CHAPTER FOUR
Oppositional Banality: Watching Ordinary Muslims in *Little Mosque on the Prairie*

In the premiering episode of the Canadian situation comedy series *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (2007-2012), the character Joe, a white prairie farmer, wanders into the local Anglican parish hall to witness a group of Muslims praying and prostrating in unison. Alarmed and frightened, he stumbles out of the building to call the national terrorist-attack hotline. Later on, he recounts – with agitation – his encounter with these Muslims to his reverend: “I saw them [Muslims] bowing and moaning just like on CNN.” Although the comical scene is meant to parody the post-9/11 anti-Muslim paranoia that had spread in the US, Canada and elsewhere, it nevertheless crystallizes several lingering cultural and visual effects of the September 11, 2001 attacks: first, there remains a tenuous but stubborn visual association linking Muslims and the practice of Islam with terrorism; second and as a consequence of the first, encounters with Muslims for non-Muslims like Joe become moments of alarm, fear, and panic; and third, perceptions of Muslims and Islam are guided and shaped by the media, in this case the news media. These issues of post-9/11 visuality (ways of seeing and their affects) and visibility (who is visible and in what imposed way) lie at the heart of this dissertation, which tackles 9/11 politics through its aesthetic dimensions of audibility and visibility, and with cultural resistance defined as struggles and interventions that seek to disrupt these fields.

Moving past the realm of audibility explored in the previous two case studies, this chapter and the next shift to visibility and visuality, with this chapter centering on the various visual structures governing the key figures of Muslims and the practice of Islam in Western media. It does so through *Little Mosque* (henceforth thus shortened), given that the presence of Muslims and Islam in the media, and the (mis)representation of both are the driving forces of the show in terms of its content, motivations, and oppositional spirit. Having premiered on Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) in 2007 and ending in 2012 after six seasons, the show features a mosque located in a church intentionally. It parodies many 9/11 topics or situations which have by now become familiar: Muslims, or dark-skinned foreigners, being interrogated at the airport as terrorist suspects, Muslims being placed on airlines’ no-fly lists, mosques under police surveillance or being raided by the security intelligence services. Acting as a comic relief to succor anti-Muslim fears and hostility, the show directly opposes common stereotypes and hostile perceptions towards Muslims by exaggerating these attitudes or exposing their
instrumentalization by the media. Although originated in Canada, the show circulates globally, being syndicated in 80 countries. Inconspicuous is the fact that it has not yet been aired in the United States, highlighting a visual boundary that delimits what can and cannot be seen. Some episodes, though, have been downloaded onto YouTube, thus allowing sporadic online viewing. This exclusion from a sphere of appearance raises the question of what are the determinants of visibility and visual inclusion when it comes to Muslims and Islam? And relatedly, what are the resistant possibilities? My analysis seeks to show how Little Mosque contests the sphere of visibility by introducing a different mode of seeing and a contrastive presence that hitherto deviate from other forms of televisual presence possessed by Muslims and Islam in the West.

The chapter first details the key issues in the post-9/11 debate over the visual representation of Muslims and Islam in the West, as well as how Little Mosque engages with those discussions. Besides outlining the intentions, ambitions, and major features of the program, I also address the academic responses it has attracted. The next section looks at the issue of visibility in depth by enclosing the politics of representing Muslims and Islam within a regime of visibility that invites certain ways of watching and forecloses others. This requires a brief return to Rancière’s thoughts on the distribution of the sensible which I relate to a distribution of genres that conditions the television appearances of Muslims and Islam. Section three sets forth the multiple ways in which the situation comedy genre transforms Muslim bodies and the practice of Islam visually and impacts affects. Rather than focusing solely on the Muslim characters of Little Mosque, I then consider in section four how the on-screen interactions between Muslim and non-Muslim characters might also facilitate a distinct, although overtly idealized, visuality. These on-screen relations and the emerging visuality are discussed through Paul Gilroy’s concept of convivial culture. The final section pinpoints some of the show’s thematic limits which circumscribe its oppositional potential.

