Islam within Canada, paying close attention to how the religion is currently situated within Canada's multicultural principles and values. This contextualization narrows the focus of the project and leads to a better understanding of how *Little Mosque* filled a previously unoccupied niche in the media landscape and, furthermore, why this niche was filled by Canadian programming rather than the more prolific American or British comedy industries. The unique contribution to the literature that this chapter provides stems from the relationship between comedy and Canadian multiculturalism.

Secondary questions addressed in this chapter include the role of multiculturalism in creating opportunities for the series' emergence and the role of understanding Canadian humour in appreciating the show's cultural significance. Ultimately, this chapter argues that the culture and history of Canadian comedy provided an inimitable site in which a show such as *Little Mosque* could originate.

Chapter 2 examines the genre of sitcom television in relation to *Little Mosque*. Humour, as *the* unextractable element of sitcom TV, has often been treated generically,

not properly nuancing the unique conventions of sitcoms and the ramifications of its comedic style. This chapter focuses heavily on the sitcom genre by responding to the question of how sitcom conventions shape the social commentary presented in *Little Mosque*. By thoroughly considering setting, characters, and plot, I make the case that some types of social commentary are heightened through the genre, while others are suppressed. Doing so allows for thoughtful consideration about if and how *Little Mosque* deviated from the sitcom's reputation as a shallow, conservative, and inconsequential form of social commentary. Ultimately, this chapter contends that *Little Mosque*'s first three seasons relied heavily on the traditional sitcom model and, in doing so, presented complicated social issues in very particular ways.

Chapter 3 explores the latter half of *Little Mosque.* During the final three seasons of the show, its producers made a concerted effort to change the tone of the series by raising more complicated and consequential social themes. To understand this shift, I identify how *Little Mosque* transitioned from pursuing consensus to cultivating conflict. This chapter concentrates on cultural attitudes towards humour and considers the notions of sociopositive and socionegative comedy. The chapter culminates by exploring the central question posed earlier in the introduction: what does humour theory reveal about the depth and type of social commentary presented in *Little Mosque*? To answer this question, I argue that appreciating cultural attitudes towards humour are as important as the themes and issues that are used as joke fodder. By exploring these ideas, I also contend that jokes function as a sort of cultural thermometer, in that they can provide

valuable insight into cultural attitudes that are difficult to appreciate using traditional modes of interpretation. In the final analysis, the last chapter discusses how *Little Mosque* is, and can be, read as social commentary, but one that requires a proviso on what it means to undertake this task using punchlines instead of thesis statements.

Chapter 1: The Context of *Little Mosque*

Q: What's the difference between a Canadian and yogurt?
A: The yogurt has its own culture.
(Original author unknown)

Compared to other places, it can feel as though not a lot happens in the rural landscape of the Canadian prairies. This feeling is particularly true when talking about its place in pop culture, as the prairies are often treated as an afterthought in comparison to other prominent culture industries. Often, this sentiment carries over to Canada as a whole. In the English-speaking world, America, Britain, and, arguably, Australia are significant players in the media landscape,[12] particularly where sitcoms are concerned. Therefore, it would seem logical that a sitcom that caught the global zeitgeist would come from one of these places. However, that is not what happened with *Little Mosque.* Hence, this chapter responds to the basic question: why did *Little Mosque* originate in Canada, as opposed to elsewhere?

The case built in this chapter argues that Canada has several cultural attributes that contributed to *Little Mosque*'s production and, further, that the overarching concept of multiculturalism links them together. However, this is not to say that thinking about multiculturalism marked the beginning of this discussion. Initially, my process of

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[12] For the purposes of film, Canada and the United States are treated as one place, whereas the other places are tracked singularly (Motion Picture Association of America 6).

answering this question was focused on finding research gaps and identifying what was not being said about *Little Mosque*. One gap in the literature originates from our limited understanding of how humour functions as an ideological lens and how this weakness affects various interpretations of the series.

Humour does not exist in a vacuum and must be contextualized. Exclusively examining humour is not enough to understand what is happening in the series. Moreover, through analysis it became clear that a limited understanding of humour had a corollary, it reflected a weak understanding of what *Little Mosque* was saying about Canadian culture and the appeal to multiculturalism that seems fundamental to Canada's identity.

In the broader context for *Little Mosque,* the social themes that are most relevant to *Little Mosque's* intended trajectory and legacy include xenophobia/acceptance, sincerity/silliness, and integration/independence. However, these themes cannot be adequately considered independently. Discussion of specific themes or issues became the trees; Canadian culture and comedy, the forest; the point was not to miss either one, but rather investigate how they coexisted and informed one another.

When *Little Mosque* hit the airwaves, the outcome was noteworthy from a cultural perspective. Racism, for example, cannot be understood without also understanding tolerance. It became apparent that the configurations of themes found in the series had roots in what might loosely be called a "Canadian sensibility." Clearly, it was not only

significant that *Little Mosque* was the first Muslim sitcom, as many have already claimed, but it was equally important that this program was produced in Canada.

Where does one begin to make sense of such a broad category as the Canadian context and, furthermore, how are the intricacies of comedy in such a wide-ranging context? The field of cultural studies offers insight into understanding this general context, including how cultural policies, products, and beliefs are infused with relations of power. In this vein, the central concept that has structured the discussion of competing cultures in Canada for the past fifty years is multiculturalism. Since its inception, multiculturalism has attempted to account for Canada's shifting and diverse culture, and it has influenced Canadian policies and beliefs. Since at least the 1970s, there has been a recognition that Canada is under constant social churn, demographic evolution, and even the occasional bout of cultural anxiety. This sentiment was most robustly expressed by Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau in the 1971 *Royal Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism:*

> There cannot be one cultural policy for Canadian of British and French origin, another for the original peoples and yet a third for all others. For although there are two official languages, there is no official culture, nor does any ethnic group take precedence over any other. No citizen or group of citizens is other than Canadian, and all should be treated fairly. (Canadian House of Commons)

At its core, the commission addressed the question of who is considered a Canadian. Trudeau claimed that anyone could be Canadian and, more importantly, could do so

without giving up his/her cultural heritage. Although this attitude seems sensible to many—if not most—people in Canada, experience tells us that negotiating multiculturalism is anything but simple. These sentiments are as relevant today as they were then, and the tension is bubbling under the surface of *Little Mosque.*

This attention on context is relevant to the central questions of this chapter: why did *Little Mosque,* as a Muslim sitcom, originate in Canada? To answer these questions requires an explanation of the role of multiculturalism in creating the desire for a series of this nature. Multiculturalism is assumed to be a complex concept with deep contradictions that exist alongside what is celebrated as a significant national source of pride. I contend that *Little Mosque* relies not only on the positive aspects of multiculturalism, but also on its failures and contradictions. Humour is also vital to appreciate how the series navigated these positive and negative features of multiculturalism. Hence, understanding humour is an indispensable aspect of understanding *Little Mosque*'s cultural relevance. But because not all comedy is the same, it does us little good to speak about how comedy functions on a broad or all-encompassing scale. Appreciating the Canadian context of comedy, which *Little Mosque* both draws from and builds on, is fundamental.

The Series in Context of Present Realities

The "original" little mosque on the prairies is Al Rashid, in Edmonton, Alberta. In the early 1930s, a group of local women approached then-Mayor John Fry, asking to purchase land on which to build North America's first mosque. At the cost of $5,000, Al

Rashid opened its doors on December 12, 1938, a significant step towards establishing the Muslim communities[13] in the region. Today, the original Al Rashid Mosque has been relocated and holds a prominent spot in Fort Edmonton, serving as a reminder of the deep roots Islam has in the country, especially in western Canada's prairies (Al Rashid / Canadian Islamic Center).

Roughly seventy years separate the opening of Al Rashid in Edmonton and Mercy Mosque, found in the fictional town of Mercy, Saskatchewan. As the story of Al Rashid proves, Islam has deep roots in the prairies, which has been a destination for multicultural immigrants since the beginning of Canadian colonialism. Interestingly, the opening of a fictional mosque in rural Saskatchewan in 2007 was treated, in both the series' fictional universe and the real world, as somehow exotic, unfamiliar, and even groundbreaking. The perception of strangeness reveals the instability of Canadian society's understanding of Islam, despite its rich history as part of the cultural mosaic.

In their 2013 study of religion in Canada, the Pew Research Center made the following observation:

> As part of their national anthem, "O Canada," Canadians sing: "God keep our land glorious and free." The official French version of the song also contains a religious refrain, proclaiming that the nation is ready to carry both the sword "and the

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[13] To reiterate, I use the term "Muslim community" to refer to peoples sharing a common faith; I do not wish to suggest that these peoples are otherwise homogeneous or without ample diversity.

cross." But while Canadians have sung these verses for decades, the country's religious landscape has been changing. ("Canada's Changing Religious Landscape") Pew's research found that although two-thirds of the Canadian population identified as religious, that number was precipitously dropping. Canadians identifying as Catholic fell from 47% to 39% in the past 40 years, while an even sharper decline has been observed for Protestants, which went from 41% to 27% during the same period. In the 2011 Canadian Census, the number of citizens identifying as Muslim rose approximately 82% in the preceding ten years, from nearly 580,000 people to slightly over 1 million. This change in population is primarily linked to increased immigration: "Of the immigrants who came before 1971, 2.9% were affiliated with Muslim, Hindu, Sikh or Buddhist religions, whereas 33.0% of immigrants who came between 2001 and 2011 reported affiliation to one of these religions" (Statistics Canada). The numbers tell the story of a growing community in Canada, one that, at the birth of Canada's multicultural policies, was not nearly as significant in numbers or influence as it is today.

Canada's religious trends require some subtlety to parse out. While there is a notable decline in Christian religions, which traditionally had the most adherents, there has also been growth in other religions, notably Islam. The writers of *Little Mosque* were aware of this trend; the most prominent early plotline in the series centred on the Muslim community renting space for their growing congregation from the Anglican church, which suffered chronically empty pews.

The recent growth of Islam in Canada and elsewhere in the global West has often been fraught with painful periods of assimilation and controversy. History teaches us that certain world events profoundly shape how people view the world and, moreover, reorient how future events unfold in their wake. Among those events in the twentieth century that had multicultural implications in Canada were the two World Wars and the fall of the Iron Curtain. The twenty-first century, thus far, has been greatly influenced by the events of September 11, 2001 (9/11). The general history of 9/11 has been so thoroughly dissected that little review is required for our purposes. What is valuable, however, is to discuss the impact of the event on the psyche of Canadians. Following 9/11, The Environics Institute conducted a survey investigating "What is it like to be a Muslim in Canada, and what is it like for other Canadians to have Muslims living in their communities?" (*Survey of Muslims in Canada 2016* 1). The survey, which was based on similar studies conducted in different countries, aspired to understand better what it meant to be Muslim in Canada during the tumultuous times post-9/11. The survey was revisited ten years later, in 2016, and used the 2006 data as benchmarks. That *Little Mosque*'s run falls directly in the middle of these surveys is a small stroke of luck, in that we can aptly bookend the series with broader cultural insights that can be contextualized by the survey research from both pre- and post-series.

The 2006 Environics Survey included a special section on "Muslims and Multiculturalism in Canada." In its introductory remarks, the report asserts that the recent past has been difficult for Muslims worldwide. Even in Canada, although citizens

tended to view immigration favourably, the integration of new immigrants into society was a source of some anxiety:

> When it comes to the Muslim population in particular, the data show that most Canadians believe that Muslims wish to remain separate from the society at large – even though most Canadian Muslims say that Muslims are interested in integrating into Canadian society. (The Environics Institute, "Section Three Special Theme: Muslims and Multiculturalism in Canada" 61)

The picture that emerged revealed levels of intersectionality and subtle tensions within the nation's cultural dynamics, with nationality sometimes juxtaposed against religious/ethnic affiliations. The report acknowledged difficulties plaguing the nation, outlining the ways that public attitudes toward Islam betray many of the purported core beliefs of multiculturalism. The survey showed cracks in Canada's multicultural ideals, and demonstrated that "the Canadian context, with its loudly touted multicultural policies, is not perfect – but it is unique" (The Environics Institute, "Section Three Special Theme: Muslims and Multiculturalism in Canada" 61).

The second part of the Environics Report was published four years after *Little Mosque* concluded. A few critical observations stand out from this second survey. For instance, in 2016, a vast majority (84%) of Canadian Muslims felt as though they were treated better in Canada than Muslims in other countries, a view that strengthened during the ten years between studies. However, there was not a corresponding increase in a similar sentiment amongst non-Muslims, whose general impression of the religion did

not improve during this time. Furthermore, Canadian Muslims, particularly women and children, continued to experience acts of discrimination and stereotyping. One in three (33%) Muslims, for instance, experienced discrimination in the five years leading up to the report, well above levels experienced by the population at large (The Environics Institute, *Survey of Muslims in Canada 2016* 3). Ultimately, there is much work left to be done, as the report rhetorically asked, "Fast-forward almost ten years, how are Muslims in Canada faring today?" A response could be, "The angst of 9/11 has faded but public concerns about the cultural integration of immigrants are growing, and Muslims continue to be viewed with discomfort, if not suspicion, by some" (The Environics Institute, *Survey of Muslims in Canada 2016* 1).

Discomfort implies uneasiness and mild pain. The well-established discomfort endured by Muslims in Canada brings social consequences, especially for Muslim youth. As Katherine Bullock, a political scientist at the University of Toronto, explains: "A lot of youth have felt let down. They feel their Canadian identity has been put into question—as if their citizenship depends on the whim of the government. To be a Muslim in Canada today is to be a person of scrutiny" (qtd. in Nasser). Where different identities intersect, an understandable tension occurs for Muslim Canadians who are rightfully seeking full recognition as active and contributing citizens, yet must remain guarded against a society that holds reservations about their inclusion. The survey illustrates this problem. Based on interviews with 600 respondents, the Environics 2016 study found that 83% are "very

proud" to be Canadian (7).[14] Young adult Muslims (ages 18 to 34) qualify this national pride by acknowledging that this pride is not always compatible with their faith. The report indicates that "[c]ompared with older Muslims, they identify primarily as Muslim rather than as Canadian, and express a slightly weaker sense of belonging to the country. They also report higher levels of discrimination and feel pessimistic about how Muslims will be treated in the future" (The Environics Institute, *Survey of Muslims in Canada 2016* 5). The notion that one must privilege one identity over another is ostensibly a commentary on the present state of multiculturalism.

"Proper" Multiculturalism

Q: How many Canadians does it take to change a light bulb?
A: None. Canadians don't change light bulbs. We accept them as they are (Rasporich xx).

"In 1971," the Government of Canada website reads, "Canada was the first country in the world to adopt multiculturalism as an official policy. By so doing, Canada affirmed the value and dignity of all Canadian citizens" (I. Government of Canada, *Canadian Multiculturalism*). That all Canadians enjoy equal shares of dignity in society can be contested; however, we can be safe in the knowledge that the Canadian Government is making an organized effort to ensure that the belief permeates citizens' collective

[14] A sizeable proportion (73%) of what the study calls "mainstream respondents" are "very proud" to call themselves Canadian (7).

imagination. While the government does have a vested interest in saying that multiculturalism works, what that entails is not entirely clear.

Because I am a product of Canadian public schools, the notion of multiculturalism is nothing new for me. Throughout grade school, a staple in social studies education was grounded in defining who "we" are as Canadians. In contrast to the melting pot ideology of the United States, we were told that Canada follows a model that celebrates diversity and difference, adapting as new people, ideas, and practices are woven into the cultural fabric. Underpinning this idea, of course, was the belief that multiculturalism creates a more socially just society—a lesson learned from the unrest surrounding the October Crisis in 1970.[15] Rattansi correctly points out that a North American understanding of multiculturalism arises from this appreciation of how unequal power dynamics stoke injustices. From the 1991 edition of *HarperCollins Dictionary of Sociology*, Rattansi quotes: "multiculturalism celebrates and seeks to promote cultural variety, for example, minority languages. At the same time, it focuses on the unequal relationship of the minority to mainstream cultures" (11). Although improving social cohesion seems a valuable goal, the real importance is based on how equitably and effectively this goal is pursued.

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15 The October Crisis began in 1970, when a British diplomat, James Cross, was abducted by members of the Front de Libération du Québec (FLQ). Shortly afterward, Minister of Immigration and Minister of Labour Pierre Laporte was abducted and murdered. These acts of terrorism prompted the only use of the War Measures Act during peacetime in Canadian history (Smith).

In terms of the themes found in *Little Mosque,* multiculturalism is awkwardly positioned, given how it uniquely affects Canadian Muslims. Multiculturalism, of course, has multiple meanings that change depending on the context. One of those meanings is the lived reality that Canada is multicultural because different cultures are living together. One might alternatively mean multiculturalism as policy and practice, such as the initiatives that ostensibly support multiculturalism, many of which, notably the bilingualism policy declaring two official languages, are government driven. The ideological aspect of multiculturalism consists of the ideas regarding how we might live together while respecting each other's differences. Without question, these three aspects of multiculturalism are inextricable and complicated, and are especially relevant to *Little Mosque*. The ideological domain of multiculturalism, the ways in which multiculturalism shapes beliefs, attitudes, and ideas, forms a robust platform for the development of the series.

The Kymlicka Report: The "Official" Position of Multiculturalism

In 2010, the federal government of Canada commissioned multiculturalism expert Will Kymlicka to complete an evaluation of Canada. This report is significant because of the federal government's implicit support: it is featured on Canada's official website and is meant to support "the potential of all Canadians, encouraging them to integrate into their society and take an active part in its social, cultural, economic and political affairs" (I. Government of Canada, *Canadian Multiculturalism*). Though other consultants could have authored summaries of the state of multiculturalism in Canada, Kymlicka

contributed an authoritative voice to the discourse. His book *Multicultural Citizenship* received the Ralph J. Bunche Award from the American Political Science Association, recognizing the best scholarly work in the field during a given year. Kymlicka's report presents valuable insights into the hegemonic understanding of multiculturalism in the Canadian context.

At the outset of his report, Kymlicka notes that contentious issues and tensions have followed Canadian multiculturalism since its inception. Proponents of multiculturalism, he says, see its value in welcoming all people, especially immigrants and minorities, to participate in a cohesive Canada. Detractors, in contrast, point to instances of perceived ghettoization and insularity creating distance, rather than cohesion, in society. Kymlicka further remarks, "This [topic] is a highly ritualized debate whose basic terms have barely changed in over 35 years. One reason for the continuous resurfacing of this debate is that, until recently, we had little concrete evidence to test these duelling perspectives" (7). To this end, Kymlicka produced a substantive literature review, amalgamating many studies that, in his opinion, suggest the overall success of Canada's multicultural approach:

> If we put these various findings together, they push us toward some clear conclusions. I believe that the 35-year debate in Canada between those who argue that multiculturalism promotes civic integration and those who argue that it promotes ethnic isolation can now safely be put to rest. These recent studies – all

> of which were produced from 2006 to 2008 – provide strong evidence that multiculturalism in Canada promotes integration and citizenship. (11)

Taken as a whole, the report provides compelling evidence for the success of multiculturalism in Canada. Kymlicka offers a long list of ways in which immigrants and minorities living in Canada are succeeding, especially when compared to other nations: for instance, a high level of mutual recognition and acceptance between native-born Canadians and immigrants (7), the relative lack of minority ghettos in Canada (8), and the regularity with which immigrants become full citizens (8). Of special interest, however, Kymlicka singles out Muslims, noting that compared to other countries, Canada has not been "as affected by the global surge in anti-Muslim sentiments and the polarization of ethnic relations" (9). According to the 2006 Environics report, a majority of Canadians (83%) agree that Muslims positively contribute to Canada and that Canadians are less likely than those polled in other countries to believe that Muslims are hostile to them (Kymlicka 9).

Taken at face value, the general outlook on Canadian multiculturalism appears optimistic. Moreover, many of the pitfalls that have befallen other nations, notably those in Europe, seem not to have crossed the Atlantic. For example, isolationist enclaves of minorities in cities and backlash surrounding "reasonable accommodations" of cultural practices, notwithstanding obvious examples in Quebec, are not substantive problems north of the 49th parallel, which led Kymlicka to make the following observation:

> Long-time critics of multiculturalism have jumped on the European anti-multiculturalist bandwagon and have hoped to ride it into Canada, desperately looking for any shred of evidence that can be (mis)interpreted as proof that Canada is falling into European-style patterns of ethnic animosity and division. If we look at the evidence dispassionately, however, it is clear that ethnic relations in Toronto are not like those in Paris, Amsterdam or Bradford. (17)

Yet, despite the optimistic outlook given above, lived experiences tell us that tensions within multicultural Canada persist. The tragic events in Quebec City on January 29, 2017, immediately come to mind. Alexandre Bissonnette, a Quebecer known for his pro-Marine Le Pen positions,[16] assassinated six people and injured nineteen people at the Islamic Cultural Centre of Quebec City while injuring a further nineteen people (Siekierska and Dolski). Initially, Canadian media reported numerous stories about the shock following the massacre, suggesting that this event was uniquely un-Canadian and completely unexpected. According to Rania Lawendy, spokesperson for the Muslim Association of Canada, "there is definitely some fear amongst parents and the community, but at the same time I have faith in our community, obviously, the Canadian community, that this is not the norm" (Czurylowicz). Nawaz, as the creator of *Little Mosque,* was also asked to comment, and she similarly expressed profound surprise: "I

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[16] Marine Le Pen is a French politician, best known as the President of the National Front political party. Notably, she is known to hold many derogatory views about Islam and multiculturalism (Ganley; Hollinger).

think we're in shock that something like this could happen in Canada. To see it happen in our country … it was just so overwhelming, the horror of the situation" (qtd. in Fitzpatrick). In their views, Canada was not supposed to harbour such malevolence, and was supposed to be a country of tolerance and acceptance.

Others, however, were not as surprised by the attacks in Quebec City. For instance, Kenza Oumlil, whose work focuses on representations of Muslims in the media, argued that this trend of Islamophobia has been growing in Canada for some time:

> But the attack on Friday was not an isolated, random or "senseless" event. It was the product of growing Islamophobia in Canada and the rise of hate speech and hate crimes. The existence and persistence of these hateful attitudes has been glossed over by the traditional liberal rhetoric of Canadian politics which presents the authorities as welcoming diversity and "accommodating" it.

Oumlil's insistence that traditional liberal rhetoric has "glossed over" persistent issues in multicultural policies is worth noting.

At first blush, the events in Quebec City—and perhaps accepting the underlying trends identified by Oumlil—seem to contradict the broad findings presented in the Kymlicka report. However, a closer inspection of the report reveals hints of these frictions. According to Kymlicka, the first two unresolved issues are integrating religion into multiculturalism and the media's treatment of this process (18).

In considering the issues posed by integrating religion into Canadian society, Kymlicka's principal concern is that there are few, if any, suitable mechanisms in the

nation's political structure to help develop a policy that supports frontline workers who handle real-world issues. It is unrealistic, he says, to expect the Supreme Court to adjudicate every single case relating to religious claims, nor can the media be entrusted to provide coverage that offers the appropriate depth of discussion needed to engage citizens. Unfortunately, despite these problems, other practical tools for public awareness and consultation are lacking: "Such mechanisms exist in the case of ethnic diversity and race relations, but are underdeveloped in the case of religious diversity, so that we are continually having to react to crises rather than proactively managing the issues" (Kymlicka 18). As he notes, these issues have their basis in a lack of capacity throughout the media. Kymlicka suggests that although Canada's news media, compared to other western countries, is not as characterized by sensationalism, it does lack a public forum or medium to air broader public discussion. Thus, even though news about issues concerning multiculturalism is available for Canadians, little space is available to process and understand these issues in substantial ways. His analysis shows a gap, insofar as traditional methods of communication such as the news media were not reaching people in meaningful ways, especially concerning defining the role of religion in a multicultural society. The news media, in his view, could not find a balance between being too dull or overly sensational or, in the case of opinion pieces, being too charged and misleading. Such a lack of traditional forums for discussing and thinking about religious identities within Canadian society opens the door for different ways to depict—and consequently, contemplate—tense issues vexing multiculturalism.

Although he does not mention the series directly, Kymlicka might imagine a space for a show such as *Little Mosque* to gain audience engagement in Canada's media landscape. While it was not news, *per se*, the series offered information about how a Muslim community integrates into a stereotypical Canadian town. This format avoids sensationalist reporting, as sitcoms tend to be somewhat conservative, slow-moving narratives, while managing to depict issues in relatable ways. In other words, Kymlicka inadvertently highlights the gaps that exist in his vision of multicultural nation-building and, more importantly, how *Little Mosque* filled some of these gaps. Using his work as representative of the federal government, we can gain a better appreciation of how Canada has been building towards a show such as *Little Mosque*.

Dual Motivations: Feeding Two Birds with One Hand

American media scholar Kyle Conway found the very existence of *Little Mosque* surprising. He thought that the core of the series, with Muslim characters and plots, were out-of-step with how television was typically produced by networks and understanding how the show came to exist was worth further investigation. For Conway, the relevant question about *Little Mosque* was not what made the series multicultural but, instead, how the show demonstrated to policy makers and members of parliament (i.e. the funding agencies) that the CBC was upholding a political mandate ("Little Mosque, Small Screen" 652). For Conway, the fingerprints of a multicultural mandate were all over the decision to green-light the series. As he explains, the CBC is required by the 1988 Multiculturalism Act to report annually on its efforts to promote multicultural

programming. Conway recognized that in the years immediately preceding *Little Mosque*'s 2007 debut, the CBC was conscious that Arab and Western Asian-Canadians were the most rapidly growing visible minorities in the country ("Little Mosque, Small Screen" 657). For the decision makers at the network, it was obvious that this growth had parallels with their own experiences, resonating with the collective imagination of Canada, a nation largely composed of settlers.[17] Conway argued that the cultural climate of Canada meant there was an indirect relationship between multicultural underpinnings and an emotional attraction to the spirit of the show. He recounts an interview with Mary Darling, an executive producer of *Little Mosque,* who said:

> When we pitched [*Little Mosque*] to [TV producer] Anton Leo … we wanted to do a show and tell some stories we really loved. Anton didn't say to us, 'Hey, that really fits our mandate beautifully, let's do that.' He said, 'You know what? … My parents came straight from Sicily' … His parents came from Italy … and Anton was a first-generation Canadian, but he really got the cultural context in the universal characters that we tried to create. (Conway, "Little Mosque on the Prairie: Humor as a Medium of Translation" 41)

Against this backdrop, one can see where the opportunity to produce such a show arose. It not only aligned with the formal policies put in place to support multiculturalism, but

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[17] I typically use the term "settler" not in its common meaning of people who emigrate to lay down agrarian roots. Rather, I do so in recognition that the clear majority of Canadians are not indigenous to this land and have traceable family histories that originate elsewhere, even if those connections are now many generations removed.

also, and crucially, represented a familiar story to which many people could relate. In some small way, the story of Islam in Canada become a proxy for many settlers in Canada's past, while also acquainting viewers with the ostensibly unfamiliar aspects of Muslim culture.

A Canadian Contrast: Aliens in America

The notion of creating a Muslim-centric sitcom was not unique to *Little Mosque;* countries that place less emphasis on multiculturalism, such as the United States, have also developed such programs. What set the Canadian context apart were two distinctive qualities found at the CBC: a national broadcaster with a government mandate to promote multiculturalism, and a reduced profit motive compared to most networks. The latter feature is important because, as Conway outlines, the mitigation of profit above all else allowed the CBC to take on a degree of risk. There is a strong argument to be made that in order to ensure continued funding, the CBC *had* to take risks to distinguish it from other Canadian broadcasters and from funding coming from south of the border.

The risks that the CBC takes with its programming, especially scripted comedies, are dissimilar to those taken by other networks. The FX network in the United States, for example, has been pushing boundaries in television comedies by producing shows that are darker and more mature than in generations past. Similarly, HBO and Showcase make many of the same mature gestures while using sizeable production budgets that are more comparable to movies. Additionally, networks in the United States can often use substantial financial assets for their production; for instance, pouring $9 million worth of

costs into each episode (Littleton). In contrast, as a national broadcaster using public funds in a relatively small market, the CBC must take risks differently. To produce a hit such as *Little Mosque*—insofar as it takes a risk to try something genuinely new and noteworthy—their gambles must be risky without being risqué, be generally good-natured while still being culturally germane, and do so at a reduced cost without feeling too amateurish or second-rate. The producers of *Little Mosque* took risks in that they created a show portraying Muslim characters in an affable, relatable way that many other networks worried may be misconstrued and backfire with public backlash or, even worse, low ratings. Nevertheless, this was a calculated risk that fit within the broader political mandate of encouraging multicultural messaging. This combination of factors driving the CBC's programming worked, and as the broadcaster notes, "[the] strength of the Canadian system hinges on a robust national public broadcaster, since there are some things that private broadcasters either cannot or will not do, but that a public broadcaster can and will do" (qtd. in Conway, "Little Mosque, Small Screen" 658).

Conway's research revealed varied opinions on the risks taken by the creators of *Little Mosque.* There was no shortage of media commentators willing to applaud the risks taken in the series (e.g., Anderson; Canadian Press). Others saw things differently, disputing the notion that there was anything daring about the series. Conway quotes columnist Margaret Wente, who was unconvinced of the show's revolutionary hype:

> *Little Mosque* is the most-hyped new CBC show in years, though not exactly the most true to life. Like all CBC shows, it has a mandate to instruct and uplift. Here

> is the moral lesson: Muslims are people too! And guess what! They're harmless! … *Little Mosque* is a show only the CBC could make. It is so risk-averse, so painfully correct, it makes your teeth ache. (*Little Mosque on the Prairie* n.p.)

At odds in these opinions are beliefs about how flexible society's attitudes are towards minorities on the small screen, how far networks can go to push or shape these attitudes, and what forms a genuine gamble. While it is initially difficult to come down on one side or another, a glimpse into other cases can help better understand what sort of success was at stake and achieved by *Little Mosque*.

In an alternative but plausible universe, we might not be talking about *Little Mosque*. Instead, we would be investigating another series that also premiered in 2007, *Aliens in America* (hitherto referred to as *Aliens*). *Aliens* was an American sitcom that had both the advertising buzz and the financial backing of a series premiering on network US TV and, notably, had a Muslim lead character who used his religious identity as a central plot convention. *Aliens* was a major network sitcom produced by CBS Paramount, airing on the CW network. At the time of its debut, *New York Times* critic Edward Wyatt was optimistic about the series' potential, writing "There are countless ways for a new television comedy to fail … *Aliens in America*, a new sitcom scheduled to have its premiere on the CW network in the fall, has dodged most of these bullets" (Wyatt). But, despite favourable early reviews, the well-funded American sitcom *Aliens* did fail, while the superficially far less likely to succeed *Little Mosque* ran for six seasons. In this section, I wish to suggest that understanding the role of multiculturalism, as opposed to an

American model of assimilation, reveals something significant about *Little Mosque* and why a Muslim-focused series thrived in Canada, counterpart, *Aliens*, withered away in the States.

Aliens portrayed the Tolchuck family, a middle-class family living in Wisconsin with all the appearances of a Norman Rockwell portrait. The Tolchucks participated in many quintessentially "American" pastimes such as skipping church in favour of the mall, preferring hamburgers over curry, and "keeping up with the Joneses." The series' initial premise set up a classic "fish out of water" plot. A well-intentioned American mom, Fanny, wanting to make her awkward son Justin more popular at school, agrees to host an exchange student. Expecting a "cultured" European student who would be able to integrate smoothly into the community, the family is surprised when Raja, a sixteen-year-old Muslim boy from Pakistan, arrives on their doorstep. With some obvious stereotypical conflicts in place, the punchlines are derived from the "clash of cultures" when a small, narrow-minded American town hosts an "exotic" Muslim student. *Aliens* was not unlike other successful sitcoms in its emphasis on how a "fish out of water" character was not only different but, crucially, could stay different despite many American influences.

Figure 3, a series poster from *Aliens*, illustrates this insider/outsider juxtaposition. The image shows the main character, Raja, holding a portrait of his host family, the Tolchucks. Raja holds up the picture alone, detached from his host family. The picture frame motif ought to be reminiscent of another famous, contemporary television poster, that of *Modern Family*.

Figure 3: A promotional poster for *Aliens in America* (IMDb, "Aliens in America").

Figure 4: The Season Eight cast of the ABC sitcom *Modern Family* (Lawson).

"progressive" sitcoms, in that it shows how varied cultural identities can come together in the powerful metaphor of the American melting pot. Figure 4 demonstrates a more inclusive type of "framing," showing the three branches of the *Modern Family* tree: the family patriarch with his much younger Colombian wife and kids on the left, the stereotypical nuclear family front and centre, and, on the right, the gay uncle who, along with his husband, has married and adopted a Vietnamese daughter. Notably, each of the family members is inside a portrait, illustrating the "modern" inclusivity and malleability of the American family.

In effect, these juxtaposed images reveal something about the types of ideological claims each show is making. *Modern Family* aims to participate in the constant reimagining of who makes up the cultural fabric of the US; however, it does so with the implicit belief that all the characters are, at their core, American, or at least, have become American throughout the season. In an interview about the show, one of the series' stars, Ty Burrell, expressed his belief that much of the program's success comes from the "everydayness" of an extended family that, despite obvious digressions from what might be called "normal," is nonetheless the same as everyone else: "That's the brilliance of the writing. In a completely unaggressive, apolitical way, they are showing this [gay] couple as *completely normal dealing with ordinary stuff*. The banality of it is the most revolutionary thing" (Broadbent, emphasis added). The underlying message is that if power dynamics are to stay more or less the same, anyone can be a part of the American dream the series depicts, as long as they do not fundamentally rock the boat. In other

words, whereas *Aliens* posed questions about what the core beliefs of American society are (Raja, for instance, wants to curb alcohol consumption and for women to dress more modestly), *Modern Family* does not intend to radically change American practices and ideals as much as it wants to modify to whom these privileges apply.

