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'Last of the dinosaurs': *Citizen Khan* as institutionalisation of Pakistani stereotypes in British television comedy

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In the summer of 2012 the BBC aired the situation comedy *Citizen Khan*. In spite of its popularity the show received various criticisms from a range of audiences who felt that the programme negatively caricatured and stereotyped the Pakistani patriarch in British society. It is argued that this misrepresentation was a function of the structural characteristics of the workings of a large organisation which has become out of touch in relation to the diverse communities of Britain. The character of Mr Khan was modelled on the archetype of the Pakistani community leader of days gone by, reinforcing the notion that the community is stuck in the past and therefore reinforcing its position as a dysfunctional ethnic minority group. While the first series has its shortcomings, there is the potential for an improvement in the second series which is to be aired later in 2013.

Introduction

During the months of August and September 2012, the BBC aired the six-part situation comedy, *Citizen Khan*, to a wave of criticism from some and rapturous applause from others. In spite of its notoriety, the show proved popular among a diverse range of audiences, with some shows viewed by over three million people. As a result, a second series received the go-ahead even while the first series was still running. This dossier entry provides a critical overview of the some of the important sociological and cultural studies issues emanating from the programme, exploring such issues as representation, hegemony and the reinforcement of popular stereotypes. It discusses the impact of the misrepresentations on the popular recognition of Pakistani Muslims in Britain and the implications for community and cultural relations, particularly in relation to questions of race and gender.

Adil Ray, a BBC disc jockey on the *Asian Network* for many years, invented the character of Mr Khan as part of his radio slot and video shorts for *Bellamy's People*, which was also produced by the BBC and was shown on terrestrial television in 2010. Snapped up by impressed producers at the BEEB, *Citizen Khan* got the go ahead and eventually aired in mid-2012. Adil is a local man, growing up in the Yardley area of Birmingham, and having attended Handsworth Grammar School. Of East African and Pakistani heritage, and having been in the city most of his life, he is generally in tune with the pulsating rhythms and colours, sights and sounds, as well as the changing fortunes of the city since its position as a prosperous second city still managing to hold onto some role as a car manufacturer in the early 1970s, but slowly disappearing some after that, only to be replaced with a focus on the retail sector economy. While Birmingham as a city has evolved over the years, morphing from a producer to a consumer town, where ethnic minorities are in the process of turning it into an ethnic minority majority city, the character of Mr Khan, however has not progressed beyond the 1970s.

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In the late 1970s, a programme on London Weekend Television entitled, *Mind Your Language*, focused on the bumbling misfortunes of an English teacher, Mr Jeremy Brown, played by the late Barry Evans, and his efforts to teach English to a range of foreign students from a whole host of countries, including, China, Japan, Pakistan, India, Italy, Greece, Spain, Germany, Sweden and others. The show was hugely popular in the countries from which the characters were supposed to have come. The comedy was light, the humour eccentric, and for the most part the joke was on the English due to their endless sufferance in misunderstanding the rest of the world. By 1985, the show was pulled from the airwaves because of the emergence of a 'politically correct' movement that encouraged the idea that the show somehow played on racial and ethnic stereotypes. In the programme, a certain character named Ali Nadeem represented a Pakistani student, and he was presented in his beige polyester suit, kipper ties and the customary Jinnah cap, which was never off his head. A loveable buffoon, he was the butt of many of the jokes in relation to conflict between India and Pakistan. The Sikh character, Ranjeet Singh, played by Albert Moses, and the Muslim Pakistani, played by the Dino Shafeek, who was Bengali in fact in origin, were both in perpetual conflict in the first two series, although in later episodes their profile changed to suggest they could collude if it served both of their interests.