86 The show was produced by WestWind Pictures, an independent television production and distribution company. 87 According to television trade reports, the American broadcasting company Fox acquired the rights back in 2008 to adapt the show into an American setting, but that version never materialized. In 2012, however, the American television distribution company PPI Releasing joined forces with the production company of the CBC series to sell the show to American broadcasters. See press release from PPI Releasing at http://www.ppi.tv/news_mar282012.shtml, accessed February 18, 2013.
Little Mosque’s Big Ambitions

Central to the debate over visual representations of Muslims and Islam in Western media is the common practice of linking Muslims at large and Islam to terrorism, as well as the persistence of canonical anti-Muslim and Orientalist stereotypes. These discussions predate 9/11 but have been intensified since, as representations of Muslim bodies and the religion became entwined with the concurrent launch of the former Bush administration’s war on terror and the circulation of civilizationalism discourse, which interprets the 9/11 attacks as part of a wider conflict between contending civilizations of the East and West. This approach to global politics through culture and civilizational animosities reiterates Huntington’s earlier and disputed hypothesis of “the clash of civilizations.” As Ervand Abrahamian has argued, a backward glance at the American media coverage of 9/11 in the attacks’ aftermath confirms Huntington’s “triumph,” as the American media reported the catastrophe through the prism of a cultural conflict between Islam and the West, as well as the West being threatened by the Other (Abrahamian 531).

With the help of comedy and laughter, Little Mosque seeks to change all this. Although produced and set in Canada, the show is assertively responding to and continuously engaging with the events of 9/11 through its own content, motivation, and intentions. Discussions of the show, both in the Canadian and American media, also situate it within 9/11’s history. The show’s title is an allusion to the classic American book and television drama series, Little House on the Prairie, which has prompted scholars to suggest a parallel settler-narrative. There is, however, no specific intertextuality between it and the earlier American program in terms of the plotlines. The title of the situation comedy has more to do with the life experience of its Muslim-Canadian creator Zarqa Nawaz, who moved from Toronto to a Canadian prairie town after she was married, according to the commentary offered in the DVD of the series. The show offers a

88 “Media” in this chapter is always referring to mainstream media and does not cover any New Media forms.
89 Besides a general discussion of the media coverage of the attacks, Ervand Abrahamian also examines the coverage of the New York Times, including the paper’s new section “A Nation Challenged,” which contained articles with headlines such as “Yes, this is about Islam,” “The core of Muslim rage,” “The age of Muslim wars.” See Abrahamian’s “The US Media, Huntington and September 11,” Third World Quarterly 24.3 (June, 2003): 529-44.
90 Scholars have interpreted differently the allusion to the original American show. Michele Byers claims that Little Mosque “calls attention to the white supremacy of the original narrative and suggests itself as a corrective, a re-insertion of difference into both the Canadian prairie landscape and into narratives of small town life.” See her “Speaking About the Nation: Critiques from the Canadian Margins,” Critical Studies in Television 6.2 (2011): 145. Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin claim that Little Mosque forgoes the moralizing that characterizes the older American series and directly tackles community relations and stereotyping. “If Charles Ingalls and his family were nineteenth-century pioneers forging a new life in the untamed Midwest, in Little Mosque the extended Muslim ‘family’ of Mercy, Saskatchewan, blazes its own trail by establishing a place of worship in the local church hall, facing fearsome rednecks and hostile ‘natives’ along the way” (202). See their Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).
homey and comical depiction of everyday life in a Muslim community as its members interact with other non-Muslims in their fictional Canadian prairie town of Mercy. The show’s first episode attracted 2.1 million viewers which, according to a television critic, was a feat in a country where an audience of one million is already a hit. Ratings, however, fell as the show progressed.

Figure 4.1. A promotional photograph for Little Mosque featuring characters, from left to right, Barber (Manoj Sood), Rayyan (Sitara Hewitt), Amaar (Zaib Shaikh), Reverend Thorne (Brandon Firla), Yasir (Carlo Rota) and Sarah (Sheila McCarthy). Reprint permission courtesy of WestWind Pictures.