Aliens never planned to follow the *Modern Family* model of banal inclusivity but wanted to change how people fundamentally saw one another; or, more accurately, how people saw themselves in others. One of the series' producers, David Guarascio, has said:

> So often people feel alienated in their own community, in their school, or in their family or culture … But we wanted to show something positive about that, where if you can just push past the differences on the surface of two people, you can find that there is so much that is similar going on with you. (qtd. in Wyatt)

Despite positive early reviews by many TV critics (cf. Wyatt), the reality was that the broader audience did not enjoy the show. "There's something moderately gutsy about lampooning present-day bigotry toward Muslims within a sitcom," Brian Lowry wrote of the series (4); however, this gutsy lampooning ended up not having a significant effect on the American media landscape, and the network cancelled the series after only one season.

Thus, *Aliens* premiered with a bang but went out with a whimper, and as was written at the time, "to very little surprise, CW has cancelled their critically-lauded but viewer-ignored sitcom, *Aliens in America*" (Kimball). Unlike *Little Mosque, Aliens* never did find a steady audience, with the show's finale viewership rankings coming in at 94th

out of 96 total shows that week. At present, there has been no sustained investigation into the specific reasons that the CW cancelled *Aliens*, outside of the obvious reason that small audiences plagued the series. Ultimately, there were issues of misaligned messaging insofar as audiences were seemingly not receptive towards the ideological messages presented by the producers.

America has no strong tradition of multiculturalism; instead, the US is typically thought to be more of an assimilating "melting pot." For *Aliens,* this posed a problem, because "*Aliens in America* is an unexpectedly poignant and complex exploration of the virtues of individuality versus conformity. The episodes didn't always come down squarely in favour of the former" (Murray). The series critiqued American culture from an imaginary outsider's perspective, from a viewpoint that did not bend in favour of US ideals. For example, in episode 105, "Help Wanted," Raja decides to help his host family by getting a part-time job, which he initially finds difficult until he finds a job (as a nod to stereotypes) in a convenience store. There is only one catch: unlike his Americanized boss, who is also an immigrant but one who has come to adopt "western" ideas, Raja refuses to allow his underage classmates to purchase alcohol and cigarettes. Raja's portrayal is markedly different than how Muslims are represented in media:

> Maybe potential viewers were scared away by the premise, fearing a weekly lecture or some kind of Muslim minstrelsy (or both). Or maybe they sampled the show and decided they were more comfortable with the Muslims of [the TV show] *24*. If the politics of today have taught us anything, it's that American citizens will

> sometimes reject a perfectly pleasant piece of pop culture just because they're sure it's making a statement that they'd rather not support. Every straw has become the last straw. (Murray)

Pop culture is, typically, inherently political and, often, deeply conservative. Even so, one can appreciate Murray's note that audiences do not necessarily want overt political baggage in their pop culture diet, especially when it comes to the charged area of Muslim (non)assimilation. Murray's claim is that the American context was overly politicized for this sort of show, which led to low viewership. While it might not be impossible for an American comedy series showcasing Muslim characters to succeed, the fact that it failed suggests something important about the Canadian context and gives credence to understanding differences north of the border.

The "Multi-Counter-Culture"

Aliens suffered from a failure in the American context that contrasted with Canada's experience with *Little Mosque*. An existing policy of multiculturalism created specific criteria for CBC that created a niche for *Little Mosque*, showing diversity in a previously underexplored media context. This is multiculturalism in the *active* sense; it is an overt political undertaking. Conversely, multiculturalism in the *passive* sense also had an effect. Passive multiculturalism is more than specific initiatives or policies, but also includes abstract ways that audiences understand and relate to ideas of what constitutes a nation's culture. One could suggest that formalized multiculturalism, such as that offered by the Canadian government, shaped a relatively favourable appreciation of the series.

There are alternative perspectives that show how the failures of multiculturalism are, surprisingly, also part of the popularity of the series. Plausibly, failures of multiculturalism—real, perceived, or uncertain—factor into why *Little Mosque* flourished in Canada.

The term *mult-cult*, coined by Daniel Johnson, refers to the powerful ideological effects of the official policy of multiculturalism on Canadians, and to how the concept has exerted a "cult-like" effect (5) on the collective imagination of the nation. Johnson inverts the typical notion of multiculturalism, that Canadians "enjoy equal status" (3), which he sees as a detriment to thorough and effective critique. He argues that the very idea of multiculturalism "arises to persuade Canadians that they have something to protect: a unified, egalitarian, diverse nation that stretches uninterrupted from 'sea to sea to sea'" (6). Johnson is fundamentally convinced that multi*cult*uralism is a method that masquerades the more sinister aspects of Canadian culture, hiding its hegemonic processes behind a glossy façade of inclusion, tolerance, and celebration. Many countries that promote multiculturalism show favourable quality of life measures contrasted against nations who do not, but these benefits come at the cost of suppressed politics or what Johnson describes as a type of cultural "tourism." Kogila Moodley expands this thought:

> The ideological aspect of multiculturalism is best illustrated by its focus on the non-controversial, expressive aspects of culture. As long as cultural persistence is confined to food, clothes, dance, and music, then cultural diversity provides colour

> to an otherwise mundane monotonous technological society…As such it serves to be no threat, but on the contrary trivializes, neutralizes, and absorbs social and economic inequalities. (qtd. in D. M. Johnson 11)

In this view, contrary to popular understanding, multiculturalism is not politically progressive in a meaningful way, and substitutes perception for politics.

Perhaps it is worth clarifying what is meant here by "politics." There is an argument that any shared set of ideas across a given society is political; however, for the purposes of this work, "political" is meant in the sense that certain ideas or practices prompt critical thought and further governmental action that could change the structures of society. For people like legal scholar Augie Fleras, multiculturalism can try to restrict this impulse towards action; multiculturalism is important because of its depoliticization of society's differences, and Canadian multiculturalism is less about the promotion or celebration of diversity than it is about the neutralization of those things that might disrupt social cohesion and harmony. In short, multiculturalism functions to maintain existing laws, constitutional values, and individual rights, and does so by only tolerating differences of a relatively superficial nature, most often in the private or personal domains (Fleras, *Racisms in a Multicultural Canada* 25). Since at least 1988, Canadians have been generally enculturated to accept beliefs that are different from their own, so long as they

do not challenge what are perceived to be the fundamental tenets of Canadian identity.[18] Fleras characterizes this mindset as being "safe from difference, safe for difference" (*The Politics of Multiculturalism* 23). Fleras is critical of *Little Mosque* because he sees the series as perpetuating media whitewashing, a form of polite racism that exploits an idealized notion of multiculturalism to insulate Canada from pursuing actual change. He points to various tactics at play, including representing minorities' experiences as universal, rather than culturally specific; avoiding outright political positions; representing minorities as either unattainably perfect or quirky; and making representations of minorities less about them than about how others react *to* them (*Racisms in a Multicultural Canada* 134–35). Fleras' analysis reminds us that multiculturalism is a double-edged sword, and progress can come with unforeseen damage or unintended consequences:

> Playing Muslims for laughs may well defuse anti-Muslim stereotypes and Islamophobic fears. But repackaging Muslims and Islam into something palatable for mainstream consumption and overseas sales manages to sanitize what in

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[18] A salient example of this phenomenon is the reoccurring debate around women wearing the hijab or niqab. As a headscarf, the hijab does not cover the entirety of a woman's face. In contrast, the niqab covers the entirety of a woman's face, excluding the eyes. For approximately the past decade, there has been a contentious debate over whether the niqab is permissible in some public functions, notably the swearing of oaths in court. One reading of this debate is that in a depoliticized context, the hijab is more culturally acceptable because it does not challenge a cornerstone of liberal ideology, that an individual is uniquely recognizable and accountable to the state. The niqab, in contrast, creates political disruption because it challenges these principles and, in doing so, reveals the limits of "acceptable" multiculturalism.

> reality may be an awkward post-9/11 situation … Such an approach is surely an improvement over the framing of Muslim and Islam as evil and untrustworthy. But any kind of whitewashing comes with a cost that cannot be dismissed.

While I believe that Fleras put it best because he understood how the potential shortcomings of *Little Mosque* fit the cultural dynamics within multiculturalism, others have raised similar criticisms (e.g., Claire; Cañas; Chao; Eid and Khan). However, these criticisms did not hinder the popularity of *Little Mosque*. Once more, looking south of the border is helpful, particularly Murray's claim that *Aliens* failed because the US "will sometimes reject a perfectly pleasant piece of pop culture just because they're sure it's making a statement that they'd rather not support. Every straw has become the last straw" (Murray). Post-9/11, many Muslims, especially those who look like Raja, the main character of *Aliens*, have been scapegoated and portrayed as outsiders to American society. This is not an indication that American audiences are more attuned to cultural politics and how they provide multiple meanings, but instead that they have different "blinders." Americans, for instance, tend to be more polarized in their understanding of oppositional cultures, in that they emphasize conflict and, as a result, conformity. A relevant example can be seen in episode 104 of *Aliens,* "The Metamorphosis," in which the boys at the high school are furious when Raja convinces the best-looking girl in class, Anita, to dress more modestly:

> Anita: Roger [incorrectly referring to Raja], what was that all about yesterday? I don't get it, are you gay?

Justin [the teenage son in Raja's host family]: No, he's not gay. He's just from a different culture.

Anita: [Sarcastically snapping] Is your name Roger?

Justin: Um, no. Nobody's is.

Raja: Anita, I am sorry if I offended you, but your behavior made me uncomfortable.

Anita: You're doing it again! What are you trying to pull?

Raja: Nothing. Anita, it simply saddens me to see you behave in the manner that you do.

Anita: What are you talking about?

Raja: It's as if the only value you have is your sexuality.

Anita: [Incredulous] Huh?

Raja: And I think you greatly underestimate what else you have to offer.

Anita: Is everyone in your country as cruel as you? (Zinberg)

The interaction depicts a "black and white" conflict. Consider the subtle difference when compared to an interaction between Baber, a devout Muslim man, and Layla, his daughter, in the second episode (102) of *Little Mosque.* In this scene, Baber also wants girls in high school to dress more modestly:

Baber: You look like a Protestant!

Layla: Don't you mean prostitute?

Baber: No. I mean 'Protestant.' (Kennedy, "The Barrier").

What Little Mosque deftly handles, and I argue Aliens does not, is how to fit jokes into a complex nexus of relationships. Although the kernels of the scenes are similar, Little Mosque shows a dialogue between two Muslim characters and demonstrates how diversity can exist in the Canadian context. This is made possible because of multiculturalism, which facilitates a greater leeway to make such jokes. Yet, this greater leeway of jokes does not necessarily translate into a better appreciation for the central issues facing Muslims in Canada. Sandra Cañas contends that multiculturalism can "menace" stereotypes only up to a certain point; it has its limits. In the case of Little Mosque, Cañas makes the following argument:

> Multiculturalism, in other words, can "menace" to the degree that it can be co-opted and redefined by the hegemonic powers producing sanitized versions that exclude so-called extreme cultural forms … The complexity of Islam is only partly emphasized, with no mention made of cleavages between Sunnis, Sufis, and Shiites. (209)

Like Johnson and others, Cañas correctly recognizes that multiculturalism does not entirely reveal every cultural difference, but allows only those things that are easily understood and digested by society at large. In some cases, this might be enough; however, as the present sociopolitical situation reveals, it might not be enough to radically change how society thinks, for instance, how society views Islam. The outcome of this type of multiculturalism is a community that can misunderstand cultural nuances.

In doing so, while superficial conflicts are resolved, more profound issues may still exist. Cañas continues,

> The show emphasizes the forging of national unity through the resolution of conflict; little attention is given to the complexities of the cultural backgrounds of some of the characters … This is what *Little Mosque* leaves out. Perhaps this is the political limitation of the professed multiculturalism of the series: the form of the cultural text—a television comedy—can only use satire, parody, and mimicry in comedic ways that, while challenging the Orientalist discourse of the Muslim Other, produces its own silences. (209)

Cañas concludes by noting that even as multiculturalism drives *Little Mosque,* it also limits it. However, she does not pursue a more involved discussion of what these silences reveal and how these silences remain hidden. What Cañas flags, but does not explicate, is the role of comedy in this process. It is a particular type of comedy that allows for this silencing to occur, one rather unique to the Canadian context.

At this juncture, we might ask how these criticisms of multiculturalism help to explain this chapter's central question: why did *Little Mosque* originate in Canada? At first blush, these criticisms might pose problems for audiences watching the series, causing viewers to lose interest or, even worse for producers, protest a series. With that in mind, it is advisable to remember that Johnson suggests that multiculturalism makes these issues seem friendly and less problematic, as part of the depoliticized nature of Canadian multiculturalism. Multiculturalism functions as an ideological disguise, one that can

minimize the impact of these issues. Hence, even though there are problematic readings of the series—in ways that are inherent to portraying problems facing the Islamic community via a sitcom—those reading fail to gather much momentum, by and large, because Canadian audiences have been encultured not to notice them. Multiculturalism generates spaces in which differences can be displayed; it also camouflages those things we might otherwise not wish to see. Thus, where multiculturalism might make a national audience more likely to accept a series like *Little Mosque,* it similarly blinds audiences to more problematic features of precisely what it celebrates.

Canadian Humour: A Multicultural Type of Comedy

Legend has it that the late, great Canadian comedian John Candy was at Pearson Airport in Toronto one day when a baggage handler came up to him and said, "Wow, John Candy. Let me ask you something, John—why is it when all you Canadian comedians make it big, you move down to the States?
John Candy replied, "Actually, I live north of Toronto."
And the baggage handler said, "Aw, that's too bad. I thought you made it big, eh?"
A Canadian comedy legend in his own right, Mike Myers (2–3).

Surprisingly, the most poorly understood and least discussed facet of *Little Mosque*'s rise to prominence are its comedic qualities. Superficially, comedic attributes might seem obvious. In fact, it is often the first thing that people notice when it comes to *Little Mosque*: "Look at this show, making jokes about Islam!" Yet, its comedic spin on the issues that Muslims face is taken at face value. Although there has been some work thinking about *what* is portrayed in *Little Mosque*'s comedy, there is virtually nothing concerning the *where,* the *why,* and the *how.* As any comic will tell you, context is equally

relevant to content: even the best joke will fall flat if it is told at the wrong time or place. Accordingly, this section focuses on the Canadian comedy context as a partial answer to this chapter's overarching questions of why a show such as *Little Mosque* first arrived in Canada and why the Canadian context was uniquely situated to do so. A significant part of the answer comes from the nation's comedic tradition.[19]

Other writers have positioned Canadian comedy in relation to its most significant influences, primarily British and American humour. However, these roots explain only a portion of what is occurring in the Canadian comic sensibility and its ironically detached style. What has been lacking is contextualization of these comedic roots within the Canadian multicultural framework, but it is this relationship that sets the stage for a show such as *Little Mosque* to debut on the country's national broadcaster.

Grey Comedy: A Canadian Sensibility

"Canadians have been so busy explaining to the Americans that we aren't British, and to the British that we aren't Americans that we haven't had time to become Canadians" Helen Gordon McPherson (qtd. in Desaulniers 74)

There is a formulaic quality to many conversations about Canadian humour. The blueprint goes something like this: 1) mention that both at home and abroad, Canadians

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[19] A small but regrettable proviso: speaking about Canadian comedy tends to minimize francophone traditions, treating them as their own rather than what one would find in English-speaking parts of the country. Yvon Deschamps comes to mind as a hilarious Quebecer, who famously said all the province wants is "*Un Québec independent dans un Canada uni"* (loosely, an independent Quebec in unified Canada) (Ferguson xvi). Ultimately, topics in francophone comedy deserve their own thesis.

are generally considered a funny group of people; 2) note that for a country its size, there is a long history of Canadian comics becoming incredibly successful south of the border, reaffirming point one; 3) acknowledge that geographically, historically, and politically, Canada has strong cultural ties to both Britain and the United States; and, finally, 4) lament a reality in which, for a relatively long time, the Canadian comedy scene has had little commercial success on the worldwide stage.

Beverly Rasporich's *Made-in-Canada Humour*, one of the few books explicitly assessing Canadian humour, illustrates this cultural dynamic. She argues that Canadian comics have an international identity as a middle power, one which has its basis in the way that celebrated humorist Stephen Leacock[20] had "cocked his humorous eyes towards both sides of the Atlantic in the early 20th century" (Rasporich xvi). Effectively, Rasporich builds a case that through many of the nation's early formative years, Canada was dominated by two outside international interests and, in light of this, developed what she termed double vision:

> This double vision, undoubtedly a legacy of colonialism, has meant a humorous advantage to an inordinate number of contemporary Canadian comics who, with the objectivity of distance, easily reinterpreted Americans to themselves or

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[20] A Canadian comedy legend, Leacock was writing humorous pieces around the turn of the twentieth century. Since that time, he has come to be known as one of the seminal figures in the nation's comic history and is memorialized with the "Stephen Leacock Medal for Humour," which has been awarded yearly since 1947 (National Library of Canada).

> injected a novel, zany British-inspired mode of humour into the U.S. scene. The Canadian middling position has proved to be a boon to comedians. (xvi)

This middling boon for Canadian comedians is debatable. A charitable reading of this statement is that Canadian comics have for some time found a great deal of commercial success once they move abroad, although the same is not as easily said for comedians domestically. At the end of the twentieth century, the domestic success of Canadian comics was somewhat bleak:

> The math is simple. In 1996, the CBC (including radio), employed approximately twenty-five comedians and comedy writers. About fifteen of Yuk Yuk's top stand-ups made over forty thousand dollars that year. *The Red Green Show* most likely brought another two Canadians in above forty thousand [dollars]. That means that in 1996, a grand total of forty-two comedians earned a full-time living doing comedy [in Canada]. (Clark 257)

As these statistics are ten years before the debut of *Little Mosque* and twenty years removed from the present day, my point here is not to make a definitive claim about the conditions of Canadian comedy today, but rather to set a tone for some of the challenges it faces. In this spirit, I wish to pull on two loose conceptual threads that will later tie into my analysis. Canadian comedy has two dominant traditions based on the colonial and imperial powers of Britain and the U.S., respectively. Though these traditions allowed for a thriving community of talented comics, this talent did not necessarily translate into

domestic commercial success and viability. Perhaps nobody has put it as pithily as Bruce McCall:

> It is impossible to fully express Canadian resentment of America's cultural dominance, and the sense of impotence and helplessness involved has been oppressing Canadians since that fleeting high-water mark of self-regard in 1814 when British troops burned down the White House as revenge for the U.S.'s having torched the Canadian Parliament a year earlier. Humor—subversive, ironic, usually dark—is one of the very few weapons available to the oppressed. Which is why the Jews, the Irish, the Russians, and the Canadians are so funny.

This is true enough, but he continues ironically: "Being Canadian, however, the Canadians keep it to themselves."

Comedy, especially that which is seen as socially engaging, is often seen as on the fringe of what is socially tolerated, pushing boundaries and using the healing nature of laughter to hide sharply barbed critiques. While this may be true in many traditions, this is not necessarily the case for Canadian comedy. Gerald Lynch, one of the few academics who has considered the qualities of Canadian humour at length, has one word for it: "moderate" (199). Although describing Canadian comedy as moderate does sound like a thinly-veiled synonym for dull, or even failed, comedy, this is not Lynch's intention. Instead, Canadian comedy, and the comic tastes of those who tend to consume it, has developed a certain sensibility, one that is typically self-reflexive and concerned with its

place in the world. Lynch argues that Canadian comedy found its voice in the early writings of Leacock and Thomas McCulloch, noting:

> [it] continues today to be distinguished for humor and satire in an ironic voice that expresses a spirit of an essentially conservative communal consciousness; it respects traditions and institutions that have proven their worth over generations; it suspects radical change and change for change's sake; it recognizes a definitive relation between place and identity. (Rasporich 264)

Each of Lynch's points is worth further exploration, and each will be addressed over the course of this thesis. However, at the moment, it is most valuable to pause on his final point: Canadian comedy has always been a deliberation concerning the relationship between place and identity.

Take Off, to the Great [Grey] North: The Starting Point for Canadian Comedy

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Q: What's the difference between an American and a Canadian?
A: A Canadian not only has a sense of humour, but they can also spell it.
A well-travelled joke throughout Canada

One truism about Canadian comedy, which I also plan to use here, can be traced back to a reputed conversation between two comedy legends, Martin Short and Mike Myers, who were discussing the unique circumstances of the Great White North.[21] They

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[21] The "Great White North" is a colloquialism for Canada. More specifically, the term entered the comedic lexicon by way of the sketch comedy series *SCTV* and its characters

were specifically talking about why it seemed to be the case that Canadians, on average, were funnier than people from other countries, especially those to the immediate south. Short, having reflected on the situation, is said to have told Myers, "'When Americans are watching TV, they're watching TV, but when Canadians watch TV, they're watching American TV," to which Myers is said to have added, "That distinction makes you notice things" (264). The lesson offered is simple: Canadian media consumption has long been dominated by American influence, but because Canadians are not American, they use their outside perspective to their advantage. When combined with the import of British comedies, particularly during the height of *Monty Python* and its cultural companions, Canadians were exposed to two traditions that, in Rasporich's opinion, meant that the nation's citizens "were better educated in humour. They have had a broader, more sophisticated taste because of their experience with two traditions" (Gervais).

There are several common ways to describe humour, such as blue, dark, deadpan, observational, ironic, or satirical, to name a few. Further, whereas every culture has aspects of many diverging styles, it is fair to say that there are some basic traits that characterize places. America, for instance, has been deeply influenced by the transition from vaudeville performances to stand-up, and has developed a taste for slapstick and observational humour. For our purposes, the observational style is most relevant.

Bob and Doug McKenzie. Needing to fill extra minutes of airtime for the Canadian broadcast, which was longer than its American counterpart because of fewer advertisements, comedians Rick Moranis and Dave Thomas created the endearing term "hosers," and became iconic Canadian caricatures during the 1980s.

Observational humour finds its laughs in everyday experiences, expressing nuance or new/skewed perspectives on things that most people can relate to through direct experience. Jerry Seinfeld's comedy, which serves as an archetype for the observational style, is a classic of this genre, with jokes that use the "have you ever noticed?" or "what's the deal with?" setup. American comedy tends to examine the commonplace and exaggerate its traits, looking for the mutual experiences of everyday people and, correspondingly, placing the "American experience" at the forefront of the joking.

Unlike the American tradition, the British sense of humour is appreciably more understated, reserved, and often more barbed. Further, British sensibility tends to be more ironic, macabre, and self-deprecating. One such example can be seen in the reflections offered by comic Ricky Gervais, a British comedian who has also had tremendous success internationally:

> There's a received wisdom in the U.K. that Americans don't get irony. This is of course not true. But what is true is that they don't use it all the time. It shows up in the smarter comedies but Americans don't use it as much socially as Brits. We use it as liberally as prepositions in everyday speech. We [Brits] tease our friends. We use sarcasm as a shield and a weapon. We avoid sincerity until it's absolutely necessary. We mercilessly take the piss out of people we like or dislike basically. And ourselves. This is very important. Our brashness and swagger is laden with equal portions of self-deprecation. (qtd. in Doyle)

Where the American sensibility is more straightforward and observational, the British tend to favour indirect irony that is ostensibly pricklier.[22] Differences between these comedic traditions exist, and what happens when these two traditions mix is relevant to our discussion.

The case study for this mixture is Canada. Understanding the origins of the Canadian sense of humour is relevant insofar as it partially explains why a show such as *Little Mosque* found an initial home on the nation's airwaves. Aspects of *Little Mosque* use straightforward American observational comedy, but it also took on an original theme, the lighter side of being a North American Muslim, which American networks did not dare touch, at least at that time. American TV networks responded to post-9/11 realities with shows focusing on hypersecurity and terrorism, such as *24, Tyrant,* and *Homeland; Little Mosque* did not fit into this model, but instead treated Muslims in Canada in an arguably gentler and more humorous way. In his article on the premiere of the series, TV critic John Doyle reflected on comments made by viewers of an American news show. One American viewer said that after seeing Muslims acting humorously, "I see no humour in *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. I see a Muslim, and I think 9/11. This country has been without mosques since it began, and yes, I see the religion in a negative light. I feel

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[22] Except when it is not. These distinctions, of course, tend to hold true the broader the view, but exceptions and transnational comedy-hybridity regularly occur. This simply speaks to broad taste; a person/culture's preference is not exclusionary, but rather a tendency.

threatened by mosques being built in our country" (qtd. in Doyle, "*Little Mosque* Is Gloriously Canadian"). Doyle, speaking proudly but with a hint of sarcasm, replied:

> Right. But this is Canada and we pride ourselves on being more tolerant here. We roll our eyes at the paranoia and ignorance of Americans, and believe it's legitimate to strengthen our tolerance by poking gentle fun at those who are intolerant, and even by poking fun at Muslims. After all, they are kinda wacky, like the rest of us.

What this speaks to is a Canadian attitude towards humour. The insinuation in the American news viewer's remarks is that the topic of Muslims and comedy is too dark for her country's tastes. Comic scholar Andrew Clark shed some light on the situation:

> Canada's status as the official observer of the American experience arms Canadian comedians with the ironic distance needed to mock America until it laughs. Canadian comedians also have the British connection. They have grown up influenced by the likes of Monty Python. This added dimension gives Canadian comedy it's dark irony. We can handle grey. (257)

In a word, the Canadian comic tradition found balance. Canadians were, by and large, well equipped to appreciate a comedy like *Little Mosque.*[23]

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[23] In 2012, the BBC produced the sitcom *Citizen Khan*, which depicted a Pakistani Muslim living in England. Though it was also a "Muslim sitcom," its reception differed greatly from that of *Little Mosque.* After the series premiere, its broadcaster received nearly 200 complaints about a "tasteless depiction of Islam" (BBC News Service, "BBC's 'Muslim

Grey Humour in Action

There are other examples of this Canadian "grey humour" treatment of ethnicity that have achieved noteworthy levels of success, albeit not as often in sitcoms. The most famous example is Russell Peters, a Canadian stand-up comic of Indian heritage, who is best known for his bold jokes about all ethnicities, often mimicking others with stereotypical accents. David Gillota, author of *Ethnic Humor in Multiethnic America,* rightly points to Peters as one of—if not *the*—most skilled comics in the world at deftly tiptoeing around sensitive subjects. Where Gillota is misled, however, is that he treats Peters as a *de facto* American, meaning that, because (unlike John Candy) he moved to the U.S. after his comedy success, the Canadian and American contexts of his comedy are interchangeable.[24] Gillota, whose research focuses primarily on the U.S., downplays how Canada shapes comics and comedies; however, I contend that the different contexts

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Sitcom' *Citizen Khan* Provokes 185 Complaints"). Abdul-Azim Ahmed came to the following conclusion: "As a comedy, it could have played an important role in subverting racism and Islamophobia while simultaneously providing an opportunity to showcase talented British Muslim writers and actors. Unfortunately, the show has failed to capitalize on these opportunities" (95). I would argue that the British (sitcom) comedy tradition is as conducive for what Ahmed would prefer, compared to Canada. What was missing, however, is the emphasis on making multiculturalism a priority, as evidenced by the fact that "[Britain] has not been formally affirmed in any constitutional, legislative or parliamentary sense" (Queens University).

[24] Given the political climate in the era of U.S. President Donald Trump, and the long history of a dominant American culture industry, Gillota makes the soft suggestion that America has a reciprocal relationship with importing/exporting culture: "[Peters'] humor reflects not only the diverse populations of the United States and Canada but also the ways in which America is part of a multidirectional global web of commerce and culture" (146). My analysis privileges Canada.

cannot be minimized. Gillota's discussion of Peters' style mirrors how one might also describe multiculturalism:

> Much of his humor is built on his experiences interacting with members of different ethnic communities. … unlike many other ethnic humorists, Peters's [sic] humor is about much more than his own ethnic community of South Asian immigrants. … Peters is a skilled mimic, and his humor often relies on ethnic accents and stereotypes. He digs deeper than the surface stereotype, though, and provides more complex cultural insight. Much of his humor, for instance, is built on the awkward social situations that may arise with individuals with different cultural backgrounds interact. This humor encourages intercultural dialogue but understands that such dialogue is often fraught with anxiety and has the potential for conflict. (146–47)

Gillota makes the case that Peters is unique for an American comic (even though Peters is Canadian) because he skillfully integrates many ethnic voices into his routine, unlike what is more commonly seen with other American comics. Moreover, Peters' comedy is less about an individual relating to a melting pot society than it is about how these relationships continue to exist, despite anxieties and conflict. So, while it makes sense to agree with many of Gillota's observations about Peters comedic sources and skill, I argue that he misunderstands the social structures that helped shape Peters' techniques and subjects. In other words, Peters employs an evolving style of grey comedy in his routine, something he honed in Canada, before his big break in America.

Peters, a first-generation Canadian, understands that he walks a comedic line that is, in part, made possible by the Canadian context. For instance, one of his routines tells about how his father tried to "become" Canadian when Russell was a child:

> [Feigning an Indian accent, mimicking his father, which continues throughout the joke]: 'Son, tonight, we will become Canadians.'
>
> I said 'Dad, I was already born here. I think I've got it covered. But okay, what's your plan?'
>
> He says, 'Son, I have bought a barbecue.'
>
> I say, 'What are you going to do? Cook the rest of Canada until we're the only ones left?'
>
> 'No, Canadians like to eat the barbecue.'
>
> I go, 'Dad, they don't actually eat the barbecue, but I think I know where you're going with this. So, what's your plan?'
>
> So, he goes [looking around slyly], "Tonight, we will have a barbecue in the backyard. We will invite all of the neighbours. They will come over eat our food, and think we are Canadian.'
>
> I said, 'Dad, if they eat our food, they'll know we're not Canadian. Our food will have, um, flavour.' (Fenyn)

Peters plays with a lot of ideas in this joke. He shows an insider/outsider dynamic; he is simultaneously Canadian by birth but, somehow, also not "entirely" Canadian because of his family; and, as is often the case, he links multicultural identity to food. Offhandedly,

the joke shows that for him and his family to assimilate into Canada, the right path did not include trying to imitate perfectly what their neighbours did. Rather, it meant becoming more comfortable with how their own identities fit into society, not how they successfully changed to fit the community. To do so, Peters relies on the observational style of American humour and on the ironic mocking distance that is more typical of British comedy. Peters comes from neither of these backgrounds, at least directly. Instead, he found his voice within an existing comedic tradition in Canada, one that celebrated his "grey" style, even though the themes of his jokes were uniquely his own. His strategy is very similar to that of *Little Mosque*; indeed, Peters and *Little Mosque* are arguably the two most discussed Canadian comedies from the past decade. For both, the Canadian context played a central role in shaping their comedic style and subsequent reception. More importantly, it is no coincidence that their comedic styles came from the mixture of multicultural experiences and a style of comedy, grey humour, that worked well with the content. Grey humour is about finding a middle ground, which balances the familiarity to know a situation with the distance/comfort needed to mock it. Retelling a well-known joke about Canucks seems especially relevant here: “Why did the Canadian cross the road? To get to the middle.”

An Answer to “Why Canada?”

Why Canada? That was the central question of this chapter. Accordingly, I made the case that the most relevant historical and cultural context for the rise of *Little Mosque* was the intersection of multiculturalism and Canada’s comic tradition. Multiculturalism,

including racism, religious tolerance, Orientalism, and other topics, helps make sense of the relevant themes; yet, multiculturalism is not a monolithic concept. Though it more often than not has positive connotations, multiculturalism can be profoundly problematic and, rather than building authentic connections between cultures, can reduce them to stereotypes that ultimately maintain existing power relations. In other words, there is an inconsistency to be found in multiculturalism, a positive and negative sense of the concept that is exhibited in the comedy of *Little Mosque*. Grey comedy as a brand of humour that is relatively distinctive to Canada was fashioned by multicultural pressures and, more importantly, implies a positionality to Canadian humour that privileges a "middling" perspective.

The following chapters use this basis of Canadian multiculturalism and Canadian comedy and apply them to *Little Mosque* in detail in order to shift from *why* the series debuted in Canada to *how* it happened and *what* commentary it offers.

Chapter 2: Analysis of the Sitcom Form in Seasons One through Three (2007-09)

Sitcoms: A Genre "Viewed and Skewed"

Another important thread in this thesis is connected to gaining a better understanding of the *Little Mosque*'s tagline, "a little Muslim twist," and what that implies. The "twist" has multiple meanings, and there are two distinct but intertwining lines of inquiry. The series represents an attempt to reconfigure the presiding shape of Canadian multiculturalism with the soft touch of a gentle sitcom. This observation, however, is low-hanging fruit; *Little Mosque* has always been upfront with its aim of better weaving Muslim culture into the Canadian multicultural tapestry. In this respect, it is easy to appreciate many of the producers' motivations in creating the series.

What is less clear is a more comprehensive examination of the series concerning how it mobilized sitcom genre conventions to shape social commentary. This chapter examines the series from an underrepresented perspective, focusing on the effects of sitcom genre conventions on the show's social commentary. Specifically, I wish to illustrate how the themes and ideologies depicted throughout the show are, to borrow a term from sitcom scholar Mary Dalton, "viewed and skewed" via the genre. As such, this chapter aims to show how the sitcom genre promotes a particular ideological perspective; sitcom conventions take real-world issues and, more often than not, skew them towards specific ends. This chapter considers this issue by breaking down the internal logic of any sitcom into its three main components: setting, characters, and plot. I intend to illustrate

how sitcom genre conventions facilitate dominant readings of the show's ideological messaging in favour of more negotiated or oppositional interpretations.

Analysis of storylines and plots involves examinations of characters and settings, and how these meld into coherent ideological positions. Significantly, rather than look at jokes and themes separately, this analysis is based on representative episodes as case studies. Each episode was selected primarily because of its portrayal of a vital aspect of ideological work found in *Little Mosque.* Other episodes did something similar, but some episodes figure more prominently while others, true to sitcom form, were "fillers."[25] It is also worth noting that this chapter examines the earlier seasons of the series. As Conway correctly explained, these earlier episodes tended to spend considerably more time explaining, elucidating, and exploring topics concerning Muslim identities, customs, and, for lack of a better word, "normalcy." In contrast, the latter half of the series, which will be considered more concretely in the next chapter, shifted its focus more towards conflict and turmoil, relatively speaking, given the context of a light-hearted sitcom.