In *Citizen Khan*, it is rather problematic to find that the character of Mr Khan and Ali have a likeness which appears rather uncanny at first. Had Ali been transported in time from 1977 and given his own show in 2012, complete with wife, children and a community profile? Was this a distant relative of Ali who had a parallel existence but in a later era? The portrayal of Mr Khan is not of a man such as Ali, who was utterly lovable even if a little bit of a buffoon. Mr Khan is not outwardly endearing to others, in fact quite the opposite most of the time. Both Mr Khan and Mr Ali are presented as a bit of a cheapskate, but Mr Khan is self-aggrandising, presumptuous, patriarchal and controlling. But why is this the case? Did the BBC simply run out of imaginative ideas or did they and Mr Ray play to the dominant stereotypes held in relation to Pakistanis in Britain in the current periods, and those which have seen a focus on cultural relativism now that the focus on extremism and terrorism have somewhat dissipated? Perhaps they felt the pressure of steering away from issues that affect these groups today, or certainly those that capture the attention of media proprietors and an ever-sensitised audience, namely terrorism, extremism, Islamism, violence towards women, exploitation of young English women, fraud, and criminality, to name those most prominent. Whatever the precise production reasons at play, it is clear that there are certain ramifications important in the consideration of the impact of the programme on audiences in Britain.

'Mind your culture'

There are a number of key issues that emerge from this television programme which reflect on institutional practices at one level and the impact on community dynamics at another. In the first instance, it is important to elaborate on the dominant stereotypes found in the programme, as discussed below.

The single most pressing issue relates to the representation of Pakistani masculinity and femininity. Khan, as the protagonist in the programme and as the dominant male, is represented as the patriarch but overestimating his abilities or prowess – from Khan himself to the young fiancé of his daughter, Shazia, who is shown to be subservient to the whims and fancies of his mother as well as Khan, both of them ordering him around at will. In relation to aspects of his personality, Khan is shown to be conniving, unreliable,

untrustworthy and cheap, all presented as low order human qualities, even though he is shown to have loveable characteristics, which are most acutely observed in relation to the only dominant women in the show, namely his long-suffering but ever-forgiving wife, Mrs Khan. However, the younger women are represented as submissive to the patriarch, while the matriarch is misrecognised and misunderstood. The two central young women in the show, daughters Shazia and Alia, are represented as poles apart. In the case of Alia, she is portrayed as duplicitous and overly sexualised, and in the case of Shazia, as being plain, insignificant and almost invisible, her main visibility derived from her role as the aforementioned dimwit's bride-to-be. Rather, Shazia is desexualised in every way and while she is shown to be dull and drab, Alia is always seen in significant make-up, which is way over the top, wearing the tightest of skinny jeans and false eyelashes that one would imagine few women would regard as genuinely wearable. The sum of the different parts here accumulate to suggest that Pakistani men are self-serving, cowardly or obtuse while Pakistani women are either docile or, given the opportunity, in spite of the shackles that contain them, they are able to emerge as highly exotic and to that extent salacious women. In both instances, there is a realisation of the classic juxtaposition found in the historical representation of the orient in European literature – Asian men are sly and slippery while Asian women are imprisoned by the men but when they are given the sight of freedom they are full of sexual allure and promise. While this exposes aspects of gender inequality found among certain Pakistani households, it does so by exaggerating the polar extremes, which, arguably, is a function of comedy; however, there is the also the danger of essentialism and reductionism in the minds of the many who watch the programme and for whom Pakistanis in Britain are only seen and known through the lens of existing film and television.