According to Little Mosque’s producer Mary Darling, the storylines of the weekly show contain, first, a strong Muslim perspective that highlights the religious practices of Islam, and second, various popular universal themes such as family and marriage life, generational gap, love and friendship. In other words, the show simultaneously highlights the particularities of Islam and overlaps them with what the show sees as universal ideals. Little Mosque also has pedagogical ambitions: it hopes to meet the public’s need for understanding and knowledge following a catastrophe that has, in some ways, defied human comprehension. “I think everybody was looking for understanding. Here I was with my Idiot’s Guide to Islam trying to learn about a culture that really a lot of us don’t know much about,” says Susan Flanders-Alexander, a member of the show’s writing team. She believes that one of the strengths of the series is that “it [is] a great exploration of a culture … it is teaching, it is educative.” That farmer Joe, featured in the first episode, would react to a group of Muslims praying with such fear, is because of misrepresentation on the one hand, and his own cultural and religious ignorance, on the other.

---

92 DVD commentary from Little Mosque on the Prairie: Season One.
93 DVD commentary from Little Mosque on the Prairie: Season One.
Regardless of whether the spectator is indeed ignorant or not (Rancière would no doubt dismiss this assumption of the public’s religious illiteracy), the show nevertheless familiarizes non-Muslim spectators with some very basic beliefs, institutions and experiences of the religion, including the Five Pillars of Islam, the five daily prayers and halal food. These topics are seamlessly woven into the weekly storylines. Various episodes also feature Islamic festivals such as Ramadan and Eid-al-Adha. In the second episode of the first season, for example, the fictional mosque hosts an open house to combat suspicion and educate the white, non-Muslim townsfolk the basics of their religion. Several scenes show the Muslim characters explaining Islam and educating their uninformed but eager-to-learn neighbors, and by extension, the television viewing audience.

The spirit of the *Bildungsroman* is one that *Little Mosque* shares with Hamid’s novel. The situation comedy can also be seen as a kind of multi-voiced and communitarian *Bildungsroman* that chronicles the development or maturation of a Muslim community. From episode to episode, viewers see the transformation of this community from several loosely linked families that have to hold their meetings in each other’s basements to a more coherent group possessing a proper mosque and imam.

For the show’s creator Nawaz, the show aims to alter the public’s misperceptions and misrepresentations of Muslims and Islam. She explains:

> It [the show] is a snapshot of a normal Muslim community in Canada, because a lot of people don’t see Muslims in the media, they only see the male terrorist or the oppressed Muslim women. They get a skewed perception of the Muslim community. This is a show that examines the ordinary lives of ordinary Muslims. Muslims are parents … they are holding down jobs; they are paying off their homes; they are paying off their bills, and no one ever gets to see that side of the Muslim world.⁹⁴

Nawaz’s wish seems not to be limited to replacing the post-9/11 negative representations with positive ones, but to see more complex portrayals of Muslims’ lives. Although she uses neither the word “resistance” nor “opposition” in various interviews about *Little Mosque*, her rejection of the caricatural, anti-Muslim stereotypes echoes the sentiment of many Muslim and American-Muslim artists who believe stereotypes and misrepresentations serve as the primary site for

---

⁹⁴ DVD commentary from *Little Mosque on the Prairie: Season One*. 109
Cultural contention and resistance.\(^{95}\) Cultural resistance, in this specific Canadian and Western context, is synonymous with self-representation and self-articulation through the introduction of counter-images, narratives, and history to subvert dominant and reductive generalizations.\(^{96}\) Confronted by negative representations, these projects take the expected “critique-of-stereotype” approach, which aims to address the inadequacy or distortion of representations. These discussions of anti-Muslim/Arab media representations often have as their fulcrum assessments of whether the images are “positive” or “negative,” “sympathetic/honest/humane” or “unsympathetic” towards Muslims at large. This form of critique, however, neglects the broader issues in the politics of representation, in particular questions of power and instrumentalization. Moreover, certain positive images can function as ethnic stereotypes (Rosello 40), and are therefore equally debilitating.\(^{97}\)