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[25] While the term may sound derogatory, "filler" episodes are common in sitcoms, and the use of this term is not a criticism of a series. Instead, these episodes are ones in which nothing "major" happens, such that a person could skip an episode and not miss any critical plot development. With the decline of traditional, over-the-air/cable viewing habits, some shows have stepped away from filler episodes. However, in the early stages of TV history, in which recording and video-on-demand were largely non-existent, most series in prime time were "fillers" to ensure they could keep viewers week-to-week. Arguably, this is the major reason why self-contained episodes are so prevalent in sitcom, as audiences were conditioned to watch sitcoms in this way for decades.

Why Shows "About Nothing" Tell Us Something About Culture

It was the post-war period that gave rise to the TV sitcom as we now know it. Television, following radio, was making its way into many North American homes as the next wave of mass communication and entertainment. At that time, networks were using formulas to produce quick and easy programming, formulas that they could readily reproduce to ensure high viewership and, consequently, advertising dollars. In the era in which it was exceedingly rare to see households with more than one TV, this meant primetime TV had to have broad appeal and be relatable to as many in a household as possible. Sitcoms were especially good at using a recognizable formula to accomplish this goal: they could rely on visual, verbal, and situational jokes to layer laughs for different tastes, simultaneously catering to different ages and interests in a household.

Moreover, specific techniques amplified pre-existing comic elements. For instance, the laugh track, an essential part of early sitcom TV, replicated a group experience in what Medhurst and Tuck called "the electronic substitute for collective experience" (45). In short, sitcoms, from the beginning, have been about appealing to collective, shared experiences. Considering these elements of sitcom TV, it is evident that the genre, despite its sometimes-superficial connotation, has become deeply ingrained in the make-up of the television industry and, for that matter, the cultural fabric of many places around the world.

Like other genres, the sitcom is evolving. Genre hybridity has changed past paradigms. Series such as *Trailer Park Boys, The Office* (UK), and *Arrested Development,*

are notable for taking documentary style techniques and blending them with sitcom conventions. More recently, shows such as *Atlanta, You're the Worst,* and *Please Like Me* blur TV drama with humour, so that long story arcs are better able to balance emotional moods with greater nuance. Characters suffer less from receiving stock or conventional treatment. Arguably, much of this change relates to how TV is viewed in the DVD and Netflix era, as audiences are assured that they will not miss an episode nor suffer from forgetting episode nuances due to long gaps between viewing back-to-back episodes (Matrix). Despite these changes, the decisions made by the creators of *Little Mosque* were largely conservative, deliberately choosing to avoid newer trends in sitcom production. Michael Kennedy, the director of many of the series' episodes, affirmed this when Conway interviewed him:

> It was my belief, and the network executives' strong recommendation, that the show would benefit best by being shot in a very clean and simple, straightforward manner, deliberately without any trendy contemporary stylish aspects such as handheld camera, etc. They wanted it to look very much like 'a traditional sitcom.' It would be a traditional sitcom, with a very edgy topic. If it had been possible, I am sure they would have shot it with 3 or 4 cameras in front of a live audience, like many successful American sitcoms. ("Little Mosque on the Prairie: Jokes and the Contradictions of the Sitcom")

Building on Kennedy's thoughts, it would be logical to consider the influence of nostalgia. In retrospect, Kennedy anticipated what attracted many TV viewers. One competitive

advantage of streaming sites over traditional broadcast TV is access to higher-quality audience data, which feeds into computer algorithms that predict the sorts of programming to which various audiences gravitate. As the aggregate data show, the collection of individual viewing habits guide what types of TV shows are produced. *The Guardian*, for instance, investigated this trend in programming:

> [Netflix] can use that information to find out which series are weekend-long binges and which are Tuesday evening comfort food … The challenge is to mine all that niche-focused data to create something a general audience will like. So, the key to creating new programming is making sure the genre, duration, and actors are among things a large number of viewers already enjoy. The data seems to suggest that means a half-hour sitcom. (Thielman)

These aggregated data indicates that sitcoms are partly a nostalgia-fueled medium, so what relevance does this have for *Little Mosque*?

Producers of *Little Mosque* tried to develop a sitcom that, while relying on a traditional sitcom legacy, added a twist: subconscious inception, in that the series attempted to strategically use the social standing of sitcom TV to relay messaging.

Setting: Where "There's Not a Lot Goin' On"

It would be hard to imagine *Cheers* happening in a coffee shop instead of a dingy bar. The cubicle-based drudgery of *The Office* does not translate well to the flashier TV soundstage featured in *30 Rock*. These observations are meant to say that setting matters, for numerous reasons: what sorts of plot lines are believable, how audiences connect and

relate to stories and characters, and what sort of messages are communicated. At this writing, one of the most popular and successful series on Canadian TV is *Kim's Convenience,* a series that depicts a Korean family who runs a small store in Toronto's Regent Park area, a noted centre of multicultural activity. In this sense, seeing people from all walks of life come through the store makes sense; it is a microcosm of Toronto that tends to resonate with its image as a cosmopolitan city. Moreover, it seemed realistic that Toronto would be the setting for the first Canadian sitcom featuring nearly all Asian leads. This diversity, of course, would have made some sense as a location for a similar type of show about Muslim characters. No one would have been surprised if Thorncliffe Park, another multicultural pocket of Toronto, was the site for a series trying to do what *Little Mosque* did. But *Little Mosque* is notable, in part, because it avoided this easy opportunity instead of choosing to opt for a small-town locale. A lot is going on in Toronto; there is, apparently, not a lot in rural Saskatchewan, and that is crucial in understanding the trajectory of this series.

Little Mosque's name also makes a conspicuous allusion. The title is reminiscent of another popular TV series, *Little House on the Prairie* (*"Little House,"* 1974-83). Based on the children's books written by Laura Ingalls Wilder, *Little House*'s stories also took place on the prairies. That, however, is the extent of these series' similarities. Whereas *Little Mosque* was a sitcom, *Little House* was a period piece drama, depicting settler life in the American Midwest and, according to an executive producer of *Little Mosque,* Mary Darling, the title and design aesthetic (as seen above) was a small homage to Darling's

Figure 5: Images of each show's title screen (IMDb, "Little Mosque"; IMDb, "Little House on the Prairie").

home state of Montana, in which *Little House* was set (Conway, *Little Mosque on the Prairie*).

Although it has only a superficial connection to *Little House*, *Little Mosque* has intertextual connections with other TV series. A comparison can be made between *Little Mosque* and its fellow Canadian contemporary, *Corner Gas.* Also set in rural Saskatchewan, *Corner Gas* is one of the most well-liked and celebrated Canadian sitcoms of the past decade, and it pre-dated *Little Mosque* by only three years. This section contrasts these two series in order to discuss the conventions of sitcom settings in general terms. It is valuable to understand why two of the most successful Canadian sitcoms

come from small, rural towns and, further, why this is significant in understanding the social commentary of *Little Mosque*.

Setting a Situation

As a writer of sitcoms, Simon Dunn also teaches others how to write scripts. When starting a new script, he identifies some things a beginning writer must consider. The most straightforward feature to determine, according to Dunn, is the setting because "it is probably the first thing you know. Perhaps you've identified a niche, something, somewhere, that no-one else has thought of." However, Dunn continues with a word of warning: "Beware, original settings do not necessarily make for brilliant comedy. Some of the best (and most successful) sitcoms do not have original settings" (Dunn). The logic behind Dunn's advice is discernable when considering what most sitcoms aim to achieve. The genre, at its core, is meant to be relatable; audiences are supposed to be able to see parts of their lives reflected on the screen to develop a quicker emotional connection to the show. This is why sitcoms are often set in either the home, workplace, or community hub such as a café, church, or bar: three types of places with which most viewers can relate. It should come as no surprise that *Little Mosque*'s central locations were the Hamoudi/Sadiqi household, Fatima's café, and the combination church/mosque. Perhaps a person in the audience lives in an apartment, sips lattes at Starbucks, and mingles at the local community centre. Although the details change, these places are, for the most part, relatable in an abstract sense. Moreover, what they all have in common is the tendency to slow down and engage other characters as they move throughout their day; they are

places where people want to stop, talk, and resolve issues (Blake). Therefore, the question remains: what made a small, Canadian town a place where people wanted to stop and talk about multiculturalism and issues facing the Muslim community?

Canada and Sitcoms

Dog River, Saskatchewan has one gas station, Corner Gas, which shares its parking lot with the town's one diner, The Ruby. It is a long way from the hustle and bustle of *Seinfeld's, Friends',* or *30 Rock*'s New York City locales, away from Boston's *Cheers,* or even *Frasier's* Seattle. It is not even in the same country, and that is important.

Canada has an unfortunate history, relatively speaking, of making unsuccessful sitcoms. There are a variety of reasons for this failure, which makes the success of *Little Mosque* even more noteworthy. There is a discernable pattern in those sitcoms that have found their niche. *Letterkenny* and *Schitt's Creek,* for example, take place in small, run-down Canadian towns.[26] Shows with a longer track record of success, such as *Trailer Park Boys* (whose setting is self-evident), *Corner Gas,* and, of course, *Little Mosque* also share this characteristic. This record of success raises the question of why a disproportionate number of successful Canadian series seem to take place in rural locations.

There are several theories worth considering. Many Canadian sitcoms happen in non-descript, ambiguous locations such as bars, coffee shops, offices, or family living

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[26] The opening title screen of *Letterkenny* reflects this sentiment well: "There is a small town of 5000 people in Midwestern Ontario called Letterkenny. Letterkenny consists of hicks, skids, hockey players and Christians. These are their problems" (Tierney).

rooms. These are the broad appeal, nondescript locations that hedge bets that if the show succeeds (although such shows rarely do), it may be syndicated abroad, so the locations are intended to be culturally transferrable. Successful use of these locations, however, requires an investment in production values—sets and props that match (or improve) the quality of other, similar series. For instance, D.K. Latta uses *Seed* and *Michael: Tuesdays and Thursdays*, as examples of shows that tried to use a Canadian sense of humour while being set in urban locations. His observations led him to conclude that these series were not usually understood as "Canadian," but were more often understood by audiences as American. The unfortunate consequence of this misattribution seemed to be the viewers' judgement of their quality; because Canadian budgets are often fractions of what their southern counterparts receive, these production decisions often appear sub-par or, as Latta puts it, "the worst of both worlds—like a mermaid with a fish head and human legs" (Latta). In other words, even though these series may have featured quality writing and acting, their initial impression as low-budget Americanized sitcoms limited their audience appeal and contributed to their failure to develop as promising series. This compelling line of argument provides insight as to why certain shows are unsuccessful. Canadian audiences can access American programming with high production values that look like the places they are from: big, worldly cities such as New York or Los Angeles.

Latta's observations about less successful Canadian shows being too "Americanized" leads to a fruitful line of thought about the impact of stereotypical

Canadian locations being palatable to national audiences. Recognizing this reality, TV critic Bill Brioux made the following observation:

> The worst thing a Canadian comedy can do is look like it is trying to be an American comedy … When *Corner Gas*—set and produced in Saskatchewan—would weave [hockey legend] Darryl Sittler or [news broadcaster] Lloyd Robertson or even [Canadian movie star] Kiefer Sutherland into their mix as a joke, 1.5 million Canadians laughed every week … its uncompromising Canadian-ness was one reason why it was so loved here at home. (Brioux)

For Brioux and others like him, the familiarity with the Canadian landscape and culture is what attracted/engaged audiences. While small-towns on TV may feel Canadian, they also do not feel American. This is not at all to say that American shows cannot be situated in rural locals, because of course they can, but it is to say that a rural setting affords a bit more flexibility to tell stories and present characters that are slightly outside the immediate American media hegemony.

In Canadian (and many other) successful sitcoms, the setting serves as an audience hook for initial episodes, but must eventually recede in favour of characters in which audiences are emotionally invested. Therefore, Canadian rural locations are, in essence, about downplaying locale and enhancing character relatability. The comedies are "situational" in the sense that the situations in which the characters are portrayed are supposed to be abstracted from any specific setting and apply broadly to the audience at home. Viewers are meant to say, "this is just like so and so from work!" Although not

intuitive, this often means that there needs to be *less* going on concerning the setting, which is often emphasized by critics but is more superficial than it is commonly understood to be. Less focus on a particular location allows for more focus on the characters and plotlines; a lowkey setting removes "background noise," and the setting becomes, in a sense, superficial.

"Not a lot going on": Leaving Toronto for the Rural Life

You think there's not a lot goin' on / but look closer, baby, you're so wrong / and that's why you can stay so long / where there's not a lot goin' on
"Not a Lot Goin' On," the Corner Gas theme song (Northey Valenzuela).

A blue sedan drives past a 1950's inspired café, and a bell rings as it pulls up to the adjacent gas station. A middle-aged attendant, who we later learn is named Brent, grabs the pump hose and asks the driver, "Want me to fill it up?" Responding "Sure," the driver gets out of the vehicle, and looks around at the scenery:

Driver: Ya know, I've never driven across Saskatchewan before.

Brent: Well, you still haven't really. Still 'bout halfway to go yet.

Driver: Sure is flat.

Brent: How'd ya mean?

Driver: You know, flat. Nothing to see.

Brent: What do you mean? Like topographically? Hey Hank! [He says this to another character, who was previously off camera and is casually reading a comic

book] This guy says that Saskatchewan is flat.

Hank: How'd you mean?

Brent: Topographically, I guess. Says there's nothing to see.

Hank: There's lots to see. Nothing to block your view.

Brent: [repeating Hank to the driver]: There's lots to see, nothing to block your view. Like the mountains back there [turns to look behind himself]. They're, er, well, what the hell?! I could have sworn there was a big mountain range back there, jutting up into the sky all purple and majestic. Must be thinking of a postcard I saw or something. It is kinda flat, thanks for pointing that out.

Driver: You guys always this sarcastic?

Brent: Nothing else to do. [Theme song plays]. (D. Storey)

This scene is the cold open of the debut episode of *Corner Gas.*[27] Thematically, the scene sets the stage for the next 106 episodes. The show thrives on the playful banter between characters, demonstrated in that scene by Hank and Brent, and the ability to make fun of the obvious. The small town locale is simultaneously highlighted and downplayed in the opening scene of the series. Further, it is reinforced by the opening lyrics of the theme song: "You think there's not a lot goin' on / but look closer, baby, you're so wrong" (Northey Valenzuela). Despite these lyrics, I argue that something important is going on: a direct relationship between *Corner Gas* and *Little Mosque,* which certainly helped the

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[27] A cold open is a technique used in TV and film in which the story jumps right into a scene before the opening credits roll.

latter find its footing in the Canadian TV landscape. "Not a lot going on," in fact, is something of a space-clearing technique; it is a signal to audiences that something is going to happen where there is typically nothing of particular importance.[28] Clearing this space is an important step.

Even accounting for the fact that sitcoms tend to use a templated style of script crafting, the series debuts of *Corner Gas* and *Little Mosque* demonstrate a remarkable symmetry. This section shows how these two series crafted their premieres and how these similarities formed a critical phase of the initial "world building" that allowed *Little Mosque* to break barriers by introducing a predominantly Muslim cast.

Corner Gas' debut, "Ruby Reborn," opens post-credits in an average-looking gas station filled with road snacks, magazines, and various automotive products. Hank, looking nervous, is talking to Brent, who is standing behind the counter. Due to a town-wide "epidemic" of bad coffee, Hank is moaning about the closure of the café for renovations. Making matters worse, he harbours concerns that the new owner of the café, Lacey, the Torontonian niece of the recently deceased former owner, is going to change the beloved restaurant: "she's not going to change the place, is she? Turn it into one of those snooty Toronto restaurants or 'eateries?'" (D. Storey). Brent, as is often the case,

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[28] Chuck Klosterman rightly notes that TV comedies are often subject to a tired cliché, that they are "about nothing," famously referring to *Seinfeld*. In this respect, I draw a parallel between "a show about nothing" and a place with "not a lot going on." Further, as he aptly notes, chalking something up as nothing "erroneously suggests that it's vision was empty. By consciously stating that it had no higher purpose … it was able to goof around with concepts that battered the deepest tenets of institutionalized society" (167).

tries to console Hank, but it has little effect. Hank continues to worry: is she going to be wearing a tiara? Just what kind of name is Lacey anyway? Exasperated, Hank gets to the root of it all: “Is it so unreasonable to be curious about a new person in town? Does she have a criminal record? That’s a reasonable question? Does she do drugs? That’s a valid inquiry?” Finally, having had enough, Brent responds sarcastically:

> Maybe she doesn't want us in the coffee shop 'cause she's turning the whole place into a methamphetamine lab. Get the kids hooked on the meth and the crack cocaine, 'cause once they're hooked on that, you know what's next: marijuana. Then jazz music. Forget about it.

Catching Hank’s attention, Brent becomes more serious:

> I just don’t want everyone in town gossiping. It was probably hard enough for Lacey to move from Toronto to Dog River, Saskatchewan. Plus, everyone is comparing her to her aunt Ruby, those are big shoes to fill. (D. Storey)

Immediately, the audience is given two valuable pieces of information about the series. First, they are shown what is at stake: is the town going to remain the same quaint place it was before the outsider arrived? Second, because Hank comes across as out of touch with reality, the scene suggests that viewers sympathize with Lacey, someone who is

seemingly going to have a difficult time making the transition to the small town without disrupting its "stagnant" existence.

Can the town of Dog River keep its culture? Can it absorb incoming outside influences and remain the place the locals believe they cherish? These questions are at the heart of what the first scene demonstrates. Perhaps predictably, the concerns are mostly much ado about nothing. Lacey slowly learns what it means to be part of the community, starting by naming the café after her late aunt Ruby, and although she is

Figure 6: A newspaper clipping from the first episode of *Corner Gas* (D. Storey).

often the basis for "fish out of water" storylines, she essentially becomes another small town local. That everything tends to stay the same in the small town is crucial. It means that the setting can absorb a lot of change, and that *it is a stable environment that accommodates—not liberates—its characters*; methamphetamine does not enter the community, nor do the townsfolk develop a taste for jazz. Predictably, the show conforms to the traditional sitcom style as outlined by Saul Austerlitz: "a sitcom is defined by its episodes. Each episode is a self-enclosed world, a brief overturning of the established order of its universe before returning, unblemished, to the precise spot from which it began" (4).

The similarities between each series' respective debut episode are striking. In the opening episode of *Little Mosque,* the audience finds the Muslim community on the precipice of change. Rather than the passing of the cornerstone restaurateur, however, the characters of Mercy are facing a different sort of change. Yasir, a small businessperson in town, has negotiated a deal for space with the Anglican minister and the Muslim community finally has a "mosque," albeit in the back room of a church. While many of the mosque's congregation are pleased with the progress, others are suspicious: many in the congregation believe that Yasir just wanted to have some cheap office space to rent; and, at the same time, it is becoming clear that many of the non-Muslim townsfolk are unenthusiastic with the prospects of an increased Islamic presence in their community. In addition, the incoming imam, Amaar, is a young, beardless, former lawyer from

Toronto who does not fit the image of a "proper" imam of the cloth. In sum, the series opens on Mercy in a nervous state of flux.

Just as Hank worries about Lacey in *Corner Gas'* Dog River, the town of Mercy has its suspicions about Amaar, the new imam. Both come from the big city of Toronto, and both of them personify the fears that townsfolk have about outside influences corrupting their rural lifestyle. Expectedly, Amaar's arrival extends the anxieties that were earlier present in the people of Dog River; the political context of a Muslim religious leader arriving in a rural community adds a layer of suspicion post 9/11. Sitcoms are inclined to meet audience expectations—especially concerning what sorts of jokes to expect—and *Little Mosque* did not disappoint. The pilot episode delivered several terrorism jokes. For example, one scene shows a few poorly chosen words, such as "suicide" and "mission," causing a misunderstanding at the airport, which landed Amaar in police questioning about the potential bombing of his flight.[29] This suspicion does not decrease when his taxi arrives in town. Stepping out of the car, he is immediately accosted by an eager journalist, while Rayyan, Sarah, and Yasir, waiting to greet Amaar and welcome him to the town, watch in dismay:

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[29] The jokes in this scene are typically "sitcomish," and fall under the "misunderstanding" trope (Juckel et al.). Amaar is on his cell, presumably arguing with his mother about his decision to quit the legal profession and become an Imam. Knowledge of with whom and why he is talking is crucial, as he naively explains that he has "been planning this [the move to Toronto] for months" and that "if dad thinks this is suicide, so be it. This is Allah's plan for me." Predictably, the scene cuts to a police officer rushing in and detaining Amaar, proclaiming "step away from the bag, you're not going to paradise today" (Kennedy, "Little Mosque").

Journalist: [in an anxious tone] What is your relationship with this mosque?

Amaar: Hang on [motioning to the taxi driver]; just let me pay…where's Yasir?

Journalist: What is your comment on the scandal? [referring to putting a mosque in a church, unaware of what happened to Amaar at the airport] Who are you?

Amaar: I'm Amaar Rashid, the new Imam. It's like a priest or a rabbi, only browner. (Kennedy, "Little Mosque")

Horrified, the flabbergasted Hamoudis intervene, trying to defuse the confusion. Briefly, it seems as though the Hamoudis succeed, and everything is going to be resolved. However, Amaar, speaking to Yasir, foolishly mentions that he attempted to call Yasir, only to get the construction business' answering machine, which even more clumsily promises to "blow people away," in the context of his reasonable prices, of course. But this nuance is lost on the journalist and, reinvigorated, he returns to the scoop:

Journalist: Wah…wah…wait! Blowing people away? Are you part of a sleeper cell?

The Hamoudis, in unison: Don't answer that!

Journalist: What is your connection to Al Qaeda?

Rayyan: What is your connection to journalism?!

Sarah: Oh, all right. Show's over.

Journalist: Are you from Saudi Arabia?

Amaar: No! I'm from Toronto!

Journalist: Toronto! Even better! This story is huge. (Kennedy, "Little Mosque")

Misinformed as he is, the journalist is, in a sense, correct about having a huge story. The caveat is that it is huge only in the context of a small town like Mercy. An imam arriving by taxi in a major city is not at all notable. The small-town setting allows the story to more believably exaggerate the premise of the plot; the story is "huge" for a small community that has few, if any, genuinely newsworthy events.

Figure 7: Screenshot from Episode One of *Little Mosque*. Note the similarity to *Corner Gas'* similar newspaper gag (Kennedy, "Little Mosque").

Whether the café or diner, gas station or church, the settings in both *Little Mosque* and *Corner Gas* offer the audience parallel storylines in which each corresponding town is facing the outside pressure of the world and a new (Torontonian) character is coming to town and threatening to disrupt the quiet little community. The production team of *Little*

Mosque was never under the illusion that they were doing something entirely new; in fact, like many others, I argue that *Little Mosque* made a conscious effort to mimic *Corner Gas*. Finding commonalities is a quick and easy way to build trust; in this context, *Little Mosque* developed confidence with Canadian audiences by situating new themes in a familiar setting. A consulting producer on *Corner Gas,* Mark Farrell, commented that what the rural locale in the series offered was an initial premise that could be resolved in the first few episodes—will an outside element corrupt the town?—which prompted his observation that Lacey is indeed a "fish *in water*" (qtd. in Weinman, "It Was a Gas"). Lacey finds that, despite feeling different at the beginning, she adapts to become an integral part of the community. "The underlying message here," star and creator Butt explains, "is that we're a lot more the same than we are different" (qtd. in Weinman, "It Was a Gas").

Does the same sentiment—that we are more the same than different—apply to *Little Mosque?* That was undoubtedly the goal. The fundamental question posed in *Little Mosque*'s setting is whether residents of Mercy could handle the threat of shifting cultural dynamics in their town. Are people in the community going to find that they are more alike than different? Abstracted to the broader society, the analogy is unmistakable, as the political context of the entire country was asking precisely the same question.

Setting the Scene for the Remainder of the Series

While characters take time to develop, places are more immediately recognizable. It is not a coincidence that even *Little Mosque*'s title mentions two sites, the mosque and

the prairies. The title sets up a perceived incongruity that draws in audiences, and which sets in motion a fictional world in which recognizable characters can act.

First, like most sitcoms, the debut of the series establishes the self-contained nature of the town. Though it would be impossible to ignore the outside world entirely, the performance is almost always locally focused, relying very little on what is happening beyond Mercy's borders. The best example of this localism is the reliance on small-town media in the series: the town relies on local reports and newscasters commenting on what is happening in the community. This means that the place becomes a bubble, a place in which storylines are confined within the town space, a place that, before the start of the series, was characterized by lack of diversity and misunderstandings about Islam. This lack of understanding is a vital feature for the "fish out of water" trope that propels the early storylines in which more liberal values from outside the community, represented by Amaar and his Toronto sensibilities, challenge preconceived notions about the culture of the town.

Small communities are often seen as more conservative than urban, more liberal cities. A recognizable political term, particularly in the United States, flyover country is a recognizable TV trope as well. The name alludes to the idea that rural places, often those in the middle of the country, are places that more liberal, upwardly mobile people skip or "fly over" when moving between the trendier urban cities on the east and west coasts. Though some details differ slightly each time the TV writers use this trope, the concept implies a type of nostalgia for friendly, community-oriented values, albeit values that are

typically linked to a mid-century social conservatism that is not known to welcome change or, for that matter, diversity. What is important to appreciate is that using this trope allows for its subversion. Hence, *Little Mosque*'s setting in the small town of Mercy implicitly establishes expectations about the culture one might find there: rural, less welcoming of diversity, perhaps even less knowledgeable. Vitally, this also sets up a situation in which expectations can be subverted and challenged, returning to the notion that a show set in Toronto, a city that does not suffer from a flyover status, would likely not have the same potential for social commentary.

Potential is evocative. While the rural location of the series was designed in part to facilitate certain types of storylines, there is also the implicit corollary that if a small town can make progressive community changes, then so too could more progressive urban cities. In practice, of course, this process is far more complicated; however, it is suggestive of the overarching commentary in the series. If a small town like Mercy can function as a harmonious multicultural space, rural ideologies and all, then there is no reason not to expect the same thing for urban locations as well.

Having now set the scene, so to speak, we can now focus on what happens in the town of Mercy, shifting attention to the characters in the series.

Characters: Making the Particular Universal

Before examining the town of Mercy, Saskatchewan, it is helpful to reflect on sixteenth-century Italy. During this period, a new type of theatre group, *commedia dell'arte*, or "comedy of the profession," was emerging. The central feature of the style was

its focus on characters, an ensemble cast whose actors played stock characters in typical and relatable situations. One of the main features of the style was the use of masks. While most actors developed their own personal mask, they were nearly always based on those who were already established and recognized by audiences. Hence, actors added their own personal "twists" to characters, which meant that audiences could reasonably know what to expect from a performance and, moreover, were often aware of the slight, yet important, changes in stock characters. As noted in its encyclopedia entry, "This helped to keep a traditional continuity while allowing diversity" (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Commedia Dell'arte").

The notion of keeping characters "traditional yet diverse" is an apt description of the collection of characters in *Little Mosque*. Although it is not a widely-used term, the website *tvtropes.org* traces the Italian history of *commedia dell'arte* to a present-day iteration, what it now calls a "universal-adaptor cast," a feature of many TV sitcoms. A universal-adaptor case is a basis for how sitcom writers model their characters, attempting to strike a balance between providing something new for audiences while maintaining expected elements that put viewers at ease. As the website explains: "You have a set of characters. They work well as an ensemble; so well, in fact, that they slot into just about any scenario you care to imagine, within the constraints of genre" (*TV Tropes*, "Universal-Adaptor Cast"). Practically speaking, this means that if writers use stock characters—characters that bear strong resemblances to familiar and well-liked

characters depicted in other series—less work on characters needs to occur in the early episodes:

> What you have is a Universal-Adaptor Cast: an ensemble is cast into an odd situation and yet fits in perfectly because their roles and characters are so well-defined. They have the same personalities and the same relationships, but play out the conventions of that genre regardless of how bizarre it would be for them normally. (*TV Tropes*, "Universal-Adaptor Cast")

Using stock characters provides an appreciable benefit for the writers of the series. The core concept of the series, that Muslims are "normal" in the same way that everyone else is "normal," quirks, warts, and all, requires a thoughtful blending of novelty and familiarity.

This section includes a brief description of the main characters in the series, focusing on how each offer something to the series. The diverse yet predictable characters frame the types of stories that the series can tell. Case studies of two episodes show how the types of characters reveal various ideological claims presented in the series.

Character Descriptions: The Paradox of Breaking Stereotypes

The characters portrayed in *Little Mosque* present a paradox. On the one hand, the show is explicit in its attempts to subvert stereotypes about Islam. On the other hand, sitcom TV, the genre that was selected to carry out this subversion, uses stereotypes as its lifeblood. Conway recognized this paradox, arguing that the show had to be "strategically essentialist," using stereotypes purposefully to show diversity (Conway, *Little Mosque on the Prairie*). If this sounds complicated, it is because it is. While *using* stereotypes is different from *relying on* stereotypes, that line can be obscure. The key is balance or, maybe more aptly, how the usage of stereotypes becomes "unbalanced." There is a precedent for this strategy extending back centuries, although it does not necessarily generate success. The issue is duality: sitcom characters must act in such a way that other characters within the diegesis can be misled for comic effect but must be transparent

Figure 8: A photo of the original cast of *Little Mosque* (Nawaz, "I Made Irreverent Art about Muslims.").

enough for audiences to feel as though they are in on the joke (Mills 84). The task for *Little Mosque*'s writers was to develop characters who were simultaneously comedic exaggerations and believable representations of Muslims who face real-world issues.[30]

At the show's debut, five principal Muslim characters attempted to meet this challenge of representation. Of course, no one single character can embody what it "means" to be Muslim in Canada—nor can a cast of five, for that matter—but there was nevertheless an attempt to share the diversity within Islam in the biographies of the series' main characters. What follows is a brief sketch of these characters, which highlight the eventual narrative functions they served:

1. Amaar Rashid (played by Zaib Shaikh) is a Toronto lawyer who moves to a new town and career as Mercy's imam in the first episode. A fish out of water in two distinct contexts, he is unfamiliar with the rural town and the more conservative style of Baber, the mosque's interim imam. Amaar is the lead character in the series. He connects rural issues with urban sensibilities, which is more often relatable in Canadian society. Amaar verbally externalizes his struggles with how to liberalize Islam, which underscores the evolving nature of Islam. Amaar has the "final say" in mosque decisions although he is often insecure about these decisions; thus, audiences can appreciate the nuances of

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[30] A relevant counter-example would be the American series *Aliens in America,* which features only one Muslim character in its cast, Raj, a teenage boy who does not represent even a fraction of the Muslim population. As such, educating audiences about Islam with any degree of breadth was far more challenging a task for *Aliens in America* than for *Little Mosque.*

the religion, even if the specifics do not contain a high degree of subtlety or nuance. The fish out of water trope is crucial, as Amaar's confusion is often a proxy for the confusion of audience members who are presumably also trying to make sense of the odd events that are occurring. Over time, Amaar becomes more comfortable in the town, becomes a respected member of the community, and assumes an additional role as husband to Rayyan.

2. Yasir Hamoudi (played by Carlo Rota) is not the most observant Muslim in Mercy. Typically, he plays the clueless (as opposed to the hyper-vigilant) father, who is more-or-less well-liked, if not slightly goofy, irresponsible, and disorganized. A good example of a common stock character in sitcoms, Yasir regularly but unsuccessfully attempts to conceal his relatively harmless deceptions. For instance, Yasir initially negotiated the agreement to have the mosque relocate to the church, but only did so because it also secured him free office space for his contracting business. A card-carrying member of the Conservative Party of Canada, Yasir is depicted as a "lapsed" Muslim. Tellingly, he is the most well-integrated Canadian who, because of family tradition, has maintained his Muslim identity, although he is often tempted to ignore his religious beliefs. For instance, Yasir joins a local men's lodge, with gambling and drinking, to further his business interests. In a similar vein to Christmas and Easter Christians,[31] he represents the disengaged Muslim until he divorces

[31] A colloquial term applied to people who follow religious traditions on major holidays but lead otherwise secular lives day-to-day.

Sarah and leaves the series in Season Six to tend to his mother in Lebanon; however, this decision was a function of Rota's other acting demands, rather than the internal logic of the show.

3. Sarah Hamoudi (played by Sheila McCarthy) was not raised Muslim, but was instead an Anglican who attended the church that later came to house the mosque. Sarah converted to Islam when she married Yasir and, like him, she struggles to follow Muslim traditions consistently, often inadvertently making errors such as serving cucumber sandwiches rather than curried lamb at the breaking of the Ramadan fast. Although she is skilled at her job at City Hall, she fits the "goofball" archetype. She often finds herself in compromising situations because of her scatterbrain ideas, for instance, breaking into her daughter's home after she moves out, and then getting trapped inside. Typically, Sarah's storylines portray her as an interlocutor between the Muslim and non-Muslim community, chiefly because her foibles of learning about Islam are meant to reflect society more broadly in a well-meaning, if not misguided, process. Near the end of the series, immediately after her divorce from Yasir, Sarah has a crisis of faith and briefly returns to the Anglican congregation, only to later switch back and affirm her belief in Islam without the pressure of needing to do so for marriage, as was the case when she first converted.
4. Rayyan Hamoudi (played by Sitara Hewitt) is Sarah and Yasir's daughter and the town's family doctor. Unlike her parents, Rayyan follows her religion

earnestly and is a strong advocate for feminism within Islam. In contrast to her mother, she dons a sartorial hijab and is active in promoting change in the mosque; for instance, she was the leading voice calling for the abolition of a prayer barrier in the mosque that separated the women from the men. Like Amaar, whom she eventually marries later in the series, Rayyan is often the voice for a more progressive and liberal Islam, and her overzealousness was commonly used by writers to put Rayyan in uncomfortable, yet funny, situations.