In the case of *Mind Your Language*, the idea that racialism was present among the lead English characters was regarded as part of the running joke that maintained the series for such a long time. In *Citizen Khan*, Khan, given his failings as illustrated above, is shown to be a racialist, and the joke is on him for being so. In the case of the African Muslim in the programme, who is said to be of Somali origin, Khan has difficulty in understanding what he says, dismissing him as someone thought to be ill even. The English Muslim convert played by Kris Marshall has ginger hair, and Khan applies all the stereotypes about ginger-haired people in English society to full effect. Gingerism is associated with negative stereotypes focusing on ugliness, untrustworthiness or being fiery in nature. Khan attempts to cajole the 'English Muslim other' to think that he is out of touch with true Islam and the needs of the community, in effect arguing his own importance in the construction of this false consciousness, and again reinforcing the idiocy of Khan and his ways. It is as if white and black Muslims are mocked by South Asian Muslims, who are internally racist, 'othering' other Muslims, thereby adding to the notion that not only is Khan racialist, he also lacks an acute awareness of his own Islam *per se*. While this aspect of his portrayal exposes internal issues within certain ethno-religious Muslim households and communities, nothing is stated to problematize this aspect of the positions of Pakistanis in Britain in general or specifically, thereby underscoring a sense that Pakistanis are a problem on their own, and that the racialisation of the other is something that the Pakistanis in Britain have reinforced themselves. The latter experience is one that is intensely felt in the current climate. While is it perfectly acceptable in comedy to laugh at oneself, in the case of a Pakistani actor leading on a performance that aims to do just that, the nature of wider racism towards this group is lost in the moment, and alas this leaves a bitter aftertaste. It reinforces the widely-held beliefs that not only are Pakistanis in Britain a burden on the rest of society, a risk to the security of the state, a blot on a model of multiculturalism, and misogynistic towards women, they are also racialist. Thus, in the

minds of the many, there emerges sensitisation to the idea that not only is racialism acceptable, even some British minority groups are of the same nature towards others. However, the point is missed in that the reason Khan is racialist towards others in Britain is because he has internalised the racism of wider British society, as well as arguably having experienced it himself during his lifetime.

The above points to systematic issues of the institutionalisation of racialism in media, in particular state-maintained television, and in relation to the BBC, which for many is regarded as the mother of all state-owned television networks. Not only does there remain a serious lack of representation behind the screen, a situation neatly captured by the now infamous quote from its former Director General Greg Dyke in 2001 that the BBC was 'hideously white', the general perspective is of those who work and manage at senior levels remain of a middle-class, middle-England composition. The senior decision makers in relation to commissioning *Citizen Khan* hold the dominant class perspective. While certain groups, including immigrant or ethnic minority groups, may well sometimes actually succeed in attaining a form of social mobility or even class consciousness, these groups are not actually able to achieve it in reality, as they 'could never be truly like us'. It represents the culture of the institution of the BBC and its unchanging ways, and in the process reifies perspectives on minorities that are age-old. *Citizen Khan* does not at all reflect the achievements of the current generation of British Pakistanis, nor does it in anyway critically reflect on aspects of British Pakistani culture.

While many remain trapped in poor areas of town and cities, some of the younger generations are achieving considerable education or employment success in spite of the limitations they faced and arguably continue to face. As such, Khan is more like the grandfather of the current younger generations of British Pakistanis. For these Khans a local political and cultural profile is all that matters to them, and they hold onto age-old patriarchal norms and values, in general seeing the world through a narrow lens. While this is a dying generation, increasingly outmoded and dysfunctional in the current climate, there is no sense of this in the programme. For the unassuming viewer, Khan is the Pakistani Muslim they know so well through the media but it is also someone they have never met or engaged with because they do not really exist anymore, although the exception can always be found, and while it might have defined the rule in the 1970s, in the 2010s they are the last of the dinosaurs.

Concluding thoughts

In determining what could be regarded as comedy a whole host of different options often emerge before writers, producers and commissioners. Classic BBC comedies of old, certainly in relation to situation comedies, have focused on certain ethnic stereotypes and made somewhat of a success of the theme. During the 1980s and early 1990s, *'Allo 'Allo!* made fun of the French, but also the Germans and British. Jeremy Lloyd, Jimmy Perry and David Croft wrote endless comedy scripts that the BBC produced and broadcast with considerable success over a three-decade period. Sometimes, however, the BBC has got it terribly wrong when it tries to do the opposite; that is when colour itself is projected as invisible even though the colour of the lead characters are highly discernible. Lenny Henry, a British-born Black Caribbean comedian of some note went from the sketch-based *The Lenny Henry Show* to *Chef*, the latter focused on the mixed fortunes of a chef in a highly prized restaurant located in a southern leafy country estate. Lenny Henry is a bulky black man; however, his portrayal of the funny man chef lacked the impetus or the personality of a show based on the comedy talent of Henry. Eliminating colour from the

equation so as to appeal to the mainstream and an effort to promote sophistication as an alternative to ethnicisation failed miserably in this case.