Using the situation comedy genre to contest media misrepresentations has a precedent. The most familiar case might be \textit{The Cosby Show} (1984-1992), which offered a different and positive characterization of a successful and upper-middle-class African-American family, deviating a great deal from the negative and distorted television representations of blacks from the previous decades (Mastro and Greenberg 691-692; Cummings 75 and 82). According to Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik’s analysis of the situation comedy: “… racial difference is made acceptable within the parameters of traditional family unity – the Huxtables are an idealized family who ‘just happen’ to be black” (243-244). Some have drawn the parallel and call the Canadian show the “Muslim Cosby Show.” In \textit{Little Mosque} the Muslim difference is also negotiated and made familiar through universal values and the Canadian (Western) context, as testified by CBC’s promotional phrase: “Small Town Canada. With a Little Muslim Twist.” In general, its characters reflect the diversity among the followers of Islam, as well as its varying ideologies, in opposition to the common perception of the religion as being homogenous and monolithic. Their various designations include reformist, traditionalist, moderate/feminist, conservative, and also nominal. Their countries of origin consist of Nigeria, Pakistan, and Lebanon, along with second-generation Canadian-Muslims and a white Canadian Muslim.

---

\(^{95}\) These stereotypes are not just the concerns of entertainers but also politicians and other public figures, such as Queen Rania of Jordan who launched her own channel on YouTube in March 2007 to tackle stereotypes about Arabs, Muslims, and the Middle East.

\(^{96}\) This same resistance strategy can be detected among other American-Muslim writers. Female Muslim writers have produced several anthologies to challenge stereotypes, see \textit{Voices of Resistance: Muslim Women on War, Faith & Sexuality}, ed. Sarah Husain (Emeryville, CA: Seal Press, 2006).

\(^{97}\) Take for example the prevailing positive stereotypes of Asian-Americans who are often considered to be the “model minority” of America.
When it comes to specific academic responses to *Little Mosque*, the politics of representation is one of the frameworks through which Sandra Cañas assesses the show. Concurring with the general claim of the post-9/11 reinforcement of Orientalist portrayals of Islam and Muslims, Cañas suggests that the situation comedy provides a counter-hegemonic narrative that questions stereotypes and prejudices against Muslims and Islam (207). Analyzing the show through specific themes, such as contested public spaces and gender relations, she also points to the show’s political limitations, calling attention to its selective emphasis on specific forms of diversity and its practice of creating national unity through conflict resolutions. Cañas cites the show’s comedy form as an obstacle to more complex engagements with Islam and with multiculturalism. “[It] can only use satire, parody, and mimicry in comedic ways that, while challenging the Orientalist discourse of the Muslim Other, produces its own silences,” she argues (209).

Another analysis has placed the show within the specific context of publically-funded Canadian television and within the country’s own geographical-ideological politics. Because the show is set in the fictional prairie town of Mercy, Saskatchewan, a locale considered regional and outside the national centre, this leads Michele Byers to examine the show in terms of the complex relations of nationalism and regionalism. According to Byers, regional spaces are seen as sites from which to critique the center and to provide counter narratives and histories of Canada. Paradoxically, the idea of regionalism itself is part of the mythology of Canada, and regional counter-narratives can also be complicit in “covering over” less than positive aspects of the country’s national history (143). Byers has argued that *Little Mosque* “covers over more problematic issues about the literal landscape” where the show is situated. “The discourse of state-sanctioned multiculturalism – through which immigrants are imagined to be inducted into the nation – covers over the story of colonialism and white supremacy upon which the nation is founded, and the bodies of aboriginal people who haunt the borders of the text,” she contends (147). Byers, however, focuses only on the opening credit sequence and the pilot episode and does not examine how the show develops through multiple seasons.