5. Fatima Dinssa (played by Arlene Duncan) is the beloved owner of one of Mercy's cafés and is an immigrant from Nigeria. Despite being conservative in her beliefs, especially compared to Rayyan, she avoids mosque politics, more often finding storylines out in the community. Instead, she is far more likely to get into a heated argument with Fred, the local radio DJ. Nevertheless, it is evident that the two have a fondness for one another, particularly Fred, who at times seems smitten with Fatima. While Sarah continues to learn about Islam, Fatima is a mirror image; throughout the series, she learns more about what it means to be Canadian, ultimately gaining her citizenship and celebrating the multiculturalism of the country. Depending on the situation, Fatima represents a woman's conservative rebuttal to Rayyan's ideas, the African/Nigerian diaspora, the businesswoman/entrepreneur, and the settled immigrant/new Canadian. As is often the case with multiculturalism, Fatima's

delicious food is the gateway for people to learn about another culture, in this case, Muslim-Canadians.

6. Baber Siddiqui (played by Manoj Sood) is a divorced economics professor and is the most conservative Muslim in Mercy. Unlike the other characters except for Fatima, Baber chooses not to wear western clothes, instead favouring a taqiyah and shalwar kameez. Despite being well educated, Baber says inappropriate things that he has misconstrued to fit his image of Islam; for example, he famously denounces "wine gums" candy as a western attempt to undermine Islam. Due to his conservative beliefs, he is at odds with Amaar, and their dialogue serves as educational exchanges for the benefit of the audience. That said, Baber is often shown to be a caring, reflective man under his hard exterior (often shown in his relationship with his daughter, Layla), who expresses humanity and concern for others as his personal beliefs. He demonstrates that being a conservative Muslim does not make one dangerous or malevolent.

The characters described above comprise the main cast of Muslim characters. Additionally, secondary characters such as Layla, Baber's teenage daughter, and J.J., Rayyan's temporary fiancé, had their own distinct storylines, but always in conjunction with the other characters. As a guiding principle, *Little Mosque*'s producers wanted to show a wide range of personalities, both Muslim and non-Muslim. In an interview, Nawaz stated: "I wanted to balance the show, so if there was a right-wing non-Muslim, there was a right-wing Muslim, and they were equally as racist and extremist, so … there wasn't the

sense that I was picking on one community more than the other" (qtd. in Conway, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* 42). Accordingly, the series features a few non-Muslim characters:

7. Fred Tupper, the local radio host (played by Neil Crone), is a stereotypical right-wing "shock jock" who often decries Muslims in the community. For instance, he regularly equates Muslims with terrorists, and is concerned that they want to take over the town. However, in fleeting moments of softness, Fred reveals that the opinions that he espouses on the radio are not reflective of his own beliefs, which are much milder, and are done mostly for ratings, which are driven by controversy. As Nawaz suggests, Fred is a vital character who provides the counterbalance to the conservatism that Baber preaches and underlines a key objective of the series by implicitly arguing that most of what is taken as radical conservatism is merely vapid hot air. Furthermore, Fred often provides an unsympathetic persona, which guides audiences to be more sympathetic towards Muslim issues in the community. His radio spots explain problems Muslims face, albeit poorly, with needed corrections by other characters. Fred is a reminder that, just as the Muslim community has Baber and, to a lesser degree, Fatima, Muslims do not have a monopoly on conservatism. Importantly, he exemplifies the influence of the media, demonstrating how a lack of on-air diversity skews discourse.
8. Duncan Magee (played by Duncan McGrath) was the reverend at Mercy Anglican Church. Magee, as he was affectionally called, begins the series as an unlikely mentor for Amaar, advising him about the community and the

religious ins and outs of Mercy. In conversations with Amaar, Magee has edifying value as he helps elucidate commonalities between Islam and Christianity. The strategy behind his character is that, by showing similarities between Christianity and Islam, audiences can come to understand Islam as it relates to their personal knowledge of Christianity or perhaps, simply religion in general. In this sense, the mosque moving into the church was not an "invasion" or "takeover," but a sharing, and Magee regularly embodies this sentiment. Unfortunately for Magee, while the Muslim congregation he helps is thriving, his own is dwindling, and he ends up being transferred out of town at the end of Season Three, making only sporadic appearances afterward.

9. The introduction of Reverend William Thorne (played by Brandon Firila) creates a dramatic shift in the series. Up until his Season Four debut, the relationship between the mosque and the church, as embodied in Amaar and Magee, was positive. As is the case in many sitcoms, however, the producers envisioned storylines concluding, and they needed to add a new dynamic to the series.[32] Thorne replaced Magee and, as his name suggests, he was antagonistic and misanthropic, two qualities that were absent from the series before his introduction.[33] Thorne wanted to bring his congregation back to prominence

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[32] If this seems like a departure from sitcom's instance on stasis, that is because it is. The discussion of the episode "Love Thy Neighbour" later in this thesis addresses this topic directly.

[33] Fred also has these qualities, but they are more transparently based on bravado and insincerity. In this respect, Thorne is an amplified Fred, extending cultural issues into the religious sphere.

in Mercy. His combativeness in not allowing the mosque to use the church space it had rented for years also signalled a significant change in the town dynamics. Previously, the town's Muslims were put in the position of needing to justify their place in the community, which Magee eased. In contrast, Season Four rebalances this dynamic with the introduction of Thorne, as the various groups clash more as equals, trying to determine whose vision of the town will prevail. Thorne instigates this change in direction, most visible in episode 410, "Gloves Will Keep Us Together," in which Amaar and Thorne hold a charity boxing event that compels the town to break into warring factions. Despite Thorne's hostility, the series was still a sitcom. Over time, Thorne begins to mellow and become part of the community, warming to his Muslim neighbours. Before Thorne, most of the opposition towards Islam was cultural, but Thorne's change of heart makes the second half of the series more explicitly about religious tolerance.

10. In addition to the three non-Muslim characters, a few others rounded out the cast. Ann Popowicz (played by Debra McGrath), the town's mayor, is often unpredictable, brash, and hedonistic, which creates moments of chaos in the town that requires other characters to manage. Joe Peterson (played by Boyd Banks) is a local farmer who is an outlier, appearing in various contexts depending on what a plot needed. For instance, he was sometimes the racially insensitive sounding-board for Fred, then surprisingly finds common ground with Baber as well. Nate Shore (played by Jeff White) later arrives in town to

nuance the community's media coverage when he becomes the newspaper's editor, allowing for more "wacky stories" to come out that do not aim to demonize Islam directly.

Together, the above ten characters make up the main cast of *Little Mosque.* Below is an exploration of how the writers use these characters to show audiences the diversity of the characters—and of Islam—in the series.

Episode 105: "The Convert"[34]

Marlon, a new white convert, has the entire mosque in a tizzy. Marlon's zealous embrace of Islam wins an immediate friend in Baber, but he soon alienates everyone by passing judgment on virtually everything the Muslims do. Meanwhile, Sarah, never too devout, decides it's time to become serious about Islam. But her passion soon wanes, even as Marlon's intensifies. Soon the entire mosque is cooking up hair-brained schemes to dampen Marlon's zeal.
- Episode Recap from the series' official website (CBC Staff, "Episode 105 - The Convert")

The North American media landscape has established certain expectations for depictions of Islam. We may consider, for instance, a distilled synopsis of the fifth episode of *Little Mosque*'s first season, "The Convert": a distraught man arrives in town and seeks the help of the local imam to help in his quest to denounce the trappings of western decadence. Out of context, one can easily imagine how such a synopsis could be

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[34] There are many strategies for demarking TV episodes. In this case, the numbering functions similarly to a street address. The final two numbers are the episode number within in a season; anything before those numbers are the season itself. Episode 105, "The Convert," is thus understood to be episode five of the first season.

(mis)interpreted; maybe a dark drama, perhaps a thriller, or even a biting documentary. Few people, although this is slowly changing, would suspect a comedy.

Reflecting on "The Convert" reveals how a diversity of characters within the sitcom genre works to invert prejudices. In the A-plot of the episode, Marlon, a single appearance character, arrives in town, looking as though he has stepped out of a thrift store stocked with 1970s castaways. The Mercy congregation welcomes him to the mosque and explains some of the most fundamental parts of Islam, such as who and what an imam is. To their surprise, Marlon speaks a bit of Arabic and shows himself quite knowledgeable about the religion, saying that he is serious about converting. As the story unfolds, what is revealed are the limits of extremism and anti-multicultural sentiment with which the series is willing to experiment. Early episodes in any series are critical because they familiarize audiences with characters and the tone of the series, setting expectations. In a genre such as sitcom TV, whose success relies on these characteristics, expectations are especially critical. In short, episode five is a foundational step to appreciating the series' position on a contentious theme such as radicalization, realized through substantial character development.

Marlon arrives in the mosque, and everyone is excited about potentially adding a new member to the congregation. Given the negative connotations Islam has faced in the previous episodes, getting a member of the public to convert would be considered a momentous success. The Hamoudis—Yasir, Sarah, and Rayyan—speak to Amaar after the sermon. Baber saddles up to Amaar's side, gesturing to an unfamiliar white man and

asking Sarah who he is, to which Sarah responds with a joke about inverted racism: "Right, because all white people know each other." The group investigates, and their subsequent reactions reveal some core personality traits. For instance, Amaar politely, if not slightly patronizingly, explains that he is in a mosque, to which Marlon responds in Arabic. Rayyan, who privileges intelligence and critical thinking, is impressed. Baber, who wants to undermine what he considers "western vices," is thrilled to see a potential convert in his ideological image, and delivers a backhanded insult towards Sarah by exclaiming, "Now we finally have a real convert!" Sarah, often defensive about her knowledge of Islam, retorts, but with little effect; everyone is focused on Marlon.

The scene cuts and transitions to the episode's B-plot. Sarah is feeling slighted at the implication that she is not a real convert to Islam because she does not take the religion seriously enough. Sarah offers to make a bet with Rayyan to pray five times a day for the next month, which shows that Sarah fails in knowing that betting is against the tenets of Islam. Sarah has not been particularly devout and is actually rather insensitive to certain issues. For the benefit of the audience, the family gathers what Sarah needs for her month of prayer: Yasir grabs her prayer mat, which is actually a floral yoga mat), while Rayyan gifts her a prayer clock. Sarah replies: "Well, this isn't something that would make it through security."

There is a stark contrast between Marlon and Sarah. Marlon follows Baber through the town, commenting on the impropriety they see. While Baber is thrilled, cracks begin to emerge, such as Marlon putting Baber in the uncomfortable position of having to

explain why Layla, Baber's daughter, chooses not to wear a hijab; Baber ultimately respects Layla's choices, regardless of his preferences. Marlon performs the *Shahadah,* the conversion ritual, and only becomes emboldened; he quickly becomes a critic of everyone in the town, remarking on their lack of piety and on Fatima's dinner not being correctly halal. He finally reveals to Amaar that his family has disowned him and he has no friends; it becomes very apparent that perhaps his demeanour and not his religion is part of the reason for this.

Sarah, in contrast, struggles with what it means to be a "good" Muslim, sleeping through prayer and forgetting fundamental parts of Islam. Nevertheless, she is well liked and well-meaning, so the congregation embraces her. The underlying message is that the Muslim community prefers a "decent" but religiously flawed congregant who kind and well-liked, rather than a devout but condescending one such as Marlon. Even Baber eventually turns on the convert during a visit to Baber's house. Layla and Baber argue about wearing a hijab, and Layla storms out of the room. Marlon offers some advice: "Have you tried beating her? It worked for the Taliban." Baber cautiously responds, "I suggest you find a role model a little bit closer to home" (Kennedy, "The Convert").

This "closer to home" line delivered by Baber is emblematic of a larger insight into the series itself. Baber, seeing that his views do not align with the convert, visits Amaar, who is playing dominoes with Yasir in the mosque. Contrary to his initial enthusiasm, Baber barges in yelling that he hates the "bloody" white guy. It is at this moment that the limits of "fundamentalism" in the series are defined. While Amaar plays peacekeeper,

offering to speak with Marlon, Baber retorts, "You can't talk to fundamentalists!" While both Amaar and Yasir roll their eyes, what we can infer is that there is a "right" and a "wrong" sort of fundamentalist. While Baber is loud, judgmental, and conservative in his views, his beliefs rarely affect others. Nor are Baber's views meant to harm others in a punitive way; he wants others to follow his beliefs and rallies against western decadence, but it is nearly always presented as an option (although, in his mind, the "right" option), rather than an edict that cannot be overturned. In fact, even within his household, Baber can rarely enforce strict rules on his daughter, who is far more liberally-minded than her father. Always, when disagreements arise, Baber values and respects people over strict codes of behaviour.

Marlon, however, cannot maintain relationships with individuals and the community. In fact, although he symbolizes diversity of beliefs within the Canadian context, he is ultimately ostracized in the town of Mercy. At his core, Marlon is the threat to a broad definition of Canadian multiculturalism because he wants to radically change the opportunities and freedoms people have in the mosque. Hence, although Baber and Marlon both wish to see women wear hijabs, Baber is the right kind of "radical" because he desires for others to come to this belief on their terms because it is righteous; Marlon, like the Taliban, wants to dictate what people wear. It is not the belief, but it is how one achieves that belief in the context of multiculturalism and respect for other humans, that matters.

Based on Marlon's suspicions that the Muslim community in Mercy is too "decadent," Yasir proposes a method to scare Marlon away that would, and perhaps could only, happen in a sitcom. With the help of Fatima and Rayyan, they set up a den of sin in the diner, complete with wine, gambling, ostentatious clothing, and, to top it all off, a roasted pig, all of which are *haraam* (forbidden) in Islam. This premise is classic in sitcom TV; ordinary characters dress in outlandish costumes and act entirely out of character to prank their way out of a potentially volatile situation. Moreover, the scene provides the additional benefit of an educational element, as it subtly teaches audiences about some central Islamic beliefs concerning what is and is not permissible in the religion. Predictably, within moments of entering the set-up, Marlon flees in horror at what he sees and, true to the sitcom format, everything returns to normal and Marlon is never mentioned in the series again.

Figure 9: Yasir, smoking a cigar and wearing a silk scarf, puts his plan into action (Kennedy, "The Convert").

During the coda, the group of pranksters momentarily appear regretful, and they turn towards Mecca - or try to turn; they have a debate about the proper direction - and atone. With that, the town returns to normal as the threat of "dangerous" fundamentalism is now gone, with its more acceptable version left for Baber. This conclusion reinforces the various personalities shown in the episode. Whereas Baber demonstrates moments of anger, the writers were careful to make this anger a specific personality trait, rather than a quality of the Islamic community. Similarly, Yasir's scheming to rid the town of Marlon was always contrasted against a backdrop of how "proper" Muslims tend not to act; again, it is framed in such a way that individual personality traits are emphasized and not cultural traits. In these cases, there is an inward focus concerning the main characters, most notably when it comes to anything that might portray Islam in a negative light. This portrayal is directly contrasted by the one-episode appearance of Marlon, who is constantly referencing the outside world and rationalizing his beliefs based on how other Muslim-majority communities handle social issues. Marlon's views are purposefully minimized, which reveals how the regular series characters were created to present a particular image of Islam.

In a discussion of the paradoxes of *Little Mosque*, Conway raises a salient point about how the characters in the series were supposed to humanize Muslims and present audiences with more well-rounded depictions of characters than one might find in a thriller or drama such as *24*. Conway argues that the notion of what it means to be "humanized" is constrained. He further, and correctly, notes that using the conventions

of sitcom TV is meant to appeal to a lighter side of the human experience and entails curtailing supposed "negative" emotions that risked alienating viewers. For example, rather than dealing with the deep-rooted Islamic issues Marlon raised in his brief time on the show, the principal characters emphasized that Marlon was simply an annoying, miserable character and not someone presenting particularly complex ideas about sociopolitical issues, something to which most of the audience, Muslim or not, could presumably relate. Conway noted that "[writers] had to flatten out the complexity of characters' beliefs, especially when they conflicted with those of 'regular' viewers" (*Little Mosque on the Prairie* n.p.). The consequence of this decision impacted storylines. Any supposed "negative" emotion such as exasperation or resentment had to be attributed to a personal failing rather than what Conway identified as larger structural factors, such as institutional racism or the fallout of the war on terror. Ironically, Conway concludes that "writers were faced with a paradox: 'humanizing' these characters meant cutting them off from much of what it meant to be human" (*Little Mosque on the Prairie*). For Conway, this paradox was a result of producers attempting to increase the show's saleability. Consideration of these observations relates to another perspective about how the characters fit into the vaster plot structure of the show, particularly as it relates to creating humorous, yet relevant, social commentary.

Balancing screen time for ten (and sometimes more) characters is challenging, and most sitcoms have fewer principal characters than *Little Mosque*. Since the goal of the series was to show a diverse community of Muslims within the Canadian context, using

many characters was significant. In this context, using ten characters seems much more challenging; how do writers grapple with such a task? Above, I noted that an essential feature of the show was its use of a universal-adapter cast, suggesting that the characters were more malleable than how we often think of a stable personality, able to adapt to plot devices in ways that serve the development of the storyline. This adaptation was crucial in the early stages of the show, as the audience presumably needed to gain an appreciation for Islam in Canada. The process has challenges; my discussion of "The Convert" focused on the need to make characters relatable, which also had the effect of flattening the characters' personas and removing emotions that might alienate audiences, to minimize negative connotations about Islam. It was a complicated process for the writers to navigate. The following section extends this discussion to examine how the writers constructed story arcs and plot devices while being mindful of their representation of Islam.

Following the Plot: Understanding *Little Mosque*'s Storylines

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"This is a sitcom we're talking about, not fucking Ibsen"
(Lodge 171).

Sitcoms are scripted, both literally and figuratively. David Lodge's novel *Therapy* tells the story of Laurence Passmore, a sitcom writer. Despite being a writer of a popular show, Laurence struggles with depression and increasingly finds that his life lacks real emotion. While he attempts to work some of his turmoil into his TV writing as a therapeutic method, he is met with stern resistance from the show's producers, who, as

the above quotation indicates, tell him that that is not how sitcoms work. The message is clearly that sitcoms should not leave audiences in an unsettled state; ostensibly, those feelings are for "more serious" works such as those by Ibsen, Shakespeare, or Angelou.

In many respects, Laurence struggles with what the *Little Mosque* writers faced while working on the earlier seasons, when they needed to flatten the characters to better "humanize" them for audiences. The same concept applied to the series' treatment of storylines. The remainder of this chapter deals with *Little Mosque's* plot construction, including the types of social commentary that are accentuated or suppressed. Genre expectations concerning sitcom TV also influence plot development. As has already been established, *Little Mosque* was developed to mimic the traditional sitcom format, and my analysis of the Season Two episode "Crush" demonstrates the tangible effect of this decision as it relates to the internal plot structure of a single episode. Understanding the implications of these sorts of story arcs, with respect to the shape and direction of the series' social commentary, is complex. Reflection on previous studies earlier sitcoms with socially conscious undertones and contrasting these shows with the Season One episode "Swimming Upstream" provides greater insights. So, even though *Little Mosque* is not Ibsen, there is indeed no lack of complexity in understanding the nuances of the show's stories.

Plumbing the Depths of a Shallow Medium

Earlier in the field of cultural studies, examining a sitcom such as *Little Mosque* may have seemed strange. The field tended to look for places of cultural resistance or

places in which cultural products might offer an alternative vision of how a society might look. Thus, for an examination of ideological implications, the sitcom genre was underrepresented "presumably because the regimes of power central to Cultural Studies' concerns are seen to be so transparently obvious in a sitcom that complex analysis isn't required" (Mills 2). Given its history, the genre seems an excellent example of what Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer were imagining when they explored the workings of the culture industry, which claimed that mass media were primarily designed to manipulate society and create passive viewers, unwilling to pursue radical alternatives to society's present state. Although humour has been regarded as an agitating social force, this is only true when the humour in question can provoke critical thought and reflection, which is not always the case. Mills, speaking specifically about sitcoms, laments that the repeated prioritization of commercial entertainment over subversive humour has effectively "neutered" the genre's power for sustained social commentary (135), an opinion he lays out rather bluntly:

> [sitcoms] rarely explicitly explore either macro social structures or the domestic and the individual has been one of the reasons for the criticism of sitcom's failure to comically interrogate and undermine dominant ideologies. *Sitcom has been a*

reflection of social changes, rather than an intervention into them. (Mills 45, emphasis added)[35]

However, this is not the same as saying that useful research does not exist with respect to sitcoms, since it most certainly has, but it is valuable to recognize that most previous work has had a tendency to do one of two things: either explain how a new sitcom fits within expectations of the genre, or describe how sitcoms have used genre hybridity to become something other, or more than, the traditional sitcom; for example, *Atlanta* or *Louie* (cf. Saraiya; Nowalk; Moylan). Hybridity focuses on film techniques more than issues of ideology and culture. For *Little Mosque,* the focus on ideology and culture is much more relevant.

Yet, I argue that there is something different in *Little Mosque* compared to most other sitcoms. *Little Mosque* was unique in the sense that it was explicitly a piece of social commentary, contrary to most other sitcoms in which social commentary was a secondary feature, if it was one at all. Furthermore, it was not as though the show was unaware of the genre's "usual expectations"; *Little Mosque* desired to feel like other sitcoms, rather than radically distinguish itself. This choice to look like other sitcoms

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[35] Although sitcoms nowadays more often broach social issues, the progress has been slow. In 2018, an episode of *Black-ish* that dealt with the topic of athletes kneeling for the national anthem was shelved, as has also been the case with other series such as *Seinfeld* (George facing race issues), *Cheers* (Sam faces an AIDS scare), or *Family Guy* (abortion as the subject of jokes) (Darwish).

changes the trajectory of the typical sitcom analysis because it positions consideration of the genre from a slightly different angle.

Concerning socially relevant comedy, sitcoms as a style generally receive relatively little discussion. Other forms, such as stand-up, political cartoons, and dark, satirical films are more often seen as socially relevant examples. Culturally, this speaks to a contemporary western appreciation of where the power of comedy exists. Influential thinkers have suggested that comedy's potency comes from how it can use jokes to be subversive, to push the boundaries of what is socially acceptable, and to change public perception.[36] The character of the court jester is a common reference point in this respect; his use of jokes to tell uncomfortable truths to those in power is a literary trope widely used in all types of media. In short, there is a notion that comedy's real potential for social commentary comes from its capacity to be subversive.

Herein lies the paradigm shift. What happens when a sitcom intentionally does the opposite of what cultural studies most often looks for and seeks to examine inclusion and not resistance? Moreover, what happens when the notion of "subversive" is replaced with "inclusive?" While this shift indeed does nothing to challenge cultural hegemony drastically, perhaps this is not necessarily the objective when considering the issues faced by visible minorities who, despite acknowledging significant shortcomings associated with cultural hegemony, nonetheless desire to better integrate into the dominant culture.

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[36] Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque immediately comes to mind as an example, as do Freud's ideas concerning tendentious jokes slipping past censorship.

It is one thing to challenge society with subversive comedy to inspire change, but it is entirely different to integrate into the dominant culture, not to radically change society, but rather to use education and exposure to find inclusion.

If one makes this change in perspective from the subversive to the inclusive power of comedy, past criticisms of sitcoms take on a different meaning. Previous criticisms of the genre from researchers such as Gerhard Jones assume a different tone when examined against the original intent. For example, Jones notes how sitcoms reinforce a conservative status quo through their typical storyarcs:

> [In the sitcom,] harmony is threatened when a character develops a desire that runs counter to the group's welfare, or misunderstands a situation because of poor communication, or contacts a disruptive outside element. The voice of the group – usually the voice of the father or equivalent [...] – tries to restore harmony but fails. The dissenter grabs at an easy, often unilateral solution. The solution fails, and the dissenter must surrender to the group for rescue. The problem turns out to be not very serious after all, and once everyone remembers to communicate and surrender his or her selfish goals, the wisdom of the group and its executive is proved. *Everyone, including the dissenter, is happier at the outset*. (4)

For Jones, the implications of everyone becoming happier and more satisfied than at the start are dangerous because such an ending hints at certain aspects of a hegemonic groupthink. The premise is that, if everyone just plays by the rules, everything will work out in the end. However, when abstracted from that context, one can easily see the appeal

of being part of a group in which everyone being happier at the end is "normal." In the case of *Little Mosque,* then, the following logic makes sense: Canadian society is (at least theoretically) an equal opportunist, multicultural country; however, lived experiences demonstrate a difference between idealism and reality, and minorities still face discrimination; therefore, the effort to use comedy to gently assimilate into a system that *should* include you, rather than taking a contrarian or revolutionary position, is logical. In a sense, *Little Mosque* was designed to take an established criticism of the sitcom genre and find a more negotiated position, turning the negative view that sitcoms do not often spur social change and reframe it into a positive - "you as viewers do not need to change; we're just like you!"

A cynic may argue that this is simply semantics. One could make the case that regardless of whether comedic boundaries are pushed for overt social change or inclusive jokes are used to engage majority acceptance, the results are the same. Perhaps this is so, although it feels a bit short-sighted. Rebecca Krefting discusses the intriguing concept of charged humour, which helps distinguish some key ideas. The term *charged humour* relies on an "electric shock" metaphor; this transferred charge from comic to the audience is motivating because it presents social inequalities and offers solutions on how to address them. It relies on culturally sensitive comics to give voices to the identity and experiences of marginalized groups and encourage action. Finally, and perhaps most crucially, comedy is intentionally divisive; it is supposed to divide opinion and compel those who have been marginalized and their allies to recognize their condition and push

forward with solutions based on critical thinking. To fully understand the metaphor of an electric charge, it is worthwhile to remember that, like the electrons and protons of an atom, "*charged humor both repels and attracts*" (Krefting 25). It is through this interplay, repulsion and attraction, that cultural change through comedy proceeds in what is effectively a dialectic, thesis versus anti-thesis. For instance, Krefting refers to comic Azhar Usman, also known as the "Ayatollah of Comedy," an Indian-American Muslim standup. Krefting cites a segment of Usman's performance *Allah Made Me Funny* as a prime example of what she means by charged humour. In the following passage, Usman laments how Muslims, specifically Iranians, are given unfair treatment in the media:

> But truthfully when was the last time you saw them in the media showing a normal Iranian family just hanging out? No, it's always a big mob, pissed off [*audience* laughter]. They don't like America and there is a big sign, 'death to America' [*audience* laughter]. Is that even grammatically correct? I have never been so angry at somebody that I am like death to you [*laughter*]. Death to me, death to you [loud audience laughter]. (77)

Usman's overall motivation, according to Krefting, is a call to action, an attempt to inspire those who face these issues to become more active politically. It is notable that most of the humour - at least, at the level of encouraging action - is directed at those in the marginalized group. Overall, and by contrast, *Little Mosque* avoided the plot of getting Muslims engaged in making a change. While Usman explicitly pushes a political agenda, *Little Mosque* was more about welcoming allies into a common cause.

Considering humour as a vehicle for social commentary, jokes such as Usman's are relatively easy to identify and have a reasonably straightforward progression to concrete political action, assuming those in the audience have been persuaded into action. In this respect, it is logical that comedy, presumed to have the highest ability to tackle sociopolitical issues, overtly addresses such issues. *Little Mosque* cannot be considered an instance of charged humour. In fact, as Krefting goes on to explain, TV has never been an advantageous medium for charged humour because it has always been constrained by advertisers and networks who are unwilling to potentially alienate some audiences. Instead, Krefting suggests live standup comedy as a more likely comedic venue for the use of charged humour. Ultimately, sitcoms have few if any, of the features of charged comedy, and this explains in large part why many scholars have mistakenly eschewed the area in favour of more explicitly politically and socially charged forms of comedy.

If Usman's comedy is charged, then *Little Mosque*'s approach is analogous to "a warm bath." A person viewing the show is supposed to comfortably slip in and enjoy it, soak in the good feelings, and come out feeling relaxed. This is an entirely different perspective on the role of comedy concerning social commentary and is less discussed in the literature. It is also counter-intuitive, given the context of Islamic identity post- 9/11 and how difficult it has been to construct jokes about Islam. Some people feel uncomfortable about Islam, and while telling comfortable jokes about Islam may also be uncomfortable, the gentle nature of comfortable jokes may positively influence some people who started out as less comfortable. As a result, writers needed a strategy in order

to weave together both familiar and unfamiliar contexts. The following section seeks to show how *Little Mosque*'s writers used a dual plot strategy to make the show feel comfortable and, in doing so, create the impression of a cohesive Canadian identity.

The Sitcom Code

There is a formula for plotting out the events of a sitcom episode. A thirty-minute episode (about twenty-one and a half minutes, with commercials) must contain a certain rhythm and momentum to ensure that all the expected pieces fall into place. The introduction foreshadows the theme for an episode, something like an overture in an opera. Next comes the obstacle: the audience is told what is troubling the protagonist(s) and hints are offered as to how these characters will face the hurdle in their own signature fashion. Complications arise, derailing the first attempt to overcome the obstacle, and tensions escalate until a showdown, an event that often requires a full-blown intervention, occurs. For better or for worse, but likely never that much worse, the issue dissipates, and the show has approximately three minutes to offer a brief denouement, sometimes alluding to what will happen in the next episode. Noah Charney, writing about his experiences trying to write a sitcom, called this structure the "sitcom-code."

The sitcom-code is vital for writers. Less intuitively, it is also significant for the psychology of audiences. Being familiar with the rhythm of sitcom TV, even unconsciously, can empower viewers to feel more in control of their lives. The field of parasocial psychology examines how people behave under the conditions of one-way

relationships in media and investigates reasons why people feel as though they are developing relationships with their favourite TV characters or feel a close connection to the protagonist of a book series, for example. Parasocial psychologists have found that people seek out familiar/predictable fictional worlds in their media consumption in order to restore balance to their lives after periods of stress, and to feel a sense of community belonging (Derrick 300). In one study, psychologists postulated that watching familiar TV shows would provide evidence for the social surrogacy hypothesis, which suggests that people can feel a sense of belonging by viewing a show exhibiting pro-social themes. The study found that perceptions of, and feelings of, personal threats were decreased when an individual thought back to a favourite TV show (Derrick et al. 360).

In the abstract, Derrick et al.'s findings are intriguing. In the tangible example of *Little Mosque,* they provide valuable insight into the techniques used in the production of the series. When first planning the series, the creators were concerned that most of the potential viewing audience would worry about the themes of the show, fail to have the background knowledge to get the jokes, or both. The post-9/11 context was, for many, an anxious time; in fact, it still is. Therefore, the show's producers needed to be able to introduce topics that were potential triggers without harmful escalation of said triggers. An example can be seen in the second episode of the first season, "The Barrier." This episode has a clear connection to Nawaz's earlier documentary, *Me and the Mosque;* both depicted gender issues within mosques, notably the barrier that more conservative mosques use to separate the congregation by gender during prayer. Experience tells us

that, when approached without caution, themes like this can ignite polarizing views that, once started, lead to heated debates and the loss of nuance and reflection, precisely what producers wanted to avoid. The show needed ways to deftly and sensitively approach topics that allowed time for consideration. Second, producers worried that a large segment of the audience would not understand jokes about Islam and that they needed to gain some foundational knowledge about the subject without losing interest (Conway, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* n.p.). The show needed to demonstrate points of connection and relevance with more than Muslim viewers. Finding the balance of how to approach a topic and the need to integrate many characters into each episode meant that the plot structure of the series required thoughtful plot construction, in order to balance the complexity that could have threatened interest in *Little Mosque*.

Predictably, the balancing act strategy employed by the writers of *Little Mosque* was another genre standard, known as the A/B plot. In old sitcoms such as *I Love Lucy* or *All in the Family*, the plot of a single episode carried one story arch that involved all the principal characters. However, it was not until the series *Barney Miller* (1975-82) that the A/B format was introduced. In that series, Barney Miller always faced a variety of problems, both in the police precinct where he worked and at home, and the program's creators wanted to show both aspects of the character's life. Other series began to use the A/B plot structure gradually, and by the 1990s it had become common (Weinman, "Sitcoms"). The A/B plot structure follows the basic sitcom structure described earlier, but it weaves together a major (A) and minor (B) plot, the latter getting slightly less

screen time and typically having lower stakes involved.[37] Sometimes, the B-plot is a microcosm of the more prominent A-plot, making it a subplot. Usually, the same characters do not feature heavily in both plotlines, and while the two can be brought together to share some aspect, this feature is not obligatory ("Plot Threads"; "Two Lines, No Waiting").

The use of multiple storylines allowed for more characters in *Little Mosque,* and it provided a more socially conscious strategy underpinning. Knowing that an issue-oriented approach was preferred, writers of *Little Mosque* employed the A/B style to present Muslim-specific issues in part A- and B-plots were used for more general, Canadian matters (Conway, *Little Mosque on the Prairie*). Muslims would relate to the Canadian issues but, more importantly, the writers anticipated that non-Muslim audiences would gain an understanding from the specifics of the A-plot and they would connect with the general themes such as gender roles, differences of opinion in small groups, or religious tolerance.

The B-plot, which focused on broad Canadian issues and humour, provided a buffer for potential trigger issues surrounding Islam in Canada. Rather than stoking

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[37] Modern sitcoms do not all feature A/B plots; *Everybody Loves Raymond* is one that does not. However, many do employ the multiple plotline strategy, and some can even have A/B/C/D plots. Often, these are series that weave together characters that have an underlying connection, such as familial relationships, that allow them to travel to many different settings/contexts while still having a reason to congregate, which is less likely for, say, co-workers. Such examples include *Modern Family* and *Life in Pieces,* which each have three related families pursuing close and extended-family storylines.

possible triggers without pause, the B-plot served as a momentary reprieve and a point of comfort for reflection. The B-plot also served as a reminder of the genre and its expectations—everything was meant to be familiar and relatable. In this way, parasocial psychology relates to the higher feelings of belonging to a group, which increased the likelihood of encouraging acceptance.