In the case of *Citizen Khan*, instead of striking a clever balance, the BBC opted to take what it regarded as the safest route to success. In many ways the programme has taken Pakistani Muslims backwards not forwards. It is as if three decades of community development have been wiped from the historical memory of the television station. It is not as if there is a lack of writing, acting or filmic talent among British Pakistanis. Indeed, there is plenty of art, literature and cinema that is progressive, but the BBC could not let go of the idea that Mr Khan is what the average middle-aged Pakistani is like today. Rather, British Pakistanis in Britain today are integrated, multicultural, professional and more transnational than ever, having indeed recognised change, largely because of British-born second and third generations, albeit slowly but surely. Pakistanis are as about as diverse as any other ethnic minority community in Britain today. The Khan character reinforces stereotypes, it in no way helps to inform the public, rather it misinforms, and at a grand scale.

In some cases, certain scenes in *Citizen Khan* offended devout, pious and conservative Muslims who complained to the broadcaster in droves. Parts of the programme could be said to have offended Muslim sentiments that are deeply ingrained in mainstream media culture and practice. At the time of the broadcast of the series, matters were exacerbated when British Muslims were reeling from the airing of the Channel 4 documentary, *Islam: The Untold Story*, which aimed to debunk Islam altogether, and from *The Innocence of Muslims*, a 15-minute rough cut of a film made in the USA by a disgruntled Egyptian Christian immigrant with a chequered history and a gripe against his own nation, was uploaded on YouTube on 11 September 2012. This film created a huge furore, leading to death, destruction, carnage and civil disorder in places such as Libya, Somalia and Pakistan, to name those which experienced the more severe backlash. Three simultaneous media events with local, national and international ramifications created a sense among some Muslims that the media was out to misrepresent Muslims in a systematic way.

Events far from British shores remain of interest, but the issues in relation to *Citizen Khan* remain significant. In effect, since the days of *Desmond's* in the 1980s or *Goodness Gracious Me!* in the 1990s, mainstream television comedy has failed the minorities of Britain, in spite of the fact that the Khan character is played by a Muslim and writers behind *Goodness Gracious Me!* and *The Kumars at No 42* were also involved in writing *Citizen Khan*. Ultimately, the problem is the institution, and commissioners who are locked in the past but wield power. The BBC shied away from focusing on genuinely important contemporary developments in relation to British Pakistanis, which could be presented as funny (as a parody, or even satirical or farcical perhaps). However, the BBC in producing *Citizen Khan* lacked the imagination, intellect or design. Tremendous opportunities to push forward on a range of important issues were lost. The BBC showed itself to be what it has become: an overly large, unwieldy, hierarchal, patriarchal and increasingly out of touch organisation.

Nevertheless, a new window has perhaps opened where one might have remained closed. With up to around three million viewers per show to start off with (and with the figures dropping to just over two million by the last few episodes), for the actors, writers and producers involved with the programme, *Citizen Khan* is regarded as an unprecedented success in an age of digital media where excessive choice has led to narrowness in the market, rather than the opposite. A second series is due to air in 2013. This second series, perhaps offers something of a 'second chance' in which the actors and writers can push the boundaries of character and story development from beyond the

mundane to the highly pertinent, all the while keeping the laugh factor intact. There is no doubt that Mr Adil Ray has excellent comedy timing, and his confidence in the role of the character can only grow. However, what is needed now is vision, ambition and some daring on all parties involved to drive home some positive and more imaginative messages. In all instances, whether Khan is loved or derided, it has got the British population talking about Muslims and Pakistanis within the realm of comedy. This can only be a good thing in the long-run, and it supports the BBC in its position in acting in the interests of the public good, defined by its mother-of-all-public-sector-networks charter.

Notes on contributor

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