While Mercy’s marginal status and the associated geographical-ideological implications of that location are interesting aspects, seeing the show solely through this narrow location-specific framework misses some of the other equally vital qualities of the series. The characters often poke fun at Toronto and accentuate the city-versus-prairie opposition but ultimately it is the Muslim identity that remains the most prominent aspect of the show. My own analysis is
specifically and extensively geared toward the broader debate of post-9/11 media representation of Muslims and Islam. More importantly, this examination of the politics of representation is hinged on visibility and visuality, concentrating on the boundaries that delineate a sphere of appearance. Extending Cañas’s focus on negative representations, my exploration pushes the debate beyond the positive and negative representations to consider how the show introduces a more congenial and convivial mode of watching Muslims. This different way of looking impacts the show’s potential as cultural resistance.

**Islam Within a Regime of Visibility**

Rancière once explained that an image does not stand alone and exists solitarily, but rather, “it belongs to a system of visibility that governs the status of the bodies represented and the kind of attention they merit. The issue is knowing the kind of attention prompted by some particular system” (*TES* 99). Although Rancière is speaking here specifically about photographic images, this attention to a broader system of visibility is helpful for the discussion at hand. To consider the existence of a wider post-9/11 system of visibility or visual regime governing Muslim bodies and Islam is to look beyond specific negative or positive images, and instead, to investigate the dominant interpretive grid or televisual distribution of the visible that renders Muslims and Islam visible and perceptible. In this way, the discussion over the media representation of Muslims and Islam would consider other factors that affect visibility and not dwell unproductively and stereotypically on the negative images themselves. What becomes more prominent in my analysis is the act of looking at Muslim bodies and to question how that act itself is framed; it is to inquire into the construction of the Muslim body as an element in a visual regime that structures what is possible to see, or more bluntly, what kinds of Muslim bodies are possible to see in the wake of 9/11, and what are the possible ways of seeing.

To theorize this regime, it is helpful to think through Rancière’s foundational idea of the distribution of the sensible which, although he considers in relation to the ways a political community is structurally divided, can be posited more broadly in terms of the distribution of genres within the televisual landscape. For Rancière, the process of partition is also related to the deterministic apportionment of competences (who is qualified to speak and act), visibility (who

---

98 This approach is no doubt also inspired by Mieke Bal’s writings on visual analysis. When discussing the issue of visibility, she suggests giving “attention to the various framings that affect visibility, not only of the object framed but also of the act of looking at it and the ways in which that act is framed” (170, italics in original). See her chapter “Visual Analysis” in *The Sage Handbook of Cultural Analysis*, ed. Tony Bennett and John Frow (Los Angeles: Sage, 2008): 163-84.
becomes visible or not in a common space), and capacities and capabilities (what a body can do consequently). It is a form of distribution that ultimately establishes delimitations. How might this logic of distribution and its subsequent delimitations relate to visualizing Muslims and Islam?

In terms of televisualty, apportionment and delimitation are two ways of discussing Muslims’ and Islam’s entrances into this media sphere of appearance. American and Western media’s encounters with Muslims and Islam both before and after 9/11 have often been through the narrow confines of dramatic news events, such as plane hijackings, bomb atrocities, and hostages takings. In particular, the 9/11 catastrophe, the subsequent wars, and the host of related issues of global terrorism, national security, public safety, and Islamic radicalization are exactly subjects that are necessarily represented by news-related genres, such as the daily news broadcasts, current affairs programs, and documentaries, which in turn, thrive on and are dictated by contemporary events. What this suggests is that Muslims and Islam tend to be confined to representation within these particular news genres. Critics and scholars often fail to consider beyond the negative and narrow media images themselves and address how those images are the consequences of being represented through the limited factual genres.

One would be hard pressed to find Muslim characters, visibly marked as so, in a major American soap opera or Muslim contestants on popular game shows. Television genres impact thematic content, dictate expressive range and emotive scope, and establish formulaic constraints; they are a way of framing a specific mode of visibility and visuality. News genres tend to emphasize and accentuate society’s most dramatic conflicts, tensions and problems. Their realism mode and tone of address to their audiences as a source of information, in the best scenario, is that of the factual, authoritative, trustworthy, inquisitorial, investigative, and polemical. While not all news-related programs reflect high journalistic standards, a certain gravitas is nevertheless required by these genres to document and chronicle contemporary

---

99 Some of those infamous events involving Islamist groups that come to mind include the 1983 suicide bombings of the American Marines barracks and of the American embassy, both in Beirut; the hostage crisis in Lebanon during the 1980s involving American victims; the 1988 bombing of a Pan Am flight over Lockerbie; and the 1993 car bombing of the World Trade Center.