The A/B format contributed to the success of *Little Mosque*. The broader appeal of the B-plot allowed writers to exaggerate the sitcom form, solidifying genre expectations early in the series. This technique meant that Muslim-centered issues could be a central focus of the plots in a way that was balanced and not potentially overwhelming to unaccustomed viewers. The final compelling reason, and the most intriguing, for the success of the A/B plot is its ability to create a relatable and enjoyable world for viewers with the outcome of cultivating feelings of belonging even in the midst of new learning and ideas. As audiences began to increasingly recognize themselves in *both* storylines, as was the ultimate objective, the case could be made that we ought to expect people to feel that characters regularly depicted belonged in the series and, by proxy, belonged in society as well.

The next section shows further consideration of the sorts of social commentary the series was able to offer through a combination of plot, characters and sitcom format.

Episode 213: "Crush"

There's trouble at Amaar's Koranic studies class when he intercepts a note from Layla indicating she's got a crush on him. He does what any good teacher would do: he runs to Rayyan for help. Sparks really fly when Baber finds out. Eventually, Layla informs them that Amaar misread the note, and he'd like to crawl under his desk. Meanwhile, when Yasir and Sarah help Fatima study for her citizenship test, they come close to driving her out of the country.
- Episode Recap from the series' official website (CBC Staff, "The Crush")

Whereas much of the effort in the first season of *Little Mosque* is background world-building, by the second season of any show audiences have a strong sense of the characters, how they will react to certain situations, and what constraints and opportunities exist in the fictional world they inhabit. Episode 213, "The Crush," exemplifies A-plot and B-plot storytelling. The "B" plot involves the classic "mistaken identity" trope, as Amaar mistakenly believes he is the object of a crush by Baber's teenage daughter, Layla, after incorrectly interpreting an intercepted note in Koranic studies. The conventional sitcom plot plays out predictably. Amaar, concerned for Layla's feelings but not wanting to lead her on, enlists the help of Rayyan (with whom, incidentally, he is romantically inclined) to redirect her affections. After confronting Layla, Amaar and Rayyan learn that she has a more age-appropriate crush, but (somewhat facetiously) fears that if her father, Baber, finds out, he will send her to Pakistan. Rayyan and Amaar decide to mediate the issue, without Layla's permission, and approach Baber. Compounding the misinterpretation, Baber misreads the mediation, thinks it concerns Amaar and Rayyan rather than Layla, and demands a marriage. Layla, walking in on the

conversation, explodes in anger when she sees that Amaar and Rayyan betrayed her. Beggaring belief, the three adults remain unaware of the miscommunication (the exaggeration of an error is also a sitcom convention), and Baber continues with wedding planning. This seeming disregard enrages Rayyan, who as a feminist loathes the idea of arranged marriages and the lingering implication that a woman's life is not hers to govern, and she storms out, still thinking this concerns the teenage Layla. Finally, the four characters run into one another at the diner, and Layla, the youngest, resolves the issue. Rayyan begins by arguing her case to Baber:

> Rayyan: You cannot marry off a fifteen-year-old.
>
> Baber: Rayyan, ah heh heh, maybe you can pass for twenty but, ah, let's be serious.
>
> Rayyan: [perplexed] What?
>
> Layla: Wait a minute, what are we talking about here?
>
> Baber: Amaar and Rayyan and their secret crush.
>
> Rayyan: [very defensively] Whoa, whoa. You thought you were talking about us!?
>
> We were talking about Layla and Asif?!
>
> Baber: Who's Asif?
>
> Amaar: The boy from her Koran class?
>
> Layla: Wait, you've talked about this how many times?
>
> Rayyan: Several.
>
> Layla: And none of you knew what you were talking about?
>
> Amaar: [dumbfounded] Ah, no.

> Baber: Hehehe, it is really quite funny when you think about it! [Quickly turning to Layla, furious on a dime] Well who is Asif! You are grounded for a week! Come! [Both exit the diner] (Kennedy, "Crush")

Baber is the focus in this plot as his conservative attitudes are tested. Arranged marriages invoke sensitive issues, with concerns that traditions coming from other countries are infiltrating Canadian society (cf. Anis et al.; Browne). With the implication that Baber may fall on the wrong side of "Canadian" values concerning this issue, as he is conservative, Pakistani, a strong proponent of marriage despite being divorced, these fears amount to little in the end. Instead, he is the stereotypical "hard-nosed parent" who resorts to yelling and a week-long grounding, a punishment that feels familiar in nearly every domestic sitcom. The underlying message is that, despite his conservative beliefs, Baber's actions—and, by imagined proxy, the beliefs and actions of the Canadian conservative Muslims he represents—are not radically out of line with expected Canadian values. While arranged marriage is not a frequent topic in the personal lives of much of the audience, disciplining teens or being disciplined by parents are familiar concepts. Baber has adapted to Canadian values and wants his daughter to fulfill her potential, not merely be subservient to her husband.[38] So, while little is learned about Muslim culture

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[38] This interpretation of arranged marriages does not do justice to the complex debate on it, especially as it relates to cultural relativism. However, that is both the point of the show and the modus operandi of sitcoms. Taken together, audiences are reassured that everything fits their worldview regarding the marriage of a minor; the very structure of the series ensures this outcome.

per se, typical Canadian expectations are reinforced in a predictable, yet humorous way, aligned with outcomes of the sitcom genre.

The A-plot of the episode, Fatima's story, is the focus. Fatima and Baber both represent Muslim immigrants in Canada, but typecasts may suggest that Fatima's experience is more stereotypically like that of an immigrant because she is a widowed woman who works a blue-collar job, while Baber is a male university professor, who does not have come to Canada explicitly for his career. The storyline begins with Fred entering the café, ranting as if he is on the radio about government, potholes, and other things, and suggests everything is "going to the dogs." When chided by Sarah, Fred beams - being able to complain about society is what makes Canada so great, at least in his opinion. It is through this discussion that Fatima inadvertently shares new information: she is not a Canadian citizen, much to the surprise of Sarah and Fred, leading into a scene cut.[39]

The story continues with Sarah convincing Fatima to pursue her Canadian citizenship. Sarah's explanation is rife with "buzz words" associated with Canadian identity, but Fatima resists until an unexpected privilege sparks her interest:

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[39] Although the subject is not specifically addressed, the scene does contain an undertone concerning the freedom of expression of Muslim majority countries. Fatima is likely alluding to her home country, Nigeria, "[in which] it is nearly impossible to cover stories involving politics, terrorism, or financial embezzlement" (Reporters Without Borders). This sort of storyline feeds a cultural narrative in the West about repression in Muslim countries, and also the related narrative of the freedom and openness of countries such as Canada.

Sarah: So, why aren't you a citizen?

Fatima: It's all right. I'm proud of my landed immigrant status.

Sarah: But wouldn't you rather be a citizen?

Fatima: Why?! I landed; I am an immigrant. The title is accurate.

Sarah: All you have to do now is take a test. Don't you want to join our social fabric? Our cultural mosaic? I mean, Canada is a rich mosaic of, ahh, fabric.

Fatima: [unconvinced] I don't know.

Sarah: You get to vote!

Fatima: Meh.

Sarah: You get to do jury duty?

Fatima: [eyebrows raised, interest peaked] Jury duty?

Sarah: Yeah, the government randomly makes you judge criminals and send them to jail.

Fatima: [grinning widely] You've captured my interest. [End scene] (Kennedy, "Crush")

Therefore, with the potential to judge others on offer, Fatima initiates the process of becoming a Canadian citizen.

Sarah, excited that she has convinced Fatima to become a citizen, sets out to help her study for the upcoming citizenship exam. Yasir, finding the two in the kitchen playing *Candy Land* on a map of Canada, worries that Sarah is more concerned with having fun than actual learning, so he decides that he will also help with the studying effort by

printing a huge stack of information. True to sitcom tropes, Yasir and Sarah soon lose sight of whom they are tutoring, and it becomes clear that the two are only rehashing old debates from when Rayyan was a child, leaving Fatima frustrated.

Discouraged, Fatima reverts to her former opinion, deciding that she no longer wants to become a citizen. “I just to want to fill my head with money animals,” she says, referencing an earlier line of questioning about beavers, loons, and polar bears being strange things to put on money. In a twist that would likely only work in a sitcom, Sarah passive-aggressively asks Fatima to recycle some flyers for a citizenship party that is no longer going to happen, which is enough to swing Fatima’s opinion once again. Skipping ahead to a time when Fatima has completed her exam, presumably studying without interference from Sarah and Yasir, we see a citizenship ceremony. Yasir and Sarah are joined by Fred, who started the entire process by saying that nobody has the right to

Figure 10: Fatima celebrates her Canadian citizenship (Kennedy, “Crush”).

complain about the government unless they are citizens themselves. Fatima and Fred walk out of the courtroom together; she mentions that she does not feel all that different, although she is now a Canadian. No sooner does she say this than she turns to look at her car to find a parking ticket on her windshield: “A ticket?! Why can’t they hold this where there’s more parking? [Sigh] Stupid government!” A smug look appears on Fred’s face as he says, “Feels good, doesn’t it?”, to which Fatima replies with a smile, “Yes, it does” (Kennedy, “Crush”).

The irony in the last few lines of the episode underscores the episode’s central theme that being a Canadian citizen is a privilege worth celebrating, even if it might include some concerns. The unfolding of the plot, the ideological message of the storyline, and the characters all illustrate the episode’s main focus on the topic of Canadian citizenship. Fatima, as the primary character, is going through a significant change and some “growth” as a character. Sarah and Yasir, while heavily featured, function more as secondary characters who help move the story along. Fred is perhaps the most intriguing character in that he supplies the source of conflict and his running dialogue explains the basic parameters of what makes a Canadian citizen. Fred is the counter-balance; he is a dissenting voice in the episode that is used to push the issue of citizenship and, ironically, he also “confirms” that Fatima is a “real” Canadian after she gets a parking ticket.

The B-plot of this episode, Fatima’s journey to citizenship, is explicitly about Canadian identity. Furthermore, her mission during the episode is to find commonalities

with "normal," established Canadians and focus on the country's history and culture for a citizenship test. Meanwhile, the A-plot about arranged marriages is used as a cultural marker of difference that is misaligned with Canadian values.[40] What *Little Mosque*'s writers did not want, of course, was to have an arranged marriage debate take over the episode, because they did not want to polarize opinion unnecessarily. Consequently, the episode juxtaposes something explicitly Canadian, becoming a citizen, with something more controversial and traditionally not part of Canadian culture that affects some members of the Muslim community, arranged marriage. In presenting the fraught topic of arranged marriage, the writers create space by giving the A-plot a broader context and by suppressing the urge to judge the A-plot too hastily. The A-plot also has an educational aspect in its depiction of arranged marriages and its emphasis on the pressures faced by those in this situation.

There is a strong argument to be made that "Crush" strongly exemplifies what *Little Mosque* wanted to achieve. The episode presented the contentious issue of arranged

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[40] For instance, shortly after the episode aired, the CBC News website, whose parent organization also produced *Little Mosque,* published the article "The Problem with Arranged Marriage." The author, Natasha Fatah, retells her experiences and notes that her south Asian heritage had long been a source of contention in Canada. Even though she did not believe in the practice herself, she could not avoid the questions: "I can't say the question caught me off-guard. For as long as I've lived in Canada, my friends, co-workers and sometimes even strangers have felt compelled to ask me about this practice" (Fatah). She further states that her discussions on the issue are regularly derailed as emotions, on both sides of the issue, run hot and sometimes leave little middle ground for discussion.

marriage in a manner that was both informative and balanced with another more relatable plotline of citizenship. This, in and of itself, is a credible achievement.

Socially Conscious Comedy or Enlightened Racism?

"On Thursday nights, Cosby, like a priest, absolves his white viewers, forgives and forgets the sins of the past" (Steele 11)

Trends in pop culture have a way of returning for new viewing audiences in slightly different forms. In this way, *Little Mosque* has a connection to *The Cosby Show*, which ran from 1984-92. For the uninitiated, *The Cosby Show* was a half-hour sitcom depicting an upper-middle-class family in New York. Cliff Huxtable, played by comic Bill Cosby,[41] is a doctor raising a family with his wife Claire, a successful lawyer. The show was a quintessential domestic sitcom that generated jokes from everyday family foibles that were meant to be eminently relatable for a broad audience. The show was notable because it portrayed a stable, prosperous African American family on network television for the first time.

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[41] At the time of writing, Cosby was found guilty of heinous crimes concerning sexual assault, which seems to be part of a larger pattern of abuse (BBC News Service, "Bill Cosby Guilty of Sexual Assault"). Although these were the first formal charges brought against Cosby, the allegations dated back to the 1960s, and more than fifty women have accused him of sexual assault (Ioannou et al.). Cosby's public image and legacy have therefore been irreparably tarnished. It is important to recognize that now nearly everyone tries to distance themselves from Cosby, and those involved in *Little Mosque* are no different; nevertheless, it is important to separate the cultural impact of *The Cosby Show* from its star actor.

Near the turn of the century, *The Cosby Show* was named one of the best all-time shows by *TV Guide* (Cosgrove-Mather), so it is understandable why producers of *Little Mosque* might want to promote a shared heritage with its predecessor – at least at the time of its debut; given later developments, this would no longer be the case. In fact, those comparisons were present from the outset of *Little Mosque,* and were explicitly mentioned on numerous occasions by individuals with connections to the show. During *Little Mosque*'s run, marketing ran a show blog to keep viewers engaged between episodes. After American news anchor Katie Couric made a germane remark, the blog posted a perfect example of the connections that the production team hoped to nurture: "In other news this week, Katie Couric tells her viewers that America needs "a Muslim Cosby show." Ummm, hello? We're right up here? Katie! Yoo hoo! Oh well" (CBC Staff, "Little Mosque on the Prairie Blog"). In spirit, *The Cosby Show* and *Little Mosque* were similar in their attempts to raise the social profile of marginalized groups by using gentle and relatable humour to show society that minorities are more than what the stereotypes suggest.

As the influence of *The Cosby Show* became increasingly apparent, so too did the interest in the veracity of claims that celebrated how socially progressive the series was. Proponents of the show such as prominent race scholar Michael Dyson reasoned that the show opened doors for African Americans that were previously closed: "The most useful aspects of Cosby's dismantling of racial mythology and stereotype is that it has permitted America to view black folk as *human beings"* (29, emphasis in original). This is an "equal

footing" sort of claim, which argues that social equality is mainly achieved when different groups of people find similarities and, as a result, diminish prejudices. The parallels to *Little Mosque* are apparent. In the case of *The Cosby Show,* the characters were a departure from the blue-collar, slapstick depictions of black roles in shows such as *The Jeffersons;* similarly, *Little Mosque* featured representations of Muslims who were not linked to terrorism, which was rare in western media at the time. Noticing that critics' opinions tended to become less uniformly positive as time went on, Jhally and Lewis made the following astute observation: "elaborate praise becomes an increasingly difficult burden, and a cynical backlash almost invariably follows critics' praise. *The Cosby Show*, for good or ill, is no exception to this rule" (2).

Out of context, such cynical backlash could be seen to do with the notion of "quality" television. Shows run out of storylines or the actors age to the point at which the characters they play no longer fit in the show's dynamic. For many popular shows such as the American *Office, Friends,* or *Scrubs*, critics begin to pay extra attention to analyzing why a show was such a hit initially, and if those qualities that sparked its popularity endured. In that respect, Jhally and Lewis observed critics turning on *The Cosby Show,* but for perhaps surprising reasons. While most sitcoms are entertainment first, with social commentary a distant and nearly invisible second, *The Cosby Show* bucked this trend, so that the critiques levelled at the show placed a unique emphasis on the social issues the show portrayed - a treatment often not given to other sitcoms, as explained earlier in this chapter). Jhally and Lewis noted that "[critics] have begun to accuse the

show of presenting a misleadingly cozy picture, a sugar candy world unfettered by racism, crime, and economic deprivation" (2). They found that it was not only TV critics using the series as a soapbox, and that those cultural critiques which typically avoided pop culture analysis were affecting the content of the show. For instance, a noted opinion leader in the black community, Henry Louis Gates, admonished the program for its lack of diversity because of how such lack glossed over significant class struggles:

> As long as *all* blacks were represented in demeaning or peripheral roles, it was possible to believe that American racism was, as it were, indiscriminate. The social vision of 'Cosby,' however, reflecting the miniscule integration of blacks into the upper middle class, reassuringly throws the blame for black poverty back on to the impoverished class. (qtd. in Jhally and Lewis 94)

For Gates, this is an important turn in how racism manifests in society. When racism is used against all people of one race, it is easier to understand where to put up resistance. However, making social inequality an individual failure, even when social conditions favour/disadvantage different groups, somewhat diminishes a clear path to resistance. Gates argued that uncritically showcasing consistently positive images of upwardly mobile people such as Cosby poses a latent danger because it sets up a belief that anyone can achieve the American dream and, moreover, that the significant discriminatory barriers which previously worked on a collective level have ceased to exist. This familiar view is part of a wider discourse on neoliberalism, which shares the concern that individual success pettifogs the declining conditions of race and class in society. So, even

though the show normalized the success of Huxtables as an expectation for black individuals in society, it simultaneously (and unintentionally) demonized those who were not able to meet those lofty ideals, systemic barriers notwithstanding. While life was good for the Huxtable family, millions of others did not enjoy such luxury, and they were being told that it was primarily personal, not social, issues that were holding them back.

One lingering characteristic in cultural studies is that it often overlooks the fact that not all problems are black and white. Indeed, it is possible to express both politically progressive and conservative views about the same thing. As Jhally and Lewis point out, the commentary that *The Cosby Show* offered can be interpreted along a wide range: the show is seen "either as socially progressive or as an apology for a racist system that disadvantages most black people" (3). Similarly, in his article "The Theory of Cultural Racism," James Blaut asks the rhetorical question, "Nowadays we seem to have a lot of racism but very few racists. How do you explain this paradox?" (292). Jhally and Lewis indirectly try to answer this claim through what they call enlightened racism. Enlightened racism shifts discrimination away from biological characteristics, such as the colour of one's skin, and towards the more ambiguously defined features of culture. In the context of *The Cosby Show,* qualities that were more closely associated with "black culture," such as brash personalities and working class social issues, were supplanted by the "familiarity" and "acceptance" of white, upper-middle-class attributes (Jhally and Lewis 110). Whereas *The Jeffersons* may have reminded dominantly positioned (read: white) audiences of uncomfortable truths about racial and class inequities, *The Cosby Show* has no such

markers and "thus allows white people the luxury of being both liberal and intolerant … the color difference is okay, culture difference is not" (Jhally and Lewis 110).

It is possible to draw some definite parallels between *The Cosby Show* and *Little Mosque,* and to learn some valuable lessons. Superficially, *Little Mosque* attempted similar "normalizing" tactics in their plots. Both shows, for instance, sought a broad appeal beyond that of minorities on screen. Rather than interest only people who immediately identified with the characters, such as black Americans or Muslims, both shows prompted audiences to look past the obvious differences and see commonalities based on other traits such as family/community dynamics, life experiences, or sense of humour. This last item is important because both shows relied on comedy in, at a minimum, three important ways. First, producers wanted to show that humour cuts across cultures and that everyone could share a laugh. Second, both shows used a gentle, approachable style of comedy that did not intimidate audiences who may have prejudicial views and invited audiences to participate in the joviality on the premise "who can be apprehensive when laughing?" Finally, the producers wanted positive emotions generated through comedy to engender positive emotions in the broader communities.

Jhally and Lewis analyzed an episode of *The Cosby Show* using three progressive stages. The first was the popular, or "common sense," *case for* the show, which they understood to be similar, and related, to people's preliminary assessments of the show. Crucially, these "positive" features were before the "cynical turn" of the critics and represented social values the show ideally conveyed, such as diminished racial

stereotypes, the upward mobility of minorities, and the empowerment of children through education and tight family bonds. In short, this stage established the hegemonic traits of the episode. Next, they problematized the themes found in the first stage of the study, taking the "positive" interpretations of the episode and seeing where alternative, less flattering issues existed. Although these perspectives could be cynical, they tended to reaffirm social trends and issues that did not resonate with some of the more optimistic readings of the series, such as the continued structural inequalities black Americans faced despite a decline in overt/biological racism. Finally, Jhally and Lewis characterized what they found as an instance of "enlightened racism" and reflected on what this meant more broadly, ultimately criticizing the authenticity of the American dream as portrayed on TV. A parallel line of thought might also apply to *Little Mosque*. While the show focused on the Canadian multiculturalism instead of the American dream, it is worth considering if the series did so in ways that fundamentally challenged the status quo or if merely shifted attention to a new, but weak, way of representing social issues.

Episode 104: "Swimming Upstream"

> Mercy's Muslim women protest co-ed swimming classes at the local pool. Mayor Popowicz refuses to change the rules, nervous at what voters will think if she's seen kowtowing to the Muslims. Meanwhile, Baber refuses to let Layla go out for Halloween, causing Amaar to suggest an Islamic version of the heathen holiday. In the end, the pool remains integrated, but Fatima dons an outrageous bathing suit to ensure she remains fully covered.
> *- Episode Recap from the series' official website (CBC Staff, "Episode 104 - Swimming Upstream")*

The episode opens in Fatima's café, where she is trading playful barbs with local radio host, Fred. Just as Fred stands up to return to work, Fatima slips, injuring her ankle. Betraying his gruff exterior, he hops over the counter, checking to see if she is okay, showing genuine concern. However, as Fred reaches to help Fatima to her feet, she yells at him, letting him know that a man cannot touch a woman who is considered "illegal."[42] Rayyan, the town's doctor, later informs Fatima that she has a sprained knee that will require physiotherapy, and suggests that she attend some aqua aerobics classes.

Together, Rayyan and Fatima head to the pool but, to their shock and dismay, the instructor turns out to be a man. Building on the theme of gender expectations, the

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[42] "Illegal," in this sense, is a complicated term. Varying opinions on what is illegal, based on Islamic scripture, stems from a different understanding of the term *al-mass,* in the Prophetic statement "It would be better for one of you to have himself stabbed on the head with an iron needle than to touch a woman that is illegal (his non-*mahram* or of similar status) for him." Since this prohibition can be understood as being purely sexual, or more literal and universal (applying to all touch), these ideas are manifested in social life in various ways based on context and personal belief, but most often, this restricts men from touching women to whom they are not related (Padela and Rodriguez del Pozo 42).

audience watches the two women quickly cover up with towels and tell the instructor that, as Muslim women, they cannot be seen in bathing suits, even though the instructor insists he is "a friend of Dorothy," a euphemism for homosexuality. As the pool scene closes, the women lament the situation:

> Fatima: This is all too much for us! I just want to sell the café and live in a cave!
>
> Rayyan: Have you priced caves lately? No. You have a right to swim.
>
> Fatima: But you just heard, it's impossible!
>
> Rayyan: Don't worry. When your mom works for the Mayor, nothing is impossible.
>
> (Kennedy, "Swimming Upstream")

Following this conversation, the scene cuts to Mayor Popovich flatly denying the women's requests, to comedic effect. There is no money in the town's budget for a female lifeguard, and if the community found out that the Muslim congregation was dictating who was hired for what jobs, this would reflect poorly on all of them. While the characters try to force the issue with support from women in the aqua-fit class who would prefer a female instructor, the conservative foil, radio DJ Fred, rants about preferential treatment on his show, and the bid for a female instructor ultimately fails.

Fatima, however, remains undeterred. She still suffers from her injury and intends to use the pool. Fatima arrives to class, although this time wearing a distinctive bathing suit that exposes only her face, hands, and feet. As she limps towards the instructor, two women—one of whom earlier supported hiring a female instructor—begin talking about Fatima's attire: "Where did she get that suit? It would really cover up my cellulite," one of

them says. Moving past the women, Fatima greets the instructor, who is selecting the music; he replies, "Girl, about that getup." The camera pans to Fatima's concerned face, and then back to the instructor, who smiles pleasantly, imitating Tim Gunn of *Project Runway* fame: "You make that work" (Kennedy, "Swimming Upstream"). Fatima laughs, relieved that all's well that ends well, and the scene ends with all the women entering the pool and dancing to festive salsa music.

This episode can be interpreted in multiple ways. From a charitable perspective, media scholar Chao emphasizes that this storyline demonstrates Canada's hospitable culture, particularly how it looks beyond differences and seeks cross-cultural solidarity and pleasures: "The show's rendering of multicultural relations is explicitly idealized, for conviviality is possible only because acceptable differences are being addressed" (40). The resolution is classic sitcom "feel good" sentimentality, in an example of the sitcom formula Jones outlines, with key features of the genre: the dissenter looks for a solution to an obstacle; the solution fails; the dissenter returns to the group; the problem was never all that serious, and everyone is happier in the end. All of these things happen in "Swimming Upstream." The episode also communicates two implicit, yet intentional, optimistic intents: first, it educates unfamiliar audiences about the custom that discourages Muslim women from exposing their bodies to unrelated men, and represents issues of acceptance and accessibility that Muslim women can face in Canadian culture. Second, the conclusion of the episode shows the best-case scenario for Fatima and the community of Mercy. Fatima is accepted in the pool in her swimsuit, but her suit is also

Figure 11: Fatima, in her new bathing suit, enters the pool (Kennedy, "Swimming Upstream").

celebrated and even coveted by the other women at the pool. The implied suggestion is that cultural diversity, as represented by Fatima, has improved the lives of others, affirming the supposed benefits of multiculturalism.

Granting the positive outcome above, things are not entirely perfect either; as Jhally and Lewis demonstrated with the analysis of *The Cosby Show*, issues with representation and depoliticization also exist. Whereas the Huxtables were the "right" sort of black family (for a mainly white audience), they alienated a significant number of others who failed to fit that mould. An excellent counterexample of the "wrong" sort of multicultural expression is evident in a Season Two episode of *Little Mosque*, "Ban the Burka." In this episode, a mysterious woman arrives in Mercy wearing a face veil, something no other character in the show wears. Some, like Sarah, find it oppressive and,

even as Muslims, display some signs of Islamophobia. Others, like Sarah's daughter Rayyan, attempt to overturn an old town bylaw that forbids covering up. Even Amaar, who was a lawyer before becoming an Imam, focuses on finding a loophole in the town's law rather than mounting a human rights objection, and declares it not a spiritual issue, but rather a legal problem. Consequently, the motivations, struggles and sociopolitical aspects of this veiled character are minimally addressed; in fact, the veiled woman is treated more as a prop or plot device than a character. The veiled woman's exit from the episode occurs when she introduces herself to Baber. Baber, who certainly had been noticing her, makes an impulsive about-turn and chastises her for not being modest enough by daring to approach a man in any romantic way, no matter how reasonable it seems by mainstream Canadian standards. The approach, and not the burka, refocus the issue.

This is the last that is seen of the veiled woman in the series. It is noteworthy because the burka has been a highly contentious issue in many western nations; it is often seen as symbolic of the patriarchal character of some Muslim sects, of an unwillingness to engage as an identifiable individual in society, and of resistance against multicultural assimilation. The veiled woman represents too significant an issue for the multiculturalism that Little *Mosque* champions. Whereas Fatima's clothing choices do not radically change her ability to participate in public, including swimming, the same

cannot be said for the burka.[43] Sitcoms are able to depict social norms, but not necessarily change them. Fatima represents diversity, while the veiled woman is seen as threatening to Canadian society and ideals. As the veil (arguably) fails to fit into the established vision of Canadian multiculturalism, it suffers a similar fate in the series and the veiled woman does not return in future episodes.

Contrary to how the series might ostensibly seem, the town of Mercy is essentially depoliticized. While political opinions abound, nothing fundamentally changes, with few impacts on or changes to public policy. Nothing substantial comes from radically opposed viewpoints within relatively amicable relationships that have been developed with the characterizations. Likeable characters defuse difficult topics. In Mercy, the Islamic community is large enough that they are visible as a cohesive and engaged group; however, they are not large enough that they can dictate civic affairs or, on a smaller scale, have enough people and capital to start their own aqua-fit course. Cultural negotiation becomes imperative when the Muslim community is sizeable enough to have a voice, but not so large that they could influence the political apparatus.[44]

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[43] Quebec is at the centre of this debate in Canada. In the fall of 2017, their provincial government banned women from riding public transit or receiving government services with their faces covered. Shortly thereafter, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau distanced his government from this policy, claiming that they did not have the right to tell women what or what not to wear (Shingler; A. Kassam).

[44] This line of thinking requires clarification. Though it is sometimes the case that minority groups form their own insular communities within larger cities, these groups are far too often subject to marginalization and ghettoization. In other words, the insular

Within critical humour studies, Simon Weaver has considered these ideas surrounding depoliticization. In his discussion of Sascha Baron Cohen's character Ali G,[45] Weaver developed the term "liquid racism," which he notes is "fluid, difficult to collect or identify because it may escape or dissolve before it can be contained" ("Liquid Racism and the Ambiguity of Ali G" 252). Weaver argues that humour is particularly difficult with regard to liquid racism because of its inherent ambiguity, and it can "create a saturation of slippages and meanings, and prevent a dominant or solid connection between the rhetorical effect of the joke and serious racist discourse" ("Liquid Racism and the Ambiguity of Ali G" 252). Like enlightened racism, liquid racism is more ambiguous and harder to pin down. However, the where liquid racism differs is through its explicit emphasis on the effects of comedy. Humour adds a layer of intentional ambiguity that can produce readings that are simultaneously understood as both provocative and banal. In the specific case of *Little Mosque*, the lighthearted style of comedy was always unlikely to provoke serious viewer backlash. While this is ostensibly a positive, what Weaver does not fully develop is the inverse point. When a point of social commentary is made humorously, it also takes away

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characteristics of a group are not self-selected, but rather consequences of systemic discrimination (cf. Kymlicka 8).

[45] Cohen's Ali G is an "aggressively stupid," poorly equipped journalist and star of numerous TV shows and films. With "mangled English, and outlandish questions, Ali G interviewed unsuspecting actual politicians and celebrities and in the process revealed their prejudices and ignorance" (*Encyclopædia Britannica*, "Sacha Baron Cohen").

from its ability to make social commentary that "sticks" with its audience (Baumgartner and Morris; Caron). It is no surprise, then, that this episode did not rise to the level of provoking a notable response online or in the news media about events that had recently transpired in the country.

Unlike the town of Mercy, Canada can experience heightened tensions. Conway draws a connection between the plot of "Swimming Upstream" and events that occurred in Montreal, leading to what he deemed "raucous debates" over what ought to fall under that category of reasonable accommodations (Conway, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* 124). As Ingrid Peritz reported, in Montreal in 2006, a local congregation of Hasidic Jews protested that the windows into the local gym allowed teenage boys in their community to watch women in what they deemed inappropriate attire. Initially, the gym agreed to frost the windows, so that people on the street could no longer see into the facility. Predictably, others in the community resented the influence of one synagogue dictating policies in what is ostensibly a secular place. As the dispute gained momentum, the issue became symbolic of larger, more deeply engrained antagonisms:

> The controversy grew into a major source of debate in Quebec; Action Démocratique du Québec Leader Mario Dumont seized on the issue of so-called reasonable accommodation, saying that Quebec had to safeguard its traditional values. The position helped Mr. Dumont gain support outside of Montreal and he is now in a three-way race leading to next Monday's vote. (Peritz)

In the sitcom world of Mercy, provincial or federal politics rarely impose on what happens in the town, which means that issues avoid escalation and find resolution through comedy and camaraderie at the local level. Though serious concerns are raised, they do not escalate to become broader political issues; such is the plot structure of *Little Mosque.*

Other media formats could have tried to address the issues represented in *Little Mosque.* A crucial part of understanding the types of social commentary created by the program is based on understanding the opportunities and constraints inherent to the sitcom genre. Few sorts of entertainment are as light-hearted and widely accepted as the sitcom, which made it a safe vehicle to spread messages of inclusiveness and diversity. However, the sitcom functions as a façade of sorts that covers up some of the more complex aspects of what it means to be Muslim in Canada.

The first seasons of *Little Mosque* set a safe tone, relying heavily on sitcom conventions, and the series evolved once it was believed that audiences were sufficiently familiar with the main characters and their identity as Muslims. Curiously, it was the later seasons that saw the most ambitious storylines that pushed the limits of their social commentary.

Chapter 3: Interpreting *Little Mosque*'s Seasons Four through Six (2009-12)

In May 2016, religious scholar Reza Aslan delivered a talk at the Edmonton Public Library's *Forward Thinking Speaker Series*, "Fear Inc: Confronting Islamophobia in North America." Aslan, inarguably one of the most prominent North American public intellectuals of Islam, concluded his talk about the differences between Canada and the United States with respect to Islamophobia. Though he acknowledged that Canada has problems with Islamophobia, he maintained that Canada was in a better position than the US to counter prejudice because of multiculturalism, explicitly citing *Little Mosque* as evidence of Canada's progressiveness and tolerance (Aslan).

Aslan's convictions for a sitcom as a vehicle for social commentary were validated the year following his lecture. In 2017, he had focused on creating a sitcom of his own on what is typically known as America's most family-friendly major TV network: the Disney-owned ABC. Set to follow Aslan's personal experiences, the show was about the lives of a Muslim family immigrating to the conservative southern state of Oklahoma from Iran.[46] The motivation for the series was clear: put a Muslim family in heated situations caused

[46] ABC presently airs two other "multicultural" sitcoms, *Fresh off the Boat*, which is about Chinese immigrants; and *Black-ish*, which is about an upwardly mobile black family. Both series have been praised and criticized and have brought diversity to network TV, not unlike *Little Mosque*.

by cultural misunderstandings that would be defused by some light-hearted laughs. The similarities between Aslan's proposed series and *Little Mosque* were obvious.

Unfortunately for Aslan, in March of 2017, his series was halted by ABC and never actually produced an episode. According to him, his show was "thrown aside" when President Donald Trump was elected. He claims that the network decided to appeal to the visible white, rural, and conservative demographic that was thought to have been Trump's political bedrock: "There was a real decision [by ABC] to start to figure out how to appeal to what they erroneously saw as some new wave of red-state Americans" (The Independent). Central to the debate is relatability, the challenge of engaging audiences with meaningful social commentary in a way that was different from Aslan's more politically charged, and ultimately doomed, sitcom attempt.

This chapter considers the later seasons of *Little Mosque*. Following three seasons of consensus building in the Mercy community, the producers of the series made narrative choices to pursue more conflict and, as the logic goes, a chance to more accurately reflect concerns facing multicultural Muslims. The innocuous beginning of *Little Mosque* developed into a more forceful social critique over time. Consequently, this chapter focuses on how *Little Mosque* was altered to encourage social commentary and promote audience reflection on community issues by making changes to the style and direction of the series. Some changes were calculated, while others were imposed on producers due to circumstance. This chapter considers the subjective quality of the

discourse presented during *Little Mosque*'s thematic change in direction in Seasons Four through Six (2009-12).

In Aslan's planned series, the starring Muslim family was meant to immigrate to Oklahoma and find difficult, albeit comically resolved, situations in each episode. What was striking, to me at least, when hearing Aslan speak about *Little Mosque* was how he thought the program similarly progressed and how direct the social criticism was. Aslan described *Little Mosque* as a dialectic model of social progress: a thesis (a Muslim family who appears culturally different) and an antithesis (a society that rejects such change) that eventually arrive at a reaffirming synthesis (the realization that Muslim families are just as American as any other type of family). Given both the American and Canadian attitudes towards assimilation, the logic to this process underlies some basic principles of creating multicultural spaces. Fundamentally, it uses a social conflict model of progress that can be observed in the analysis of society (e.g., Marx; Adorno; Williams).

In contrast to Aslan's observations, using sitcoms and comedy to present messages frames the issues in enigmatic ways that do not equate to straightforward social commentary. Knowing that few sitcoms are produced with the explicit purpose of educating and informing, some complications are overlooked and underexplored. *Little Mosque* provides a unique opportunity to consider these topics.

Little Mosque did not initially use the model of conflict-oriented social commentary. The potential cultural conflict was present, but was strategically trivialized using sitcom genre conventions, meaning that disputes were both diminished and

superficial. The series was more about similarities and reconciliation than about prolonged struggle and ill will. *Little Mosque*'s capacity to not exclusively rely on intercultural conflict to drive narrative related to two elements. First, the show focused on an Islamic community, rather than an individual as in *Aliens in America* or a single family as in Aslan's untitled series. This difference allowed *Little Mosque* to switch between conflict at the external level of society or the broad community and the internal level of the personal or within the Muslim community. In doing so, *Little Mosque* could find plot lines that offered comedic reprieve and balance didactic plotlines. Second, Rev. Magee, the community's longtime Anglican man of the cloth, was a strong central character who facilitated building bridges, moderating solutions, and assuring audiences that everything would follow the expectations of Canada's multiculturalism.

This chapter's analysis begins where Magee's story ends. Following the third season of *Little Mosque,* Magee was replaced with a character whose name reveals his personality, Rev. Thorne. Indicative of the play on words, with a thorn in one's side being an irritant, Thorne served to expose more conflict and encourage engaging conversations of multicultural issues. The chapter shows the change in tone with a change in cast and considers *Little Mosque*'s cultural depths with a storyline that involves something as controversial as the desecration of a religious icon. The chapter ends with an examination of the series' final storyarc, which, for a sitcom, uncharacteristically explores the nature of

belief and identity.[47] Therefore, in the writers' room, *Little Mosque* charted a new course for its social commentary through the lenses of comedic theory and sitcom genre expectations. The analysis includes examination of how *Little Mosque* made a transition from a consensus style of comedy to a more conflict-oriented perspective through character change; why cultural attitudes about "acceptable" humour limited the scope of the social commentary; and what the end of the program reveals about the belief in humour as a driver of social transformation.

A Brief Overview of Seasons Four through Six

It would be impossible to cover each significant storyline of the final three seasons of *Little Mosque.* As discussed in the previous chapter, the series continued the use of A and B plots, and occasionally had C-plots. In many sitcoms, each episode often stands alone; however, *Little Mosque* started to show ongoing tensions over multiple episodes or longer; for example, the romantic tension that is often woven through multiple seasons of many sitcoms also occurred in *Little Mosque*. Specific episodes have been selected for analysis based on their resonance for cultural commentary. However, it is valuable to be roughly aware of what is happening in the series during the last three seasons, because there are a few crucial plot points that are not addressed in these case studies, yet are nonetheless valuable for setting up the episodes for more in-depth analysis.

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[47] Based on early promotion of the series in the news, the initial three seasons carried an expectation of conflict that never fully materialized. This was a strategy of the series, undercutting the audience's expectation of serious conflict with a lighthearted approach. After Season Three, the conflict became more explicit and as contentious as a sitcom gets.

Season Three concluded with the unravelling of Rayyan and J.J.'s relationship, punctuated by Rayyan being stood up at the altar. Predictably, this opens the door for Rayyan and Amaar's relationship to blossom in Season Four and their eventual marriage at the end of Season Five. Navigating their lives as a couple, they contemplate moving to Montreal for a job and, in the process, Amaar relinquishes his position as Imam to Baber for Season Six. As the two single, young adults in the series, Rayyan and Amaar provided the predictability that is typical of the sitcom genre.

The departure of several prominent cast members was less predictable. As I will discuss in much greater detail, Derek Magrath's character, Rev. Magee, went from a series regular to a sporadic guest, which allowed the writers to introduce more conflict through the replacement minister, Rev. Thorne (played by Brandon Firla). Carlo Rota, the actor who portrayed Yasir, left the show to return to the demands of shooting in Hollywood. His unexpected departure disrupted a seemingly stable relationship between Yasir and his wife Sarah. While his leaving could have been explained by such reasons as death or an extended work contract, the writers chose a more sensitive reason for his absence: divorce. Between Seasons Five and Six, the storyline to effect this change revealed that Yasir elected to remain in Lebanon to aid his ailing mother, thus catalyzing his divorce. Although the storyline was poorly received by audiences, this permitted the writers to explore Sarah's confrontation of her relationship to Islam: she grew up as an Anglican and converted for Yasir, and never felt she was a "proper" Muslim. Yasir's departure allowed the writers to explore ideas about the nature of belief for Sarah as a convert to Islam.

With the divorce finalized, the main reason for Sarah's conversion was also questioned. The domestic conflict allowed a thoughtful introduction of cultural/religious conflict more broadly.

Notwithstanding the more complex and controversial topics introduced, the series stayed true to the sitcom format and presentation through light-hearted humour. The new themes and plots are notable not because they mark a shift away from light-hearted humour; the gravity of these stories are still far less tense than any drama or, for that matter, any more risqué sitcoms one might find on cable or on streaming sites. Transition from the first three years of lesser conflict with one stable set of characters to the last three seasons required character changes, new plot line development, and incorporation of intentional strategies to move towards refined social discourse. The first episode of Season Four, "Love Thy Neighbour," is a pivotal episode of this transition.

Episode 401: "Love Thy Neighbour"

Amaar is panicked to learn the new minister replacing Magee wants the Muslims out of his church. It's only when Reverend Thorne learns his congregants like having the Muslims around that he backs off. Meanwhile, Rayyan would be fine with moving on after being abandoned at the altar, except for all the gossip that reminds her endlessly.
- Episode Recap from the series' official website (CBC Staff, "Episode 401 - Love Thy Neighbour")

Ross and Rachel from *Friends*; Sam and Diane from *Cheers*; and *Little Mosque*'s Amaar and Rayyan. When *Little Mosque* concluded Season Three, the audience had watched a consistent and predictable sitcom convention for three years. Viewers knew full well that Amaar pined for Rayyan, although he stoically stood aside while she made it

to the altar, intending to marry another man, J.J. Yet, things were never meant to be for J.J. and Rayyan; J.J. stands up Rayyan when he contracts a case of cold feet during the last episode of Season Three. While this came as a surprise to the characters in the show, it was likely less of a surprise to those viewing at home because the sitcom format means that such things are supposed to happen.

Sitcoms must change storylines to maintain audience interest and to ensure all cast members remain relevant. Using A and B plots contributes to the transition to new storylines, which was required when the Rayyan/Amaar romantic plot was transformed. *Little Mosque* could not return immediately with another Rayyan-and-Amaar-centric story arc, and as this relationship aspect diminished, producers focused on other characters and put relationships on the backburner, at least for a short time. The writers decided to remove a beloved character in order to create change in the town of Mercy (and in the sitcom), and the affable Rev. Magee was "moved" to a new congregation in Nunavut. This change required a new spiritual leader to occupy the Anglican Church, a position filled by the cantankerous Rev. Thorne.

The opening shot of the first episode in Season Four, "Love Thy Neighbour," pans out from the Mercy Anglican Church sign, which still shows Magee's name, to a small British sports car pulling up to the curb, looking out of place in the humble rural community. The driver, Rev. Thorne, begins a conversation with Amaar about how sparse "downtown" is when they are abruptly interrupted by a jittery woman who demands Amaar's attention. The woman, Mrs. Wopinski, wants in earnest to thank Amaar for

reassuring her that, despite her husband's lacklustre church attendance, what truly matters is that he is a decent man, and this has helped her find peace. Thorne, with a look showing a mixture of confusion and snark, begins to question Amaar:

> Thorne: Uh, did you just talk that woman out of bringing her husband to church?
>
> Amaar: Oh, well, no, that's not what it's like. The Reverend Magee asked me to look in on his flock when he left.
>
> Thorne: Oh, so you're a parishioner?
>
> Amaar: Uh, no, I'm an imam. That's like a Muslim priest.
>
> Thorne: So, you're a Muslim convincing Christians not to go to church?
>
> Amaar: Well, it sounds bad when you put it like that.
>
> Thorne: Sure does!
>
> Amaar: No, no, no. Our mosque is in the church.
>
> Thorne: So, a mosque in a church? It's outrageous!
>
> Amaar: Well, Reverend Magee believed in finding the common good between all faiths.
>
> Thorne: And that's why he left. He couldn't take it and he snapped. Can't say I blame him. I mean, look at this place, it's the end of hope! No, no, no. It's not even the end of hope. It's in the greater "end of hope" area with bus service to the end of hope. (Kennedy, "Love Thy Neighbour")

With that exchange, the conflict for the episode is established and follows through several episodes. Humour and the sitcom format contribute to the expression of the conflict. The

hyperbolic Thorne is a stock sitcom character: the bully, who constantly becomes a stick in the other characters' bike spokes, but also suffers retribution and undergoes subtle changes for the better as he begins to develop relationships with people who are different from himself.

Thorne's introduction marked a departure from the previous sources of conflict in the show. Fred, the previous character who displayed intolerance, was regularly shown to be more inclusive in personal relationships than his radio bluster suggested. He demonstrated how difficult it was to remain prejudiced when personal relationships run counter to biases. Thorne, however, seems to have a harder edge to him. Where Fred is narrow-minded, Thorne is cruel. Throughout the remainder of "Love Thy Neighbour," Thorne is introduced to the other main characters, offering a foreshadowing of how he will relate to them. He expresses "nonchalant" racism when meeting Baber by saying, "Oh, so he speaks English!" He scoffs at Rayyan's belief that she should not touch the opposite sex. He attempts to woo Sarah back to the Anglican church while her family, mouths agape, is in the same room. Distressingly for the Muslim community, after a short investigation, Thorne learns that a lease agreement had not been signed for mosque space in the church. Magee, a man of his word, never needed more than a verbal agreement. Firm in his belief that religion is a battle for souls, Thorne is dismayed to see that the Muslims in the community have their mosque in the church, something that he intends to swiftly "remedy." Throne quickly reneges on this agreement, which he dismisses as "as good as the paper it's written on," and leaves Amaar at a loss, as it looks like the mosque

is going to be without a home. In short, Thorne comes across as condescending and abrasive to nearly everyone he meets, and thus conflict is established. In a town where even the "bad guys," like Fred, also have a friendly disposition in most situations, Thorne seems to have a commitment to cruelty.

Even so, "Love Thy Neighbour" shows that Thorne is not a man without charm: a manipulating, contrived charm, but charm nonetheless. Behind his crocodile smile, he has a knack for telling people what they want to hear, provided he wants something from them. Although Thorne is dismayed to see that most of his congregation is comprised of senior women such as Mrs. Wopinski, his deceptive schmoozing means that the non-Muslim townsfolk are enamoured with the new reverend, no matter how transparently snide he appears to both the audience and the Muslim characters in the show. Thorne brings a young, dynamic quality to the church that was missing for years. Combined with the pleasant naivete of the local church women who are, in a way, a proxy for the sensibility of the town in general, this quality allows Thorne to occupy a commanding position in the town immediately after his arrival.

The goodwill of the town, as embodied by the church women generally and Mrs. Wopinski specifically, extends beyond Thorne and the Anglican population. After three years of sharing the church building, the Muslim community is well-respected and liked by the people of Mercy. Mrs. Wopinski's conversation with Amaar is symbolic of the Muslim community's broader assimilation, such that each person is known more for their personality traits—Fatima's barbed wit, Baber's hotheadedness, Rayyan's social

conscience, and Amaar's thoughtful counselling—than they are for being Muslim.[48] This suggests that the Muslim characters have moved beyond being typecast because of their religion, which is threatened by the introduction of Thorne. These relationships become compelling to the storyline. For example, after a meeting with Thorne, Amaar is walking through the church when he encounters Mrs. Wopinski. She is looking for Amaar because she baked him some cookies to thank him for all his thoughtful advice and to say, in her own words, "just how pleased I am that you Muslims are here in our church." Amaar looks forlorn and informs Mrs. Wopinski that it is unlikely that the reverend will let them stay. Naïve but supportive, Mrs. Wopinski tuts:

> Oh, no, he's not that sort of man. He knows that we Mercy Anglicanites just love our little brown Muslims. And it's not just me. That goes for Mrs. Hobb and Marjorie. You know, the one with the milky eye. All the ladies of the steering committee! Mercy Anglicans wouldn't feel so … hmm… cosmopolitan if you Muslims weren't here! (Kennedy, "Love Thy Neighbour")

In a plot twist that only a sitcom could employ, the camera reveals that Thorne is hiding slyly amongst the pews, listening in on the conversation between Amaar, Mrs. Wopinski, and another local church lady, presumably in an attempt to gather clandestine information against the Muslims. The attitude of the church ladies complicates issues for

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[48] This is not to say that the Muslims do not face issues relating to Islam's role within the town. However, these issues are less tied to any notion that Islam is incompatible with the social fabric than they are to other factors. The issues became quirks, rather than threats.

Thorne because, without them, he has virtually no congregation. Ever conniving, Thorne follows the two women back into Amaar's office, where he puts on a spiel, claiming to have considered the issue at hand, even if others in his position might have found the idea repugnant (they didn't), he found the idea – to borrow a phrase – quite "cosmopolitan." Thorne invites the Muslims to stay, which satisfies Mrs. Wopinski, and wraps his arms around the shoulders of Amaar and Yasir, who are smiling uncomfortably. The episode cuts to the final scene, showing Amaar sitting in the pews to listen to Thorne's first sermon as Mercy Anglican's reverend:

> My brothers and sisters, Jesus urged us to love our enemies. Enemies who say that Jesus was a prophet, and not the Messiah: love them! Enemies who pray in gibbering tongues, dressed in colourful, outlandish garb, choke back your gorge and love them! Yes, my brothers and sisters, love your enemies but never forget: They are your enemies. (Kennedy, "Love Thy Neighbour")

The introduction of Thorne and the conflict he wrought was designed to introduce more challenging, and substantive, social commentary. This goal was more difficult to achieve than it initially seemed.

A Thorne in Mercy's Side

What is striking about "Love Thy Neighbour" is how it so closely resembles the pilot episode by representing an "alternate reality." The core conflict in early episodes seems to have corresponding conflicts in the later episodes. For example, the "fish out water" story reappears when a new character does not understand or appreciate the

community he will be calling home. Further, the episode focuses on themes of religious tolerance and cohabitation. However, the context of the themes in the fictional entertainment world differs immensely. By Season Four, the Muslim community was no longer a source of suspicion but were instead valued members of the town. "Love Thy Neighbour" marks a transition from storylines that treat Muslims as threats to the community to a situation in which Islam is under threat from external forces and society more broadly. This is a pivotal change in the premise of the whole discourse.

One of the balancing acts that producers of *Little Mosque* had to manage was audience comfort and tolerance. How does social commentary, which is by nature somewhat uncomfortable to some people, remain practical but palatable in the fictional world of sitcom TV? According to producers, the program had become *too* comfortable, in that the ecumenical perfection found in Mercy was not reflective of what was happening in the world and was thus straying from the original mandate of the series and not providing relevant social commentary. From interviews with Nawaz, Conway offered the following insight: "through season 3 *Little Mosque* provided an idealized outlet for Muslims who wanted to escape the conflict they experienced in their everyday lives. It provided what many found to be a persuasive argument about how Muslims could or should belong to North American society; *Thorne reminded them of what they were escaping*" (Conway, *Little Mosque on the Prairie*).

The promotion leading up to the premiere date of Season Four on September 28, 2009 included news stories, advertising campaigns, and blog features. Ten days before the

premiere, a short interview with *Little Mosque* producer, Mary Darling, was posted on the site *TV, eh?,* a site dedicated to discussing Canada's television. At this point, close followers of the show would be aware of the replacement of Magee by Thorne, but, without actually seeing the new configuration, very few in the audience would have known what to expect. Darling, speaking to journalist Diane Wild, acknowledged that the new season would represent a significant tonal shift: "The new season of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* will come as quite a surprise for many of its fans, … The goal of this season is in many ways to engage in the actual conversation happening in the world much like we did in our first season" (Wild).[49] In other words, Darling was signalling a change, or more accurately, a recommitment, to offer social commentary through the series. This social commentary was premised on a conflict model, rooted in the belief that social commentary is effectively communicated when couched in explicit confrontations with an issue. This approach hinges on how well audiences relate to the characters and situations depicted on the screen and merits more fulsome consideration.

A Question of Relatability

While it might initially sound strange, it is nonetheless true to say that watching television is an investment for audiences. If nothing else, it is an investment of time that

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[49] Despite articles priming audiences for the changes in the show, the reality is that most viewers would not have read about *Little Mosque* prior to watching it. A few dedicated fans follow television criticism, but most regular viewers would know little about the season beyond what they saw on occasional thirty-second TV commercials in the weeks preceding airing.

could otherwise be spent watching or doing something else. More than that, people invest emotionally in shows, particularly in characters. What is relevant here is the concept of parasocial relationships, in which audience members develop imaginary connections to a media personality, fictitious or real, and get to "know" whom they see on the TV (Horton and Wohl). Season Four of *Little Mosque* interrupted these established relationships for many viewers. Media studies of why viewers watch, and often, re-watch, favourite shows suggest that viewers often replicate feelings of belonging and social acceptance (Green et al. 319). Sitcoms are particularly adept, compared to other genres, at developing such relationships (Chory-Assad and Cicchirillo 153). The strength of relationship development of the audience with characters in sitcoms generates interest in the series and is used to "catch the attention" of the audience and promote further social commentary.

Were this a project in social psychology, one of its fundamental concepts would be prosocial behaviour. Prosocial behaviours are those things people do that are intended to help others and encourage social acceptance and camaraderie. This concept is valuable because it uses thematic analysis concerning social cohesion and attempts to quantify those ideas. Are viewers of *Little Mosque* more tolerant towards the outgroups[50] that are portrayed in the series?

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[50] Outgroups refer to social groups of which an individual does not feel as though he/she is personally a member. For example, non-Muslims watching *Little Mosque* would, in the context of religious discussions, be viewing an outgroup interaction. In contrast, ingroups are those groups of which individuals are themselves members.

Social psychologists Murrar and Brauer explored this question of tolerance development through TV viewing, using *Little Mosque* as an example of entertainment-education programming. In their study, they compared attitudes towards Islam/Muslim characters between two groups who watched five to six episodes of specific sitcoms: a control group that watched an all-white cast in the series *Friends;* and a group that watched *Little Mosque*. Murrar and Brauer's project built on past studies that found that when audiences were able to develop parasocial relationships with relatable characters, those relatable characters could work as proxies. Those proxy characters could then build outgroup relationships that would replicate their experiences and make the audiences feel as though they were having those experiences vicariously. Small, yet perceptible, prosocial attitudinal shifts were found, for instance, with viewers of the 1990s sitcom *Will & Grace*, a show about the relationship between a straight woman, Grace, and a gay man, Will (Ortiz and Harwood). Finding similar results concerning *Little Mosque* would provide meaningful insight into the value of social commentary in *Little Mosque*.

Murrar and Brauer's study offers complicated insights. On the one hand, their experiment did find that those viewers who watched *Little Mosque* had more positive attitudes towards Arabs[51] than those who watched *Friends.* On the other hand, however,

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[51] Notably, the experiment used Arab identities, not Muslim identities. Although there is a tendency to conflate Muslims with the Middle East and Arab people, the reality is that only 20% of the world's Muslim population resides in the Middle East and North Africa. Due to the scaling of populations and demographics, 60% of the world's Muslim population resides in Asia, and more Muslims live in Russia than Jordan and Libya combined (Pew Research Center, "Mapping the Global Muslim Population").

while opinions may have changed, the study also showed that these changes did not translate into a significant difference in an audience's willingness to pursue further action such as receiving more information on initiatives to decrease prejudice (Murrar and Brauer 10). Perhaps most crucially, their research concluded that the more people could identify with a character on *Little Mosque*, the less likely they were to exhibit prejudicial attitudes (Murrar and Brauer 11). In other words, one of the critical aspects of influencing the audience's opinions was finding a character with whom the viewer could closely relate and put themselves in the fictional character's position.[52]

If the goal of a series is to foster parasocial relationships, the series requires diverse characters. The greater the desire for a diverse audience, more potential relatable connections are needed. This becomes more difficult if there is a perception of the difference between the characters and the viewing audience; in the case of *Little Mosque*, this speaks to the apparent Muslim/non-Muslim divide and the need for someone to act as a bridge, at least initially.[53] It is this last point that makes the absence of Magee worth closer attention.

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[52] What is unclear are which specific episodes the audiences watched and, furthermore, how these episodes were selected. Magee's abscence removes the one character that is arguably the most relatable to audiences—the least "sitcomy" character of the bunch. The other non-Muslim characters are not nearly as relatable because they were purposefully written with exaggerated traits. Consequently, whether or not Magee featured in the episodes under study could potentially change the study's findings.

[53] One strength of *Little Mosque* is clearly that it provides a number of Muslim characters to whom a person might relate and, accordingly, diminish prejudicial attitudes. Shows

While *Little Mosque* is recognized for its large cast of Muslim characters, the non-Muslim characters were also significant for the series' goals. Some viewers might establish parasocial relationships more easily with non-Muslim characters than with Muslim ones, based on relatability. Initially, the series included three non-Muslim characters: Rev. Magee, Mayor Popowicz, and Fred Tupper. The latter two are in keeping with the archetypal, hyperbolic sitcom style: the Mayor, for instance fits the mould of the wisecracker, who "just lives to make fun of others (not usually mean-spirited, like The Bully) or to find the humour in any given situation. [The character] is usually something of a thorn in the sides of the others, particularly in more serious situations" (*TV Tropes*, "Universal-Adaptor Cast"). Since the Mayor is effectively a "jokester" who lacks depth for much of the series, she is an unlikely candidate for viewers to develop parasocial relationships. The Mayor's playful mocking is a purposeful role that brings topics into clearer focus. The Mayor demonstrates her wisecracking approach when speaking to Sarah about Fred's opposition to a gender barrier in the mosque: "[Sarah] Fred Tupper standing up for oppressed women? [Mayor Popowicz] I think he's standing up for oppressed boobs" (Kennedy, "The Barrier"). This quip sheds light on the character of Fred, who fits the colloquially named "jerkass façade," which *TV Tropes* describes as a

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such as *Aliens in America* that show one Muslim character or, for that matter, those such as *Here Come the Habibs* that cast all characters in a similar light, mean that finding characters who are relatable to outgroup viewers is far less likely in these shows as compared to *Little Mosque*. All this said, having a character like Magee point out these similarities serves to intensify this strength.

"character [who] acts like either a heartless bastard or otherwise obnoxious jerkass when they really aren't … In more light-hearted media, maybe they just feel they have a reputation to uphold as a jerkass" (*TV Tropes*, "Jerkass Façade"). Without question, Fred plays a vital role in the storylines of the show; he often sparks a conflict by being a jerk towards the Muslim community because of his reputation as a right-wing provocateur, only to show his more sympathetic side when he is faced with the personal implications of how his words affect his Muslim friends. But despite his vital narrative function, it is difficult to see viewers relating to Fred as an intentionally overblown sitcom cliché.[54] Of the relatable main non-Muslim characters, this leaves Magee.

Magee checks many of the boxes for a character whom viewers would gravitate towards concerning developing a parasocial relationship.[55] He is thoughtful, patient, kind, and more often than not, fun. Magee is an excellent example of what is described as "the sage" archetype:

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[54] This is not at all to say that there are not people who would not share Fred's view; without question, there are. That said, it seems unlikely that many who held such an opinion would watch the show, because its rhetoric is so strongly against the types of views Fred espouses. Fred is a transparent character foil, used to highlight the flaws in the views he spouts on the radio.

[55] A parasocially inclined character is different from a popular character, although the terms are not mutually exclusive. Popular characters are those whom audiences want to watch, often because they have strong distinctive personalities. In contrast, parasocial characters need to be relatable, someone a viewer could see him/herself relating to on a personal level. The sitcom genre can struggle with this latter character type because of the genre's use of hyperbole for comedic effect.

> Usually an older character, this person acts as a sort of mentor to the main characters, dispensing advice …Though close to the main group, the Sage generally exists outside that group, for example a neighbour, or an authority figure such as a teacher. In Sit Coms [*sic*] of old this position was typically filled by a wise, calm-voiced father figure. (*TV Tropes*, "Universal-Adaptor Cast")

In a very tangible way, Magee was the mosque's neighbour who, holding both religious and community authority, exuded calm mentorship early in the series that welcomed the Islamic community into Mercy. It is understandable why his exit created significant shifts in the series. The following section discusses how Magee's exit removed some of the linkages to which viewers attached themselves in the series' early seasons. Magee's exit created a fundamental shift in the series, not just with characters but with plot lines, tone, and intent.

The Show Gets Some Feedback

During *Little Mosque's* run, the CBC ran an infrequent blog on their website to communicate with fans. In a post made just after "Love Thy Neighbour," the blog recounted some reactions to the airing. While they pointed out that critics seemed to enjoy the episode, the backlash from audiences could not be ignored: "Well, we knew that Reverend Thorne would ruffle a few feathers, but that's a lot of feathers!" (CBC Staff, "The New Face of Anger… or Joy?"). While they are not a scientific or representative sample of viewers, the comments on the blog provide responses to, and from, some of the

audience.[56] Much of the response showed a distaste for the changes while holding out hope for the series. Commenter "Christine" said, for instance:

> I am undecided about Reverend Thorne at this point. Creating conflict? Hmmm. Ok. But will that consist of a weekly threat to boot the Mosque and it's [*sic*] members out on the street? Won't that get a little old? Soon? Aside from the questions about the new kid in town, I am really happy the show is back! I missed it! (CBC Staff, "The New Face of Anger… or Joy?")

Another commentator, "Courtney," echoed similar reservations about the introduction of Thorne:

> This is my first time blogging on this site and unfortunately I'm writing as a very upset viewer. I love *Little Mosque*…however, since the arrival of Rev. Thorne I have been totally turned off. He's a jerk and it worries me that this is the perception that the Canadian public will have of Anglican ministers and other Christian spiritual leaders. *Little Mosque* already has the Christian and Muslim a**es [*sic*] (depicted by Tupper and Babar) and they provide very funny and harmless confusion and anecdotes about the religions - but I feel as though Thorne takes it too far […] Thorne's character is not showing acceptance or tolerance toward other religions,

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[56] These comments demonstrate a general attitude of audiences about the social function of humour. These comments are illustrative, rather than generative; they display an ongoing debate about the "true nature" of comedy.

> which is something that Christianity proudly proclaims. Writers, Directors and Producers [*sic*] please consider how long Rev. Thorne remains in Mercy, for I feel that he is inadvertently spreading hate to Canadian viewers. (CBC Staff, "The New Face of Anger… or Joy?")

Comments such as these demonstrate an underlying apprehension on the part of some viewers, many of whom felt betrayed or worried that the unifying purpose of *Little Mosque* was under threat. One commentator, Barbara, reaffirmed this point about Thorne: "His character defeats the whole purpose of the show. He makes Christians look like pompous jerks. Why fix what isn't broken!!!" (CBC Staff, "The New Face of Anger… or Joy?").

These concerns from viewers reveal two curious questions: did audiences respond to the "point" of the series in a way that series producers intended, and would it not ostensibly be the case that writers would understand this point at least as well as viewers? Perhaps, but the gap between the two groups offers insight into the differing objectives of producers who wanted to offer social commentary and viewers who were looking to a sitcom for its presumed purpose of entertainment. In this vein, the backlash of viewers came as a bit of a surprise to the producers of the show. According to Nawaz:

> I thought that [the audience] would … understand where [Thorne] character was coming from. But in fact, they were watching that show for sort of this fantasy of us all getting together, and it sort of disoriented them, so you know after that season, we tried to soften him. And he did become a more interesting character.

> But I did notice that it affected our ratings, and that people were angry whenever they would talk to me about how strongly they felt. (qtd. in Conway, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* n.p.)

The reference to the fantasy of everyone getting along is important. Without acknowledging it, Nawaz is insinuating that the program was in danger of falling into one of the traps of sitcom television, that the "sitcom has been a reflection of social changes, rather than an intervention into them" (Mills 45).

Significant changes run counter to the expectations of the genre and the expectations of the audience. Responding to the backlash from other commentators to "Love Thy Neighbour," one person on the blog captures the essence of finding this balance:

> I would like to reply to a comment by Courtney about how the last episode is spreading hate, actually I think that is the truth that is how most Canadians treat muslim [*sic*] people [*sic*] prejudice still exists and as for new reverned [*sic*] thorne [*sic*] give him a break he is new he needs time to prove himself and as for the negativity of his character I am sure the director will sooner or later convert him to being positive just like Fred the radio talk show host. Don't panic for many years we have seen the negative face of Islam see how patient and cooperative Muslims are. (CBC Staff, "Episode 401 - Love Thy Neighbour")

This commentary highlights my transition to an analysis of the episode "Handle with Care." In the episode, the ramifications of adding more "edge" to the series illustrate how

the subject matter of *Little Mosque,* as it reflects and is influenced by broader cultural attitudes, is considered by examining the role of comedy in society. Ideological positivism, which can be paraphrased as "sooner or later, bad things will be converted into a positive," has effects on how social commentary is communicated.

Episode 407: "Handle with Care"

When Yasir breaks Thorne's Jesus statue, he tries to replace it before he's discovered. But the replacement Jesus is not quite what he expects and Thorne tries to use Yasir's mistake to turn the town against the Muslims. And when Rayyan criticizes Baber's parenting, he sends Layla to live with her. Forced to deal with a difficult teenager, Rayyan realizes parenting is harder than it looks.
(CBC Staff, "Episode 407 - Handle with Care")

"Handle with Care" offers an excellent opportunity to more closely consider what it means to view humour through a sociopositive lens. As a reminder, sociopositivity means that receiver of a message, whether in conversation or through the media, is inclined to "look for the best" in whatever is communicated. This tendency, of course, makes several assumptions. For instance, one such underlying assumption is that whoever is communicating the message is worth giving the benefit of the doubt. I argue that this gracious attitude was extended to *Little Mosque* in general and for this episode in particular, in so far as it received very little backlash for what, on the surface, was a contentious storyline. Another underlying assumption corresponds to humour; namely, that humour, properly constituted, ought to be given that same benefit of the doubt. Together, these two assumptions mean that certain difficult topics, which are central to offering meaningful social commentary, are overlooked due to the urge to discuss such an

instance as a breakdown of humour, rather than as fundamental to the discussion. Billig summarizes how the effects of humour, such as the potency of its social commentary, are too often superseded by sociopositivity:

> The key issue is not to humour in terms of its effects examine how it may succeed or fail in its effects. Similarly, analysts should try to avoid becoming prescriptive in their definitions of humour, by claiming what they find funny to be 'genuine humour' and what they find unfunny to be not properly humorous. The theoretical danger is that analysts would deny that they find certain forms of ridicule to be funny. Then, ridicule and mockery can easily slip through the definitional net. The end-result becomes and comforting. Humour is something good and those with a sense of good people. However, this would represent an uncritical approach, for the critic needs to take seriously the negative. (178)

"Handle with Care" offers an excellent case study of what Billig describes, one that will help clarify how some of the critical edge was downplayed in the series.

The B-plot in *Little Mosque*'s "Handle with Care" is steeped in conventional sitcom writing. While the characters differ, the episode follows a formula that is replicable in any domestic sitcom: an overconfident character is put in the uncomfortable position of raising another character's child, which turns out to be far more difficult than originally imagined. In sitcoms, this storyline is so common it has a formalized category: the "parents for a day" episode (*TV Tropes*, "Parents for a Day"). In "Handle with Care," Rayyan, a confident and highly capable professional, sympathizes with the superficial

plight of Baber's daughter Layla. Though he undoubtedly loves her, Baber is out of touch with the world perspective of a teenage girl and, after Baber starts an argument about signing up Layla for volunteering without her knowledge, Layla goes to live with Rayyan to test the latter's parenting skills. Predictably, Rayyan finds that caring for a teenager is more onerous and stressful than she imagined, and Baber, now lonely in his empty nest, reaffirms how much he needs Layla around and contemplates easing up on his strict discipline.