100 Post-9/11 Muslim and Islam-related current affairs programs, documentaries, and news items are simply too copious to be listed here. For some examples of how Muslims are represented in these and other genres, see Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin’s Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011).

101 For a detailed discussion of television’s various genres, see The Television Genre Book, ed. Glen Creeber (London: British Film Institute, 2001).

102 With the advent of reality shows, the category of factual genres itself is destabilized. My point here is that there is a specific mode of looking enabled by a situation comedy that is different from the one encouraged by newscasts.
political, social and economic events.

This common and dominant practice of pairing up Muslims and Islam with a specific factual and news mode of presentation shares a similar guiding principle as Rancière’s representative regime, in which there exists an adequation between expression and subject matter. As I outlined in chapter one, this regime is guided by a principle of appropriateness that requires action and modes of expression to be matched to the subject in question and the genre used (DS 15; Rockhill and Watts 9).

A normativity exists that defines the representation appropriate for specific subjects (Tanke 80-81). This distribution of genre is vital, for genres determine capacities and possibilities for those bodies represented within, how these subjects will be portrayed and understood, how viewers will generally experience these encounters, and what forms of knowledge, entertainment, and excitement are to be gained. As Rancière comments in a different context: “… the distribution of genres – for example, the division between the freedom of fiction and the reality of news – is always already a distribution of possibilities and capacities …” for those represented (Carnevale and Kelsey 5). Muslims and Islam have found themselves in a distribution of the sensible that determines how they will appear on television and to which specific genres they should be assigned, which in turn dictate how they are to be portrayed and with what kinds of capacities. They are, no doubt, the subjects of fiction in numerous films and television dramas. But when they do appear in those non-factual formats, they are still scripted within the contemporary and news events of global terrorism, homeland security, and fundamentalism, and are given identities and aptitudes related to that specific sensible world. 103

Appearing in this news-oriented visual system means Muslims merit tremendous media attention if not as emblems of global terrorism (as terrorists, suspects, or terrorists-to-be), then as pressing problems of multi-cultural societies that must be tackled and resolved. The potential affective consequences of looking at Muslim bodies through these genres and through the prism of contemporary global conflicts might be a heightened sense of alertness, consciousness, and consternation, for non-Muslims viewers at least. The practice of Islam itself is also viewed as a suspicious activity, as exemplified by farmer Joe’s exaggerated reaction to group prayer in Little Mosque.

There are only a few exceptions to this visual regime. Two programs have represented Muslims through genres other than the news category on American television: the little-known

---

situation comedy *Aliens in America*, (2007-2008) which was cancelled after one season with 18 episodes on The CW Network, and the reality show *All-American Muslim* (2011-2012) on cable channel TLC which was also cancelled after just one season with eight episodes. As the titles from both shows already intimate, the Muslim identity is forcefully embedded within an American location, national identity and lifestyle. *All-American Muslim* narrates the daily experiences of five American Muslim families through the artificial reality show format of a regular cast and interviews. As a situation comedy, *Aliens in America* features a young Muslim teenager from Pakistan who lives with an American family as part of an international foreign student exchange program. Although it might share some of the general premises of *Little Mosque* by revealing some insights about Islam, by parodying Islamophobia, and by stressing the friendship between the Muslim character and his American teenage counterpart, in the long run the show is actually more about the quirky American white family and the daily tribulations of surviving the quintessential American experience: high school.