In contrast, the A-plot of the episode follows the season-long theme of heightened conflict, mostly spurned by Thorne's agitation. Despite not wanting the Muslims in "his" church, Thorne has hired Yasir as the general contractor to complete renovations to the main sanctuary. While working, Yasir receives a package delivery on behalf of Thorne, which, upon closer inspection, is a life-sized statue of Jesus. True to the genre, when Yasir says that they need to be extra careful with the statue, he accidentally tips it over and shatters it. Rather than owning up to the mistake and resolving it directly, Yasir brings Sarah into his scheme, trying to find ways to ensure that Thorne, who is anxiously awaiting the package, never finds out. Before long, Thorne has enlisted a reluctant Amaar as an investigator, creating an unwitting game of cat and mouse in the church/mosque.

Sitcom schemes are rarely well conceived and are usually found out, as evidenced by Yasir's "hide and glue" strategy. Amaar finds out about the broken Jesus statue and has a short moment of panic, only to be reassured by the promise that Yasir is ordering a replacement that is going to arrive shortly. There is only one problem: unlike the original,

Figure 12 : Yasir and Sarah ponder their replacement statue (Wright).

Jesus is depicted as a tall, black man, which was certainly not what Thorne ordered. Alas, time is running out for Yasir and his friends because, after some persistent sleuthing, Thorne has found the broken remnants of the original Jesus and the new statue Yasir was hiding in the corner of his office. Thorne, never one to pass up an opportunity to show his taciturn ways, and especially to the Muslim community, engages in an awkward confrontation. At first, Sarah fumbles her way through a scattered apology: “I'm sorry. We didn't mean to break the normal one. I mean, I mean the white one. I mean, not that white is normal. I am not a racist. No one meant to break your statue!” (Wright) Brimming with hubris, Thorne is elated. The original package he was waiting for was never a statue in the first place, since Anglicans, as he informs everyone, do not “do”

statues; rather, the original figure was a case of mixed shipment labels. The Catholics down the road got Thorne's delivery and vice versa:

> Thorne: It's not mine! No, that's the best part! - I mean, Anglicans don't have statues.
>
> Sarah: Wait, I knew that!
>
> Thorne: We find them offensive.
>
> Sarah: Yes, they do!
>
> Thorne: Except for this one, which I find hilarious!
>
> Amaar: Look, surely we can forget about this?
>
> Thorne (sarcastically): I could but the town won't. I mean, a Muslim breaking a Catholic statue in an Anglican church? It's priceless!
>
> Yasir: Actually, no, it was pretty reasonable. But they do get you for the shipping.
>
> Thorne: And now this! A big black Jesus! Oh, I can't wait to see Father Shepherd's face when he walks in here and sees that his Jesus has been replaced with this! He'll take one look at this big black Jesus and say… [Thorne turns around to see a black man, collared and obviously part of the clergy].
>
> A new character who has entered the scene, presumably Father Shepherd: … It's beautiful.
>
> Amaar: Father Shepherd! You haven't met, have you? Father Shepherd, this is the Reverend William Thorne. (Wright)

All's well that ends well, unless you are Thorne. Thorne has learned another painful lesson about hubris, about the futility of trying to run the mosque out of the church. The thin veneer covering his bigotry is exposed again without any immediate consequences. Furthermore, the events reinforce the notion that any traditional power structure that Thorne thinks he has in his favour tends to fall short of expectations.

Most importantly, though, is that this plot is another instance of a potentially perilous situation amounting to nothing. Whereas similarly themed cartoons, parodies, and standup routines have caused considerable cultural strife elsewhere, the sitcom format of the episode does not offer an opportunity for meaningful or prolonged controversy in the town. Although the risks in the episode seem to be high, the comedy is good-natured and non-provocative because everything returns to normal, or even better than normal, if one agrees that putting Thorne in his place is positive. This episode illustrates safety in pushing the boundaries of social criticism with sitcoms.

Humour in Good Taste: Some Expectations Concerning Comedy

"Handle with Care" offers an opportunity to illustrate several hidden aspects of comedic social commentary, and to demonstrate that there is no definitive way of interpreting such commentary. Analyzing humour always involves values and judgements, although comedy can downplay these judgements based on the "laugh it off; it's just a joke" attitude. However, such an attitude complicates our understanding of serious topics addressed by comics. How can a joke that is not taken seriously provoke social awareness? How does humour, in its various forms, influence the issues it portrays?

Evaluation of comedic social commentary includes assessing explicitly political elements, including themes, language, the news cycle, context, the culture's latent attitude about humour, and the normative expectations of what comedy "ought" to do. Shared cultural attitudes towards humour rely on "common sense" ideas about comedy, which are steeped in ideology and influenced by history. Assumptions about humour influence any social commentary offered via a comedy.

Although comedy shifts between cultures, the western tradition has always understood that humour has the potential to be transgressive. This potential is especially true in social commentary in which serious issues interface with frivolous actions, the latter allowing for greater leeway to say and do potentially controversial things. Comedy has a reputation for attacking a culture's conventional values and beliefs. Some scholars suggest that comedy's central function in society is to challenge dominant social structures, including religion.

What is meant by a "cultural filter?" An example from cultural theorist Slavoj Žižek is useful to explain cultural sensibilities towards humour. In *The Fragile Absolute,* Žižek discusses the nature of commodities within capitalism. By way of metaphor, he uses Diet Coke as an example of how enjoyment factors into consumerism. Coke, Žižek tells us, was medicine before it was a soft drink, a stimulant to treat headaches, among other ailments. Over time, sugar was added as a sweetener to make it more palatable. For a time, Coke existed in one standard formula but, over time, the brand needed to change again. Against the backdrop of a society's focus on healthy lifestyles arose a demand for diet

Coke, in which the sugar was replaced with low-calorie alternatives, and the brand also began removing caffeine from its recipe. What was left was something that approximated the original Coke in taste, but without the original medicinal aspect. Rather than fulfilling a real need, Coke became synonymous with enjoyment. Where Coke once promised relief to one's ailments, that promise became empty, and "all that remains is a pure semblance, an artificial promise of a substance that never materialized" (Žižek 23). Is it not the case that something similar might be said about comedy and social commentary?

The significant difference between comedic social commentary and Coke is that the former still carries the weight of expectations. In some ways, our belief in humour has accentuated the life-improving aspects of comedy; we commonly hear idioms such as "laughter is the best medicine" and "a laugh a day keeps the doctor away." However, these attitudes have not always been present, particularly in academic circles. Since the earliest writings in the western tradition, thinkers have considered the social role of comedy and looked at both its positive and negative features. Today, the emphasis is skewed towards the positive; in the words of *Monty Python*, it is our duty to "always look on the bright side of life" (T. Jones). Focusing on the positive has potentially diminished the impact and quality of social commentary. Žižek's metaphor makes sense in that comedy's social potency has been weakened in favour of more palatable consumer offerings. Just as Coke is no longer a headache medicine, comedy could be seen as ineffectual in offering strong social commentary. The lack of potency was evident in *Little Mosque* in "Handle with Care."

In past centuries, social theorists looked at humour with suspicion, because they worried that laughter could detract from the serious business of building a society. The work of Michael Billig traces how these perspectives concerning humour lessened in prominence, particularly in the twentieth century. In *Laughter and Ridicule,* Billig explores the cultural history of comedy and reinforces that humour does not have a consistent role across societies but changes over times and places. Ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato were cautious about comedy's ability to pervert serious discussion; Victorian comic philosophers, by contrast, had a more utilitarian view of comedy that emphasized wit and its ability to inflict jocular barbs. Billig argues that in our present era, humour has been primarily shaped by the rise of science and psychology in the twentieth century that favours uplifting messages and self-help. Drawing on Herbert Marcuse's work on the relationship between psychology and political economy, Billig claims that today, humour is often viewed as a tool that allows people to cope with personal struggles and cultural inequalities and, consequently, the study of humour is skewed towards promoting its psychological benefits. This emphasis downplays the ability of humour to attack, challenge, and generate negative feelings and emotions. Billig contends that this attitude towards humour limits how effectively we can both use and understand comedy as a social phenomenon:

> The argument will be that an ideological pattern can be detected across these [social science and humanities] genres [...] The less pleasant faces of humour—its

> so-called negatives—tend to be pushed aside. In some cases, this neglect is so striking one might even talk of textual repression. (10)

For Billig, ideological positivism is a pattern in our contemporary society that compels people to accentuate what is going in their lives; it "represents an optimistic, can-do outlook in a society that offers its inhabitants the dream of constant, positively productive pleasures" (10).While this seems desirable at first, it also has pitfalls: "The cruelties of this social order are overlooked, as if there is an imperative to wish away the negatives" (Billig 10). Billig's central point is about what is considered "properly" funny today. He fears that by restricting humour to only those things that generally make one feel good, much of the potential for social commentary is lost: "there is a cloud in the blue skies of the positive world. Not all the positives in the world may be in alignment. Some negatives may possibly have positive outcomes and vice versa. It is unrealistically optimistic to presume otherwise" (22–23).

Ostensibly, experience could suggest that Billig's ideas do not address instances of dark comedies that, on the surface, appear incredibly negative. Comedies deemed to "cross the line" for negativity, whatever that highly subjective line is, are systematically excluded from contemporary comic discourse. Lockyer and Pickering make a similar point about the difficulty of making humorous barbs stick in the context of racism and sexism:

> For when a joke is critically evaluated as sexist or racist, by definition, the joke fails and becomes severely devalued as comic discourse. Why humour is sometimes

> found offensive, what social functions offensive humour performs, and how the ethical limits of humour can be negotiated are the sorts of questions raised by its failure. (811)

In this view, challenging topics can be addressed in comedy insofar as a comic production can skillfully craft jokes that display humorous ingenuity. In a literal sense, this is a case of form over function.

While thought-provoking, the salient question about ideological positivism and what it means for comedic social commentary is exhibited in *Little Mosque.* In practice, this prevailing attitude about what comedy "ought" to do has implications for how people interpret the comedy they observe. In other words, audiences will privilege those commentaries that uphold their vision of the world. Often, there will be little to no conflict, and the content of a joke will be palatable. In cases in which the content of a joke goes "too far," the joke may be downplayed, and there may be a discussion about what is and is not appropriately funny. To put it bluntly, contemporary opinions on humour tend to be based on the outcome, on whether everything turns out okay. This contradicts reality, which does not always have the relief of laughter putting a positive spin on bad situations, but this is also why the sitcom form has remained a cultural mainstay for generations.

Humour is not immune to hegemony. Comics who sincerely want to challenge the status quo face a challenge because of a cultural attitude that emphasizes the style and quality of a joke above the commentary it might offer. Getting the laugh takes

precedence. Like Žižek's metaphor of diet Coke, those aspects of comedy that might be medicinal or productive for society are downplayed to make the product more palatable to consumers. What is perhaps most troubling is that those ideas that challenge audiences, or cannot be appreciated purely for their comedic skill, tend to be dismissed. It is challenging to produce biting social commentary with humour when audiences expect that everything, in the end, will be okay. The following section illustrates this point and sheds light on the difficulties of producing genuinely relevant social commentary in "Handle with Care."

Humour and Ideological Positivism in Action

The impulse to take the opportunity offered by the comic form to push the limits when looking to combine humour and social commentary is reasonable enough. Combining comedy and social commentary is especially relevant when attempting to affect conservative ideologies and challenge the boundaries that those ideologies maintain. The conflict-oriented comic George Carlin, for example, performs tirades against religious dogmatism, which *feels* impactful. This is the style of humour people envision when thinking about comic interventions in society. But it is its departure from such expectations that makes *Little Mosque* compelling. The show did not take hard lines on tough issues but purposefully softened its commentary. The implications of this strategy in the context of ideological positivism are demonstrated in the episode "Handle with Care."

It is curious that a potentially volatile story of the desecration of a religious symbol ends up producing a lacklustre commentary by comparison. The show was intended to garner audience reaction. Although it remains uncertain as to what sort of audience feedback the producers of *Little Mosque* were aiming for in "Handle with Care," the show's online presence suggests that they were aiming for a specific sort of audience reaction: a provocation. A subtext of provocation can be detected in the CBC's post-episode blog post: "You smash a Jesus on network TV, and no one even complains! What does it take to startle a jaded viewer nowadays!?" (CBC Staff, "Broken Statues"). This sentiment reveals that the series' producers wanted to step outside the comfort zone and start a conversation that never materialized. An appreciation for trends in comedy made nuanced social commentary an unlikely outcome.

"Handle with Care" was produced and aired during a period of increasing conflict in the series in an attempt to raise the potency of its social commentary. The series' blog details some of the producers' precautions and planning in order to find a balance: "A great deal of care and conversation went into this. Of course, we were dealing with something outrageous and potentially offensive, but the goal wasn't shock for the sake of [it]" (CBC Staff, "Broken Statues"). The motivation of making the controversial move of shock and/or outrage did not engender compelling social commentary.

Social comedy with no backlash and debate, or no response at all, suggests an outcome of negligible impact. This was the concern of *Little Mosque*'s producers

following the airing of "Handle with Care." The final lines of the episode's blog post affirm this worry about lacking social traction:

> And so far, not a peep on our website. People have been generally pretty vocal about their disapproval of Thorne, the departure of Magee, the new direction of the series, the depiction of the Anglican parishioners, etc. But you smash a Jesus and not a word. Go figure! (CBC Staff, "Broken Statues")

This post may well have been directed at those already engaged in thinking about the limits of religious tolerance. The episode attempted to create resolvable controversy, showing that religious offence need not always be taken when a holy object is at the heart of a joke. Based on *Little Mosque*'s blog, the comments on the website were used as a proxy for engagement, of which there was very little, by the producers' own admission. Of the eleven responses the post garnered, there seems to have been little to no real provocation; the fiercest responses are mild and tepid even by CBC standards: "Perhaps CBC should shift targets to another religious group - in seeking the outrage you are so desperately looking for. Shame on you CBC", and "Maybe you haven't had any criticism sent to you, but lots of my friends have agreed with me about how offensive it was" (CBC Staff, "Broken Statues"). This is hardly a significant measure of criticism. It should be evident to anyone in the digital age that the internet is a more opinionated place than what is demonstrated in these comments. The most salient question is not about the conversation *Little Mosque* tried to start *per se,* but why the social commentary seemed to fall on deaf ears.

Previous studies of similar situations illuminate some of the reasons why "Handle with Care" failed to provoke a larger discussion. In 2010, I completed a project analyzing the reception of dark comedy in sitcom television, looking specifically at *Curb Your Enthusiasm* (*Curb*). The series was created by Larry David, who also plays a fictionalized version of himself as the show's lead.[57] *Curb* began in 1999, airing on HBO as one of the shows in a new era of sitcoms that were untethered from the restrictions of major network prudence and willing to take comedic chances via risqué storylines. Although *Curb* is an American production, it is comparable to *Little Mosque* in audience size for first airings, having garnered approximately one million viewers. Moreover, in a stroke of luck, less than two weeks before "Handle with Care" aired on November 9, 2009), the *Curb* episode "The Bare Midriff," which touches upon similar issues and sensibilities, appeared on October 25, 2009. Comparing the critiques of these pieces of social commentary, or lack thereof, offers insight into how the comedic expectations of a sitcom frames the issues.

Curb's comedic style is fundamentally a comedy of errors that places Larry in a series of unfortunate events, which are generally self-sabotaging. Often, multiple, seemingly unrelated events coalesce into one giant catastrophe. In "The Bare Midriff," Larry has two ostensibly separate problems. First, he is taking a new medication that causes him, to paraphrase the episode's guest star Jerry Seinfeld, "to pee like Seabiscuit."

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[57] To distinguish the real-life writer/producer Larry David from the character he portrays on *Curb*, I use "David" to refer to the former and "Larry" for the latter.

Unfortunately for Larry, urine now splashes out of the toilet bowl if he does not pay close attention. Second, Larry has a new personal assistant, Maureen, who does not work out well because she lacks professionalism, exemplified by her habit of wearing clothes to work that expose her midriff. Not known for his social grace – his nickname is the "Social Assassin," based on how bluntly he voices his opinions – Larry bungles his attempt to address the issue with Maureen and is placed in the uncomfortable position of driving to her house and offering an apology. Just as Larry thinks he is in the clear and his apology goes over rather well, he excuses himself to use the washroom and observes a portrait of Jesus on the wall. Unfortunately, Larry realizes too late that his stream of pee is too much for the bowl, and a small amount of urine splashes up onto the portrait. Larry makes it worse when he tries to clean the picture; Maureen and her mother later enter the washroom to find what they think is a miracle: Jesus weeping.

Figure 13: Larry and the infamous splashing of Jesus (Gordon).

When Maureen tells Larry that she is resigning to take her miracle painting on tour, Larry is put in a difficult situation. Larry is pleased to be rid of Maureen, although he realizes that he inadvertently caused this misunderstanding and that he cannot be caught, lest he face more dire consequences.[58] Predictably, Maureen does catch Larry urinating behind a bush when she hears he is locked out of his office and, due to his medication, can no longer hold it. She surmises the truth just before the credits roll, and the situation implodes in the worse possible way for him.

Since *Curb* goes farther and darker than *Little Mosque,* it serves as a valuable point of comparison. While "Handle with Care" produced very little publicity, "The Bare Midriff" was a fully engaged topic for many commentators on cable television. However, very little of that talk addressed any substantial issues about religion's place in society, and was instead focused on what constituted "good" humour.

While it is fair to acknowledge that urinating on a painting is more blasphemous than smashing a statue, thematically they are similar. Both plots involve desecrating another faith's religious symbol (Larry is Jewish) and subsequent attempts at a coverup. Moreover, even though both events happened at the same moment in time, the response to each event was markedly different. "Handle with Care" garnered virtually no media

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[58] Though he is not entirely without principles in the company of others, Larry often embodies a sort of pragmatic nihilism when he thinks he is unlikely to face repercussions because nobody is watching. As a point of reference, the more famous character of George Costanza from *Seinfeld* was based on David, who created George in his image.

backlash, but the same cannot be said of "The Bare Midriff," which became cable and print news fodder in the weeks after its airing.[59] Conservative news sources used the *Curb* episode as evidence for what was, in their view, part of a persistent attack on Christianity. For example, political activist Deal Hudson wrote: "I don't think it's funny, [...] If the same thing were done to a symbol of any other religions—Jewish or Muslim—there'd be a huge outcry. It's simply not a level playing field" (Fox News Agency). Further, in the same article, Bill Donohue, president and spokesperson of the Catholic League, suggested that humour should never be malicious and presumably always in "good taste"; as he opined: "'Was Larry David always this crude? Would he think it's comedic if someone urinated on a picture of his mother?" (Fox News Agency). Donahue insinuates that if an attempt at humour causes harm, either directly or indirectly, it fails in its initial ambition altogether.

The above retort avoids the initial point of the social criticism and shifts the debate towards a discussion of humour. For those invested in religious issues, it thwarts any discussion about the sanctity of sacred objects by reorienting the debate towards what constitutes humour. The answer hearkens back relates to the concept of ideological positivism. The existence of "true" humour, as manifested in the statement "that's not funny," as a defence mechanism is important because it allows for a common rhetorical

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[59] The media landscapes in the US and Canada differ, particularly with respect to the partisan nature of each nation's major news sources. Even so, *Little Mosque* had crossed that threshold before; Fox News, CNN, and others covered *Little Mosque* during the series' run, so it would not have come as a surprise for any of these services to continue their coverage on this issue of religious desecration by adding a "Handle with Care" news cycle, provided they thought it had enough substance to spark audience interest.

device that stifles conversation. In some cases, the comment "that's not funny" is meant to stop conversations entirely. Other times, as evidenced in the *Curb* example, it is intended to make dark, critical satire equivalent to malice and, consequently, vilify the comic performers and (potentially) invalidate their point. Following this logic, which was used in this instance by the Catholic League, *Curb*'s satirical take on religious belief is suspect based on a belief about the cultural role of humour.

Sitcom actor and writer Jonathan Lynn wrote a brief article detailing his rules on comedy, which included the following insight: "'Bad taste' is simply a way of describing when a joke has crossed the line into 'not funny'" (Lynn). Addressing triggering topics is possible when a comic has skill enough to demonstrate wit and consideration for the topic.[60] Furthermore, this attitude underscores an attitude that claims that if something is in "bad taste" it is not properly funny, which severely limits any benefit from social discourse. When asked if David had crossed the line, other comics had mixed feelings about the plot. Rabbi Bob Alper, who moonlights as a stand-up comic, had mixed feelings about the joke but tried to explain how one might find the humour in the situation by putting a positive spin on the ordeal: "I don't think there was an underlying mean agenda. … *It was comedy*, and if there was any agenda, it was mocking silliness in the mother and daughter's decision to buy a Winnebago and travel the country with the picture" (qtd. in

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[60] Reputedly, David has compared risqué jokes to high diving: the higher the diving board, the more impressive the feat of a successful dive is; the higher the dive, the more disastrous the errors. This serves as a warning for comics: "look before you leap" seems appropriate.

NYJW Staff, emphasis added). The notion that "it was comedy" reinforces the notion that humour, "properly understood," privileges interpretations that do not harm, mean no serious offence. To dwell on the less desirable interpretations is to betray the good nature of humour. What this means is that functionally speaking, there can be no type of humour that has socionegative consequences because, if it has that effect, then it was never a "true" instance of humour anyways. The official statement from *Curb*'s network, HBO, took a similar approach when defending their show; their official statement read: "Anyone who follows *Curb Your Enthusiasm* knows that the show is full of parody and satire. Larry David makes fun of everyone, most especially himself. The humor is always playful and certainly never malicious" (qtd. in Mitchell).

An indication of how noncontroversial the *Little Mosque* episode actually was is evidenced in *the only* article published about the episode, written by Islamic scholar Gordon Nickel. In "Smashing Jesus on 'Little Mosque on the Prairie,'" Nickel offers a weak analysis of why so few people had spoken up about issues with the episode, suggesting that people would be hesitant to speak about religious intolerance on the internet and were too dumbstruck to respond.[61] Nevertheless, he does raise a salient point on how difficult it is to level criticisms at things meant to be understood humorously:

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[61] This type of analysis demands a far greater explanation than what Nickel offers. His explanation is not validated, as it is known that viewers regularly air grievances on the Internet, and it makes Nickel seem unfamiliar with the online ecosystem. Further, previous production choices had received numerous complaints, including complaints concerning poor handling of religious issues.

> Since "Little Mosque" is a comedy, those who are offended are at a disadvantage from the beginning. Many people who have no particular interest in religion might say, "Can't you take a joke?" The offended are made to look like spoil-sports and in fact, like the real offenders. (Nickel)

What Nickel articulates is a fundamental flaw in exclusively taking a sociopositive attitude towards humour. Rather than critical consideration of the content of the joke, the emphasis is placed on the psychology of the individual experience of humour. "Lighten up; it's just a joke" is a powerful statement that implies that if someone finds a joke offensive, they have committed a personal failure in lacking a sense of humour or being too ignorant to get the "correct," innocuous context of the joke, and/or have misunderstood the contemporary attitude towards humour and have taken a joke too seriously. In both situations, social commentary is obscured, and the topic is not adequately discussed.

Not all humour is seen under a sociopositive lens. Humour is shaped by social demands and expectations, and society in general has different expectations that smaller, select groups within society. The salient point is that, even though comedy has opportunities to challenge the status quo, it is not immune to traditional/conservative influences. Comedy often downplays the actual content of critique in favour of debating the form; in other words, the function comedy ought to perform. One commentator on the *Little Mosque* blog, "Cyndy," does not mention the broken statue; instead of focusing her ire on the show's "inappropriate" humour, she says that she "was horrified to see what

the writers have done this season with the reverend. This character is too vile for a comedy. I hope his tenure in Mercy is extremely short" (CBC Staff, "Broken Statues").

In contrast to the above viewpoint, an anonymous poster who was diametrically opposed to her suggested: "That episode was funny, and, since the other episodes in Season Four have been like watching paint dry, funny's [*sic*] all I care about. Whatever you did, keep it up" (Wright). Neither comment makes any reflection on the religious content nor provides evidence of the social implications of what *Little Mosque* was trying to accomplish.

In addition to any social commentary a comedy might offer, that content is always couched in cultural attitudes towards the "proper" function of humour. Cultural expectations of humour as a positive social force means that if an individual is offended by a joke he/she finds in poor taste, he/she has the impulse to discuss the failure of humour, rather than the content itself. In effect, what is seen is nearly the inverse of Marshall McLuhan's caution in *Understanding Media* against focusing too much on what is being said: "it is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium" (9). Comedies, and sitcoms in particular, focus on privileged form over content, laughs over contemplation. This is not a failure of sitcoms, although it is easy to see how one might see it that way. Instead, it is a constitutive component of the form. Limitations of social commentary in sitcoms typically occur when people do not recognize limitations.

Attitudes about humour promote certain interpretations of comedy and hinder others. Given the range of possible outcomes for an episode depicting the desecration of a sacred object, *Little Mosque*'s traditional, uplifting sitcom style shielded the series from social backlash, but also limited social commentary. The following section explores popular misconceptions about comedy and focuses on the nature of belief.

Episodes 610 & 611: The Worst and The Best: *Little Mosque*'s Conclusion

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Amaar tries to get the town to support his new Mosque, but finds only disinterest and some outright derision when he reveals that his divine inspiration came from a chicken. Meanwhile, Baber is determined to prove the town isn't ready for a new mosque by trying to get himself arrested. Sarah has a crisis of faith and considers eating bacon, while Ann suffers a crisis of love while sexting the now absent Charles Thorne.
(CBC Staff, "Episode 607 - Mosque of Dreams")

One way of completing a sitcom is to eliminate its original premise, to resolve the "situation" aspect of the situational comedy. Often, this is not possible because production companies are not sure if the network will renew their series. While many series run season to season, with confirmation of renewal late in the season, *Little Mosque* had the benefit of knowing well in advance that its sixth season would be the final one. Advance awareness permitted the major storyline of the final five episodes to resolve the series' original premise of whether the town's Muslims could find a stable and lasting home in Mercy by establishing a permanent mosque.

While the mosque is being constructed, the congregation faces a potential loss: Sarah is considering leaving the faith. For the majority of the series, Sarah was never a

"good Muslim"; she rarely prayed outside of the mosque and she often bungled traditions or forgot rules such as abstaining from gambling. Nonetheless, she was enthusiastic and wanted to be a better Muslim despite her shortcomings. Raised an Anglican, Sarah represented the perspective of a convert who was learning about Islam, someone who asked naïve questions that viewers might ask. However, Sarah's plot trajectory changed direction with the departure of her husband Yasir. According to Conway, this decision sparked a debate between the producers and the CBC as to whether to develop the story as a death or divorce. What caused Yasir's departure? The producers decided that Yasir had moved back to Lebanon to care for his ailing mother, which precipitated divorce proceedings.

Building the new mosque and Sarah's struggles with faith form the series' concluding storyarc, which begins in Episode 607, "Mosque of Dreams." Amaar has not been the Imam of the mosque for the entirety of Season Six, having given up his position to Baber at the end of Season Five when he briefly thought that he would be moving to Montreal. Amaar's plan to erect a new mosque upsets Baber. Building the mosque will require a lot of money, and the congregation has no substantial source of funding or other resources. Sensing the need for government support, Amaar visits city hall to speak with the mayor, but she has no time for the plan. Although Sarah is supportive of the idea, she gently rejects Amaar's request; she simply is not in the right frame of mind to help at the moment. Sarah reveals that she has been feeling disconnected from Islam since her divorce from Yasir, and is uncomfortable doing public relations when her heart

is not in it. Fortunately for Amaar, he stumbles upon a building that is soon to be demolished and, due to its decrepit state, Amaar can get the location for very little money. He can begin fundraising, secure in the knowledge that there is a location where the mosque can be built. As Amaar becomes more involved in the development of the mosque he decides that, even though he will not strive to replace Baber at the old mosque, he will be the new imam for a new congregation, should anyone choose to follow him there.

Sarah's issue is not so quickly resolved. Her best friend, Mayor Ann, has been encouraging Sarah to live a little, suggesting activities such as dating or having a glass of wine, which run contrary to married life. Much to Rayyan's horror, Sarah is lured by the temptation that she has resisted since converting to Islam many years ago:

Rayyan [entering the kitchen]: Hello.

Sarah: Hi.

Rayyan [alarmed]: Mom, is that bacon? That's bacon. What are you doing?

Sarah: I'm not eating it. Well, not yet anyway. Do you know I haven't had bacon for over thirty years?

Rayyan [incredulously]: Because it goes against our beliefs?

Sarah: Well, I'm just not sure what our beliefs are anymore.

Rayyan: Mom, what do you mean? You're a Muslim!

Sarah: What if I'm a Muslim just because I was married to a Muslim?

Rayyan: Well, how long have you been feeling this way?

Sarah: Well, I've been on a date, I've had wine, and something else Ann put in my drink, and now I'm thinking about trying bacon. [Sarah goes to eat a piece, which Rayyan slaps out of her hand.]

Rayyan: No, don't do it!

Sarah: Hey! That's turkey bacon!

Rayyan: Oh.

Sarah: I'm not going to jump in head-first; I'm going to dip my toes in a little.

This scene is particularly noteworthy for *Little Mosque.* Although there were instances throughout the series in which a character's faith was tested and subsequently strengthened, this is the first occasion within the scope of the show in which someone considers leaving a religion. Several events illustrate Sarah's uncertainty: although she is no longer an active member of the Muslim community, she donates the proceeds of the sale of Hamoudi construction to the construction of the new mosque. The next episodes remain intentionally vague concerning Sarah's beliefs, and the audience is left to speculate on the outcome.

"The Worst of Times"

In the lead up to the series finale, Amaar reveals to Baber that he plans to be the Imam of the new Mosque. In turn, Baber revolts and forms a splinter Mosque. Meanwhile, Ann is distraught over Charles' upcoming nuptials to a younger woman and comes up with a bizarre strategy to fight for her man. And Sarah attempts to rejoin the church choir, with fiery results.
(CBC Staff, "Episode 610 - The Worst of Times")

The penultimate episode, "The Worst of Times," brings Sarah's crisis of faith into focus. Sarah joins the Anglican choir, in which she sang during her youth, and it appears she has decided to convert back to Christianity, at least until she sings a familiar hymn, "Amazing Grace." She knows the words, but stumbles on the final word of an important lyric, "The hour I first *believed,*" which she cannot bring herself to say. She speaks to Rayyan and Amaar about her desire to return to the comforting traditions of her youth. Yet, she also reveals that time changes all things, and the adage "you can't go home again" is an apt one for her circumstances: the Church no longer feels the same as before. Facing this dilemma, she speaks to Thorne and admits that maybe returning to church was not the right fit either:

Thorne: Sarah, come on; what's the real reason you came back to the church?

Sarah: It's hard to say. It's complicated.

Thorne: No, it's not! I mean, being Anglican, you simply need to believe in the thirty-nine articles, the sacraments – oh, and of course, the good old Nicene Creed.

Sarah: You know something, I don't know what to believe.

Thorne: Well, I'll make it easy for you. Believe in Jesus. Isn't that what brought you back?

Sarah: I don't think so. I came here because I…I miss something.

Thorne: Yes, well you clearly missed the point of the church.

Sarah: You're right.

Thorne: Yeah, I usually am. But about what specifically?

Sarah: Maybe I'm looking for the wrong thing in the wrong place. I don't want to be Christian again. I'm sorry.

Thorne: No, no, no, come on, don't be sorry. It's only your eternal soul. Kidding! Sort of. Eighty percent. [He gets up to leave]. It's your call. The church will always be here if you change your mind. Again.

Sarah: Well, the church has really changed since I was a little girl.

Thorne [kindly]: No, I think you've changed. But traditions have their pull.

Sarah: They sure do. (Beesley, "The Worst of Times")

With their conversation over, Sarah takes the censer[62] and begins to waft burning incense, strolling between the pews and experiencing the sort of nostalgia that reminds a person that things can never be the same as they once were.

Deep in thought, Sarah does not pay proper attention to the swinging censer and she knocks it into the altar, spraying ash into the air. Embarrassed, she stomps out the

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[62] A censer is a container in which a piece of incense is lit, typically used in religious ceremonies.

ashes that were flung in front of her, but, in her haste to rush out of the church so as not to be caught making a mess, she fails to notice a smouldering cloth below the altar. Two scenes later, we see a mid-range shot without any characters; the only thing the audience sees is the altar ignited and engulfed in flames. The scene cuts and the audience see both the Christian and Muslim congregants standing together as they watch their places of worship engulfed in flames. Sarah is aghast and whimpering, and the others try to comfort her, except for Baber, who, with his aptitude for poor timing and absent tact, says, "Some Christian you are, burning down the Church." Sarah, flustered, scrambles to contradict Baber, declaring that she is no longer a Christian and, with sledded comic timing, he doubles down his on his criticism: "Some Muslim you are, burning down our mosque!"(Beesley, "The Worst of Times"). With that, the episode ends with the metaphor of Sarah's ruined beliefs burning in the background.

"The Best of Times"

In a series finale that lets Little Mosque on the Prairie live up to its namesake, Amaar prepares for the grand opening of the new Mosque, while trying to get Baber to end his boycott. Charles returns to Mercy with a plan to win Ann. Sarah reaffirms her Muslim faith; and, with Mercy Anglican burnt to a crisp, Thorne finds an unexpected new home for his congregation.
(CBC Staff, "Episode 611 - The Best of Times")

The final episode, "The Best of Times," begins in the burnt sanctuary of the church, with a fire inspector confirming that nothing in the building is salvageable. The Anglican congregation is at rock bottom. In contrast, things are coming together better than

expected for the new mosque, except for Baber, who is planning to boycott the new mosque even though his space has been reduced to ashes. Mayor Popowicz has received a proposal from Rev. Thorne's brother and wants to get married soon. The lack of a church prompts Sarah to ask Amaar if they could use the nearly completed new mosque. Believing that this is the perfect way to open a new mosque, Amaar agrees.

In the next scene, Amaar heads to the new mosque and inside, viewers see the back of a woman in prayer. Amaar approaches her, and she turns to profile and embraces him, as he says "Welcome home, Sarah" (Beesley, "The Best of Times"). Sarah's crisis of faith is over, and the wedding begins. Thorne, surrounded by the decor of a mosque, marries the bride and groom. However, there is a hint of sadness in Thorne as he sits with Baber following the wedding. Thorne has developed an unexpected fondness for Mercy

Figure 14: Sarah sits in prayer inside the new mosque (Beesley).

and is dismayed at the thought of having to move, now that there is no church. Baber finds that he too has softened; although he and Thorne frequently banter about their differing beliefs, they have become the closest thing each of them has to a friend. In what would have been shocking early in the season, Baber approaches Amaar with a proposal. Knowing that Amaar wants Baber to feel welcome in the new mosque, Baber strikes a deal with Amaar that Baber will return to the congregation if Amaar allows Thorne space for the Anglicans inside the mosque. Amaar welcomes Thorne into the mosque, and Baber (who is the president and not the Imam) and Thorne argue about who gets the bigger office space. Life goes on in Mercy, each character in a good place moving into their future.

Were this a different sitcom, the series would have ended with this scene. However, this was not a typical sitcom. Fittingly, an additional scene closed the series. The first Muslim sitcom did not end with a Muslim character, but instead with Fred, sitting alone in his radio booth, broadcasting directly to the listeners in the city and thus the audience. He delivers the last lines of the series as David Wilcox's song "To Love" begins to play in the background:

> Well, folks, it is an upside-down world here in Mercy. First, we had a mosque in a church; now, we've got a church in a mosque. I guess nothing that happens in this little town should surprise any of us anymore. Anywho, I, uh, I think I hear the old fat lady singing. Time for Freddy Tupper to sign off for tonight. Over and out, my friendlies. And, uh, listen, thanks for dropping by. (Beesley, "The Best of Times")

Making a Mess of Belief

In his analysis of *Little Mosque*, Conway correctly concludes that belief is a central theme of the series. The show shifted from exploring cultural elements such as the customs, traditions and perspectives of Muslim Canadians to examining belief and how culture shapes identity. Sarah exemplifies this shift. Conway notes that little exploration goes into the substance and motivation of her beliefs, which exposes the limits of saleable diversity.[63] The show used a sitcom format, which did not permit consideration of deep existential questions. Conway raises a valid point and suggests that *Little Mosque* did many things right concerning offering social commentary, but it could have done more to produce change by using a harder edge to its comedy. Conway raises the example of Aasif Mandavi, a comic who often appeared on the *Daily Show* and who created a series of satirical sketches for Comedy Central entitled *Halal in the Family.* For the record, Mandavi's show was never a sitcom, but rather a four-episode web-series that ran about six minutes per sketch. The series featured the Qu'osby family, an unmistakable reference to the Cosby family, depicted as a Muslim family who loved barbeques and NASCAR racing. Conway realizes that the show is meant to satirize the idea that sitcoms can cure social ills. All this led Conway to wonder what might happen if a Muslim sitcom pushed the boundaries of the genre to "its breaking points."

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[63] See the Introduction for a discussion of saleable diversity.

Conway proposes a sitcom to push the genre to its limits: "What I am suggesting here would trouble the world of harmony it depicted. A messy sitcom would negotiate an uneasy, ambivalent terrain where people with conflicting ideas – about Islam, but about other value systems, too – confront each other" (Conway, *Little Mosque on the Prairie*). However, though Conway does not expand further, the suggestion serves as the conclusion of his book, which is truly a speculation about what may happen in the future. It is valuable to consider the implications of his suggestion. In doing so, we will come to find that pushing the sitcom genre to its "limits" fails to appreciate how comedic genres work. From this position, *Little Mosque* informs us about the limits of social commentary via TV comedies.

Analysis of sitcoms pushing genre-bound limits shows that genres do not have intrinsic limits, although they do have expectations. Straying from these expectations is an example of how different genres merge in a process known as genre hybridity. In this sense, genres do not break; they blend. Hans Robert Jauss, who coined the term "horizon of expectation," and Elizabeth Benzinger argue that new texts do not arrive in a cultural vacuum without context; in order to understand a text, audiences use various strategies, covert and overt signals, and familiar themes and emotional cues to provide meaning (12). They offer the reasonable assertion that viewers see a text already possessing some knowledge and expectations based on what they have experienced in the past, which in turn shapes future readings of a text.

With respect to sitcoms, the horizon of expectations blends with genre hybridity. The concept is relatively simple and has a long tradition in the TV industry. The combination of two or more genres presents multiple signals and themes to audiences, prompting them to draw from multiple genre backgrounds to make sense of what is being offered. In some cases, these hybrids are absorbed into the tradition of the more recognizable or overriding genre. In sitcoms, for example, the initial single camera film techniques borrowed from reality TV, as seen in shows as *The Office* (UK) and *Trailer Park Boys*, quickly became part of understanding sitcoms. In other cases, however, genre hybridity creates new categories of genre. In film, romantic comedies (RomComs) have their own distinct genre that came from the blending of the romantic and comedic genres.

Genre-hybridity does not mean that expectations are expanded indefinitely. The development of new genres calls into question how reasonable the idea of pushing the limits of sitcoms is. One salient example of pushing the sitcom past its limits was the FX series *Louie,* created almost entirely by comic Louis C.K. After the failure of a show that was supposed to look like a traditional sitcom, HBO's *Lucky Louie*, C.K.'s *Louie* was likely only called a sitcom because it was awaiting better descriptors. Writing for *Salon*, Adam Wilson wondered if *Louie* "killed the sitcom." Hyperbole aside, what he was really asking was something akin to "Are our shared expectations about the sitcom genre expansive enough to make sense of *Louie* or do we need to think about this series differently?"

Wilson draws a very apt comparison to *Curb,* and unintentionally argues a significant point about the expectations of a positive outcome in sitcoms:

> In *Curb*, what often allows the audience to laugh is the reassuring knowledge that, despite Larry's humiliations, he's still Larry David: superior, smug, self-satisfied. Larry doesn't feel shame, only annoyance and self-righteousness. He'll laugh last while drinking champagne in his mansion.
>
> Louie gives no such reassurance. One gets the sense that humiliations stay with him, that he carries them like blooming tumors in the pockets of his swollen belly. Both Louie and Larry are bourgeois white American men, but only Larry's feel like first world problems. In part, this is because bodily despair transcends race and class. Louie's misery seems inevitable, irreparable, real in the sense that it extends beyond the boundaries of the show's fictional sphere and into C.K's actual life. (W
>
> ilson)

Wilson notes that *Louie* strayed far enough from the sitcom genre to become something different, to require us to consider how the show blends sitcom with biographical documentary in a way that no longer makes sense to identify the series as simply a sitcom, similar in the way RomComs developed expectations that were different from a traditional comedy or romance. Speaking about sitcoms' "goals," Wilson strengthens this point: "*Louie* is an ever-evolving creation, a no bullshit attempt to make something honest and challenging in a medium that's inherent nature stands in stark opposition to these very goals" (Wilson). This description demonstrates how *Louie* shows

the limits to how far a series push a genre before becoming something else; making a messy sitcom may not be entirely possible.

Little Mosque cannot operate in opposition to the central goals of the sitcom because it inherently relies on them. Central to understanding sitcoms is the recognition that everything will turn out for the better. This reliance on a sociopositive notion of humour prompts audiences to read a text optimistically. *Little Mosque* was fundamentally based on sociopositivism using the sitcom format, such that whatever happened, there would always be a resolution that worked out for the better. This is precisely what made *Little Mosque* viable and why the sitcom was the first type of comedy that allowed for a Muslim-centric cast.[64] The power of *Little Mosque* was working with the genre sitcom. The genre offered the initial space for new representations of Islam in media that were previously missing from the media landscape.

In revisiting the *Little Mosque* premiere ten years later, journalist Ishani Nath considered what the series would look like today. Interviewing Nawaz for her article, Nath reported a similar sentiment to Conway:

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[64] In an interview, I asked *Little Mosque*'s creator her thoughts about the show's comic legacy. Nawaz said that the series opened doors for other comedies featuring Muslim characters, and that it offered new, comic roles in scripted television and film. She further speculated that the show allowed for comedies about Islam to be produced, specifically citing the deeply dark comedy *Four Lions* (Nawaz, Personal meeting). I want to be careful to note that even though the cast may change to include more character diversity, genre constraints might not adapt as quickly. Fundamentally, seeing more diversity in sitcoms does not mean the sitcom is viewed differently; it does not mean that the sitcom inspires meaningful social commentary.

> If *Little Mosque* aired today, [Nawaz] says the same approach would apply, but the overall feel would need to be different [...] it would also require a shift from what Nawaz describes as a "gentle" comedy with no swearing or racy scenes to something a bit grittier because of the recent shooting at Centre Culturel Islamique de Quebec. (Nath)

Other sitcoms featuring Muslim casts, including *Citizen Khan* and *Here Come the Habibs,* have taken a grittier approach than *Little Mosque.*

Citizen Khan was never heralded as a building block for multiculturalism, either. Although *Citizen Khan* garners strong audience numbers, the praise it receives is of a different sort than *Little Mosque.* Rather than being touted as a commentary on social injustice, *Citizen Khan*'s network, the BBC, received nearly 200 complaints about the show's content when the series premiered (BBC News Service, "BBC's 'Muslim Sitcom' *Citizen Khan* Provokes 185 Complaints"). TV critics noted that the edgier jokes in the sitcom style were about racism, more reflective of the past than the present: "If the BBC's billing of the first British Muslim comedy series had intended to be edgy, the first episode quickly dispelled the spin" (Akbar). More recently, British MP Rupa Huq called the series "quite backward." To be fair, series creator Adil Ray and the BBC were quick to distance the show from reality, and highlighted that the show was meant to be comic, rather than representative: "As with all sitcoms the characters are comic creations and not meant to be representative of the community as a whole" (BBC News Service, "BBC Sitcom Is Islamophobic, MPs Hear"). What this illustrates, again, is a sociopositive ideology that if a

message cannot be uplifting, the content is treated as secondary to the enjoyment of the comedy.

A Thermometer of Belief

Although Sarah returns to Islam by the end of *Little Mosque*, she is not the same person as she was early in the season, immediately after her divorce from Yasir. On the screen, the final few episodes show Sarah's struggle with defining her religious identity, working through what she believes. Behind the scenes, an illuminating disagreement between the program's producers and CBC helped frame some of the relevant issues. The storyline or theme of beliefs is the sentiment of *Little Mosque*'s social commentary. Within its fictional world, *Little Mosque*'s storylines considered what it meant for Sarah to believe in Islam rather than merely follow its practices. The transition in Sarah's life coincides with a transformation in the community, as the town's Muslims finally establish their mosque and are integrated into the cultural fabric of Mercy. Most importantly, the show offers a better understanding of the beliefs that producers wanted audiences to use as a basis for social commentary, moving from the fictional to the real world.

Scriptwriters never planned Sarah's marital crisis; it was forced on the show because of a cast member leaving *Little Mosque.* Network executives at the CBC wanted Sarah to return to Christianity, seeing such a decision as a comfortable transition that would be relatable to the audience. According to one of the show's producers, "throughout the season in the room as we were talking about it, writers really–I think mostly because we have non-Muslim writers—really saw her going back to the Church"

(Darling, qtd. in Conway, *Little Mosque on the Prairie*). However, the final decision makers, the show's producers, disagreed with a return to Anglicanism for Sarah. They wanted to demonstrate an internal change for the character in a way that was also meaningful to the audience.

Belief in the benefits of internal personal change is powerful, albeit ambiguous. Producers wanted to depict a situation in which small, incremental changes brought about a positive outcome as they worked out the storyline for Sarah. Darling explains the producers' thought process as follows: "she's been a Muslim now for thirty years. Through osmosis or whatever else, she's learned a number of things … It wasn't meant to be any really big statement, just sort of a nice soft little – you know people make choices you might not expect" (qtd. in Conway, *Little Mosque on the Prairie*). Importantly, these choices came in conjunction with a fully realized, inclusive community. By the series' conclusion, Muslims in Mercy are more than tolerated; they are embraced and established permanent roots in the community through the construction of their mosque. Further, they have forged strong ties with other members of the community, exemplified by Ann's wedding in the mosque, which everyone attends, and the role reversal as the church is now housed inside the mosque.

The events of the later series serve as a transparent metaphor for hopes about Canada. Sarah, of course, represents a subtle, positive change of perspective and belief that is supposed to mimic the small, positive changes in audience attitudes that producers anticipated. Mercy, as discussed in a previous chapter, is a town that models a

broader vision of Canada; what can happen in Mercy can happen more widely across the nation.

The reality of the situation is much more complicated, and Canadian society has not necessarily mirrored *Little Mosque*. As recently as 2015, Statistics Canada found that "the number of police-reported hate crimes against Muslims jumped by 60 percent" (Harris). Culturally speaking, Muslims are the group most likely, alongside First Nations peoples, to face discrimination in the country (Immigration Refugees and Citizenship Canada). All of this is not to say that *Little Mosque* is the cause of these difficulties, of course. However, the legacy of *Little Mosque* continues to have a hold on the imagination of many Canadians, but has not had a strong enough effect on society as a whole. Rather than starting a trend, *Little Mosque* has become *the* example for Canadians looking for positive and recognizable examples of media making strides against Islamophobia (e.g., Quenneville; Aslan; Hutchins). The opposite is also true. People looking to decry Islam and belittle Muslims also use the show as a touchstone. Following the shooting death of two women in downtown Toronto, an event for which no evidence has been produced connecting the Arab perpetrator to Islam, at least one protestor held a sign referencing the series, which read: "'C.B.C. presents [...] Little Mosque on the prarie [sic]' and below that, 'Two dead girls in Greek Town'" (Kalvapalle).

The spirit of the show was designed to make audiences more familiar with the diversity of Islam and, in doing so, create a more inclusive society. The belief that humorous social commentary can influence how people think is the essence of *Little*

Mosque. An extensive body of evidence demonstrates that, as a genre, sitcoms are unlikely to do more than reflect the context in which they are produced:

> There is, then, ample evidence that sitcom is a genre which has repeatedly responded to the changes within the societies which produce it … [However, that it] rarely explicitly explores either macro social structures or the relationship between and the individual has been one of the reasons for the criticism of sitcom's failure to comically interrogate and undermine dominant ideologies. (Mills 45)

It does, however, seem unlikely that TV producers consulted the academic discourse on sitcom television before pursuing their ambitions for *Little Mosque*. Even so, it is hard to blame the producers for having ambitions that were misaligned with the reality of humour's rhetoric. In their study of *The Cosby Show*'s ability to alter the attitudes of its audience, Jhally and Lewis found that viewers generally tended to maintain their previous biases and opinions. *The Cosby Show* framed issues in novel ways, with racism articulated by viewers in cultural terms, such as how the Huxtables were or were not "acting white," rather than based on the color of a person's skin. In other words, showing how an affluent black family fit into "proper" society detracted from the reasons why other families were unable to do the same. It is easy, then, to see how one might argue that *Little Mosque* exhibited some of the same elements, with prejudices based on how well their cultural practices integrate into "Canadianness" such as drinking coffee, swimming at the public pool, trick-or-treating, or other things, and not on how the people looked. This raises

questions as to whether *Little Mosque* fundamentally addressed issues such as Islamophobia.

Late night TV sheds some light on the question of humour being used to change opinions. Hosts such as Stephen Colbert, Jon Stewart, and Trevor Noah have received support for their ability to both inform and influence the voting public. Comedy relies heavily on interpretation, and various studies have argued that the process of interpretation triggers existing biases (Baumgartner and Morris; Baumgartner et al.; LaMarre et al.). When social commentary is offered via a show such as *Little Mosque,* the belief from promoters is that audiences will "get the joke" and slowly accept the underlying messages, just as Sarah did with her conversion to Islam. Contrary to "getting the joke," studies in social psychology seem to suggest otherwise. Case in point, LaMarre et al.'s study of political comedy on TV showed that "while common wisdom might suggest that this is simply a comedy and people should 'get the joke,' this study demonstrates that such assumptions do not seem to hold true" (226).

Underpinning *Little Mosque*'s ambitions was a belief in the power of jokes and in comedy having the ability to precipitate changes in society. Comedy's ability to draw audiences and present issues in indirect or novel ways has potential. Humour's rhetorical capabilities, however, might be more potent than its persuasive powers. Here we can return to Davies' cross-cultural analysis over decades on the circulation of jokes, particularly those told to reinforce, realign, or rout social bonds. Looking at political

movements across the twentieth century, he concluded that jokes reveal social structures, rather than revolutionize them:

> Jokes are an important part of the lives of individuals, particularly in face-to-face or email communication, but it is wrong to deduce from this that jokes have any impact on society. It is illicit to move between levels in this way. *Jokes are a thermometer, not a thermostat*; they provide an indication of what is happening in a society, but they do not feed back into and change or reinforce the social processes that generated them in any important way. (Davies 248; emphasis added)

It would be understandable if people felt a tad let down by the Davies' line of argument, namely that *Little Mosque*'s social commentary was more a "thermometer" than a "thermostat." Generally speaking, people have high hopes for what sorts of effects humour can have and will put an optimistic spin on most comic endeavours. *Little Mosque* relied on this cultural attitude to make inroads into the comedy scene and the cultural zeitgeist, and for that reason alone the series is noteworthy.

Davies' extensive work into the impact of humour brings more context to beliefs about *Little Mosque*'s cultural influence and legacy. When the series concluded in 2012, some expressed disappointment about how it ended. Doyle, who is among the preeminent Canadian TV critics, captures this feeling well by tracing the trajectory of the series:

> *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, which ends its run forever tonight (CBC, 8 p.m.) has been called many things. It has been called, in e-mails to me, 'an act of social engineering.' It's been called 'groundbreaking,' 'lighthearted' and 'a chuckler.' Unfortunately the most apt description of Little Mosque in recent years is 'dreary.' ... Too often the humour had a "hey look at us, we're wisecracking Muslims" quality. There seemed to be a self-regard for the concept and some preciousness. It never grew. (Doyle, "Goodbye, *Little Mosque*")

What seems clear is that expectations about the social impact of *Little Mosque* exceeded its ability to solve the complex issues. Limitations of the sitcom genre and cultural expectations about humour prevented the show's social commentary from translating into perceptible social change.

Given the benefit of hindsight, or attention to the field of humour studies, it is easy to be critical of those who hoped *Little Mosque* was a catalyst for a cultural shift in thinking amongst some viewers. When Davies noted that jokes are a thermometer and not a thermostat, he did not do so to devalue comedy. On the contrary, Davies makes this observation so that cultural critiques can more usefully focus attention on what comedy does reveal about societies. For jokes to be successful, shared experiences and understandings are required. Watching *Little Mosque* shows the depth of our knowledge, or lack thereof, of a culture. Using Davies' analogy, it is very important to have a sense of the current temperature using a thermometer if the future change of the thermostat is to be meaningful. Noting that the difference between Shiites and Sunnis is never once

mentioned in the series reveals limitations on what Canadians knew about the diversity of their neighbours. Deeper knowledge of distinctions within Muslims is new to Canadians, especially in contrast to the many times jokes were made about Anglicans, Catholics, and other Christian denominations.

More profoundly, the tonal shift in the second half of the series reveals something more insightful about why the series mattered. Sarah's struggles are a commentary on what it means to believe. That she faces the substance of her belief—is she spiritually a Muslim or, in a more superficial way, does she merely go along with its customs when convenient?—mirrors a broader conversation about "song and dance" multiculturalism that is happening today. *Little Mosque* reflects a specific time in Canadian history, one in which the effects of Islamophobia after 9/11 served as a test of the nation's multicultural philosophy. The "gentle" jokes reveal that sensitivity was needed in Canadian culture at that time. *Little Mosque* is still mentioned today in motivational speeches, newspaper opinion pieces, and racist protests, which speaks to the unfinished business of reducing racism and striving for more functional multiculturalism. There is still much left to be resolved in Canadian society, but learning about Muslims and Islam needed to begin, and *Little Mosque,* with the soft touch of a sitcom's humorous style, was worthwhile.

If I have tried to stress one consistent idea throughout this project, it is that cultural attitudes towards humour are as important as the jokes themselves. *Little Mosque* is, broadly, a reflection of society's attitudes. The series found a place in post-9/11 pop culture thanks to its light-hearted jokes. During that time, while the temperature was

being assessed, the thermostat was set to address the more difficult parts of Islamophobia and cultural diversity. Jokes helped give voice to those issues, created beginning steps at learning more about Muslims and, in so doing, did not harm efforts to continue toward deeper social discourse.

Conclusion

Untangling the Twists of *Little Mosque*

"Amaar: People shouldn't hate Baber because he's Muslim.
Rayyan: Uh-huh.
Amaar: They should get to know him first."
Dialogue from Little Mosque Episode 209, "No Fly List" (Fox)

The above joke at Baber's expense is the type of joke that Freud would have appreciated. The joke establishes expectations based on stereotypes and then immediately subverts these expectations. It offers the listener the ability to distance him/herself from the offensive, poor-taste prejudice while experiencing the content as humorous through the lens of comedy. However, the joke also attacks an unexpected target, Baber, and his inability to exhibit the social expectations of the community. This joke could be a metaphor for *Little Mosque.* In one joke, it both challenges expected bigotry and frames what is accepted in the context of Canadian multicultural society. By addressing one aspect of an issue through a light-hearted laugh, it prompts many other questions. At its best, *Little Mosque* offered many such opportunities to engage in social commentary and to think critically about Canadian multiculturalism.

Throughout this dissertation, which was based on detailed viewing and analysis of *Little Mosque*, I have demonstrated opportunities of using humour as the beginning of understanding the subtlety of social critique offered through comedy and sitcom TV. One of the core features of comedy is that it is always context-dependent yet simultaneously composed of multiple interpretations and meanings.

Chapter 1 situated *Little Mosque* in the context of Canadian multiculturalism. Multiculturalism was fundamental in *Little Mosque* being produced in Canada, as opposed to other, more prolific TV production centres. Past studies concerning structural and political elements of the series' production have outlined an underappreciated aspect of Canada's comedic culture. By adapting Clark's notion of "grey comedy" from decades past, I posited a relationship between Canada's mixed cultural heritage in comedy and opportunities for new voices to emerge. Canadian comedy is highly relational, historically utilizing American and British sensibilities, which created unique opportunities for a show such as *Little Mosque* to develop in ways that would have been more difficult, if not impossible, in other contexts.

In Chapter 2, I conducted a more formal analysis of *Little Mosque*, focusing on the genre conventions of sitcom TV, with special attention given to the setting, characters, and plot devices in the first three seasons. In this stage of analysis, it was possible to extrapolate how sitcom conventions shaped the types of social commentary that was available to the series. In many ways, the sitcom format is an ideal medium to communicate contentious social issues in a palatable, widely consumed form. However,

using sitcoms as a vehicle for such discussion comes at a cost, as it constrains the types of commentary that can be made. For example, it became apparent that *Little Mosque*'s ability to challenge Muslim stereotypes relied on other, existing stereotypes prevalent in sitcom TV. In this way, I drew on the notion of enlightened racism to claim that the strategies employed by *Little Mosque*'s social commentary were mixed, both challenging existing issues of social exclusion and becoming more entrenched in the cultural hegemony of purported a liberal Canadian worldview. *Little Mosque* maximized the advantages of the sitcom genre to introduce audiences to Islam in an appealing way, but in doing so, suffered the constraints and pitfalls of the sitcom format.

Chapter 3 discussed Seasons Four through Six of *Little Mosque,* with comparisons made relative to the earlier seasons. This chapter used case studies to investigate how the series attempted to move away from the limitations of sitcom social commentary by tackling more complicated issues and shifting the tone and direction of the storylines. In particular, the replacement of Rev. Magee with the new, more acerbic Rev. Thorne signalled a movement to a more confrontational and conflict-oriented style of comedy. Analysis of this movement makes it clear that comedy has its own culture that tends to resist change, especially change that calls into question comedy's reputation as a positive social influence. As a result of this analysis, I made the case that *Little Mosque* was unlikely to become the driving force behind a social movement. Instead, I maintain that it is better understood as what Davies calls a social thermometer, insofar as it provides

insights into a culture that is otherwise difficult to appreciate when using more "serious" forms of discourse.

The Legacy of *Little Mosque*

The audience and syndication numbers alone reflect a type of legacy for *Little Mosque.* The show started by breaking records for audience viewership for a Canadian scripted TV comedy. As with any TV show, perhaps the best measure of a series' lasting success is its ability to exist in syndication, a proxy measure of popularity and impact. In this regard, *Little Mosque* has done remarkably well; the series has been syndicated in more than ninety countries, finding followings in the Middle East and Europe (Nelson), and also in the large and lucrative American market on the massive streaming platform Hulu (Volmers). From the perspective of merely tracking the movement of Canadian content around the world, the series offers a unique opportunity to study the mixing of cultural sensibilities and, in this capacity, both the relevancy and legacy of *Little Mosque* continues to grow.

Even so, the most thought-provoking feature of *Little Mosque* is how it has been used as a cultural signpost. A signpost, in its purest sense, is any readily recognizable cultural marker that, while sharing common meanings, nonetheless points people in different directions, depending on their personal viewpoints. In the sitcom genre, for instance, Norman Lear's *All in the Family* is the quintessential example of a referenced signpost because of its star character, Archie Bunker, famously portrayed by Carroll O'Connor. Although the show has been off the air for decades, it remains in the cultural

zeitgeist because of how it is regularly used in conversations about tolerance, American conservatism, or family values. It is not uncommon to hear people use shows to illustrate points about contemporary society. "Look how far we've come since the Bunker's didn't want a black neighbour," one might hear only to hear someone else lament, "We've barely moved on since *All in the Family;* the same racial tensions can be found today." My point here is not to settle this specific example, but rather to suggest that *Little Mosque* seems highly likely to occupy a similar place in culture as it relates to Islamophobia and multiculturalism in the post-9/11 world. Researching this topic, I have found validation of this observation to hold some anecdotal truth. In both casual and academic discussions about my work, I have found that most people are familiar with the show, even if they did not routinely watch it themselves. Mentioning *Little Mosque* is sufficient to orient a discussion about the themes in *Little Mosque.* In this sense, a signpost is akin to social shorthand, able to frame a dialogue regardless of whether or not the people involved are familiar with specific details. This continued role as a cultural signpost is promising for *Little Mosque* moving forward.

Although the series can be used as a source of hope and inspiration for someone such as Aslan, who seeks to change the perception of Islam in the West, it can also be co-opted by people looking to do the opposite. The protestor in Toronto following a July 2018 shooting, who held a sign reading "C.B.C. presents Little Mosque on the praire [*sic*]," followed by "Two dead girls in Greek Town" (Kalvapalle) is an example of the legacy reflected negatively. As others have discussed, there are limitations to how far one might

make the claim that the series radically challenged existing stereotypes about Islam (Chao; Cañas; Dakroury). By depicting well adjusted, amicable, funny Muslims, the show can be read as subtly making the case that there are "good" ways (i.e., integrating into Western society) and "bad" ways (i.e., "Others" with different customs coming from the East) (Chao). As Said pointed out, new configurations of dominance and hegemony arise with time, often superficially seeming to present Islam in new and progressive ways, albeit without ever entirely ceding an underlying belief in Western superiority,

> In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on this flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand. (15)

This line of thought stands in stark contrast to? the more positive, upbeat view of the series, one which the producers worked hard to cultivate.

None of this is to say that, on balance, society will reference *Little Mosque* in equal parts with praise and condemnation. It seems likely that the former will outweigh the latter, at least at this cultural moment. Conceivably, what will be more telling is how the balance of these discourses can change over time, and how they can be used as a proxy for assessing the social climate. An example of this is another sitcom known for its perceived social relevance, *Will & Grace.* When the series debuted in 1998, it was the first US prime-time show to feature openly gay lead characters. Like *Little Mosque, Will & Grace* garnered both praise and criticism. Some viewers, such as former American vice-president Joe Biden, praised the show's ability to connect with diverse audiences and, in the process, destigmatize aspects of the LGTBQ community. Predictably, many

conservatives had a differing opinion on the moral value of the situation. Queer studies scholar Alexander Doty, for instance, struggled with making sense of the different interpretations one might find of the ground-breaking series: "I come to praise *Will & Grace* as a liberal, but to critique it as a progressive. As a radical, I have no business watching it at all" (qtd. in Brook 18). My research into *Little Mosque* has demonstrated, there are many commonalities easily identified between the two series.

Little Mosque was significant as "the first of a type." As discussed earlier, many western societies harbour a lingering suspicion that Islam lacks humour, despite this notion being disproven by Ott and Schweizer. As the numbers and types of comedies featuring Muslims and Islamic culture increases, we are reminded of *Little Mosque*'s role in opening this door in the world of entertainment.[65] The series' creator Nawaz emphasized that its emergence in primetime allowed other, more politically charged projects to be made; she explicitly mentioned the dark film *Four Lions* and its depiction of inept British Muslims who radicalize and attempt to terrorize London (Nawaz, *Personal Communication*). For at least the next generation, it seems probable that themes introduced in *Little Mosque* will be relevant.

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[65] Reasonable people may disagree about the soundness of this opinion. While some might argue that *Little Mosque* was instrumental in providing opportunity to Muslim comics, others might argue that correlation does not equate to causation: *Little Mosque* did not cause more shows, but more shows were produced in the same time frame. That point, however, is almost immaterial to the discussion on legacy; in both cases, the show is once again used as a signpost and continues its legacy.

Where to Go Next: Further Research

My contention throughout this thesis is that the use of humour allows for a unique perspective from which to analyze social issues in general and *Little Mosque* in particular. There remains work to do in future projects on *Little Mosque*. Although much media coverage of *Little Mosque* has commented on its knack for finding audiences in places other than Canada, so far little has been done with respect to analyzing whether the jokes found in the series are understood similarly or differently across cultures. Such work has the potential to better explain the cultural sensibilities towards humour and what people find funny when coming from differing backgrounds.

Similarly, studying how audiences form cultural attitudes about Canada outside of the country would be valuable. This is especially true for people who can relate to the Muslim characters on the show. In this respect, we might better understand what an inversion of the series' initial goal of offering education about an unfamiliar topic such as Islam via a familiar-feeling context such as a stereotypical Canadian town: how do people from Muslim-majority cultures learn about and interpret Canadian culture through watching *Little Mosque*? Additionally, the distinct French culture in Quebec has not been thoroughly examined. A valuable project that compares viewing and reception of *Little Mosque* in English- and French-speaking Canada could contribute to our understanding of how these two subsets of the Canadian population contextualize humour similarly or differently.

Future research should also examine aspects of social change as they relate to *Little Mosque.* It has been my goal throughout this thesis to identify various complexities of producing social commentary and the function(s) of humour as a vehicle to inspire commentary. This is different from social change: can the humour found in *Little Mosque* change attitudes towards Islam and multiculturalism? Murrar and Brauer, among other early efforts, are optimistic, as they found that people who watched *Little Mosque* scored lower on tests measuring prejudice against Muslims compared to those watching a different sitcom (19). Although they are promising, studies such as Murrar and Brauer's ought to be viewed cautiously, as those who watch the series are likely not those who harbour the prejudices the series wishes to eliminate (19). That said, studies such as this often fail to contextualize these findings within humour studies more broadly.

At this juncture, scholars are still trying to untangle the slight paradox of "taking laughter seriously." For instance, a persistent gap between hearing a message and internalizing it remains, as shown in recent studies into politically minded late-night shows, such as *The Daily Show,* that demonstrate a weak relationship between learning new information and altering existing behaviours as a consequence (Xenos and Becker; Baumgartner and Morris). The phrases "Lighten up" and "It's 'just' a joke" detract from the importance of the message.

A natural extension of this thesis would be to explore *Little Mosque* with a similar scope to Jhally and Lewis' investigation of *The Cosby Show*. Building from the themes and ideas discussed in this thesis, such a project could address viewing audiences from

intentionally varied cultural backgrounds. What Jhally and Lewis convincingly argued was that *The Cosby Show* did not profoundly change white audiences' perceptions of black Americans. Instead, *The Cosby Show* allowed space for black people to "be like" the white upper-middle class, and black audiences appreciated the change from common racial stereotypes. Although this seemed positive, it fostered a climate in which black people who do not "make it" are seen as victims of their own shortcomings. Such a perspective deemphasizes unjust social structures and, furthermore, relieves white viewers of the onus of taking responsibility and addressing the still very real inequalities within society.

Racial tensions in the United States have not subsided, and some may argue that they have actually increased. Surveys have indicated that perceptions of Islam in Canada are unfavourable when compared to other religions and ethnic minorities (Frisk; Wilkins-Laflamme). It would be valuable to investigate the subtle distinction between reducing intolerance and reframing inclusiveness. There is much left to be learned about whether or not *Little Mosque* ostracised and exacerbated some cultural differences while normalizing others. We should know if *Little Mosque* reified one particular, sanitized version of Islam in Canada and, in the process, intensified backlash against those who do not fit that version by making those differences an assumed failure of the individual to fit into society's expectations.

Future studies could also assess the use of comedy as an effective tool to spur social change. In his plenary talk at the 2018 American Humor Studies Conference, James

Caron argued that much work remains to be done embedding prompts for direct action within humour, in order to significantly change the role of humour in social activism. This prompt towards social movement could be modelled, for instance, on comic John Oliver's temporarily shutdown of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) by calling on audience members to flood the organization with net neutrality comments through a website he created, gofccyourself.com (T. Johnson). Accordingly, future research could focus on how one might embed prompts towards social action into existing sitcom structures, if such a thing is possible. The more we learn about media types, the better such knowledge can be used to maximize benefits and to minimize adverse outcomes.

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