*Little Mosque* goes further than both of these programs in terms of its sustained and extensive representation of Muslims and Islam. It offers a dramatic and resistant shift that transforms Muslims from news-making bodies to comedy-making bodies, as I argue in the following section. Rather than representing Muslims in their expected “proper” or “appropriate” genre, the show disconnects them from their distribution within the given regime of visual presentation, as well as the generic roles, possibilities, and capabilities that are inscribed. In opposition to news genres, the situation comedy genre has the potential to extract Muslims and Islam from being only recognizable and perceivable through realism or contemporary events of terrorism, offering a different mode of seeing both Muslims and Islam.

**Seeing Muslim Bodies Differently**

While comedy exists in numerous forms on television, none is so familiar and so popular as the situation comedy, one of the staples of television (Creeber 65). Its basic and general features of fixed and likable characters, settings (most often in a studio with several sets), narrative style (conflict to resolution and happy ending), warm moments, humorous situations, one-liners, and physical comedy (Creeber 65-70), create drastically more congenial viewing intentions than the news genres. *Little Mosque* adheres faithfully to the standard conventions, norms and features of the situation comedy, and as such, positions Muslims and Islam in a very different and (de)politicized context via different aesthetics, tone, and plot. The show might be considered a
traditional family situation comedy, with the family being both the various individual Muslim families showcased, and the Muslim community in Mercy which acts as a wider family with its familiar and familial daily squabbles. With this family emphasis, its various studio sets also follow typical family situation comedy iconography: the warm and cozy kitchen, and the dining and living rooms of the Hamoudi family, the principal Muslim family in the community; the character Fatima’s welcoming and retro diner-style café, which serves as the community’s main spot for socialization. These two regular sets already accentuate the ordinary and daily life around which the show evolves. One other key visual reference is that of the Mercy mosque, which is located within the Anglican church, since Muslim worshippers are unable to find any other building in the area that is willing to house it.

*Little Mosque*’s portrayal of Islam’s spaces and soundscape contrasts sharply with other American media representations that have taken on violent connotations. In his study of the sounds of the war on terror, Corey Creekmur explores the various functions of the *adhan* (the call to prayer) and Muslim prayer in popular films and television dramas. Rather than serving as a geographical or cultural cue along with the mosque, the *adhan* and the mass prayer it solicits are “employed as a sound of dread, establishing narrative tension through an emphatic aural announcement of the narrative threat unfolding before us,” he claims (87). As Creekmur argues:

> Muslim prayer in “War on Terror” media signals unthinking, indoctrinated repetition rather than the spiritual power of sacred ritual and is thus often heard in the voice of an undifferentiated crowd. In short, in popular American media, Muslim prayer has become the sound of Islamic fundamentalism rather than a common cultural practice; it anticipates political violence while masquerading as religious ritual, narratively functioning as the sonic prelude to the danger that soon follows. (87)

In contrast, the fictional mosque and the daily practice of Islamic prayers as represented in *Little Mosque* are both visualized within a strictly religious context. They are further neutralized when embedded within a situation comedy framework. In the show, the so-called mosque is only designated as such by a small sign posted on top of the entrance to the parish hall and a metal structure upholding the symbolic crescent affixed to the church’s roof. The mosque itself consists

---

104 Even before 9/11, Jack Shaheen had argued that Hollywood films associate Islam with “male supremacy, holy war, and acts of terror … When mosques are displayed on-screen, the camera inevitably cuts to Arabs praying, and then gunning down civilians.” See page 9 of Shaheen’s *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (New York: Olive Branch Press, 2001).
of a simple and plain prayer hall, which appears to be the former auditorium of the church, and the imam’s office. The prayer hall is decorated with individual prayer rugs, wall decorations and a plain pulpit, or minbar, which the ignorant Joe character disrespectfully referred to as a “minibar.” There are no other props that signify drastic differences, religiously or culturally. Absent, too, are the conventionalized and overtly connotative visual and audible cues of minarets and the *adhan*. Visually, it is an inconspicuous and unremarkable place. Serving as one of the permanent sets of the show, this hall is where many comical scenes occur, in particular those relating to the internal squabbles within the Muslim community. The fictional mosque’s diminutive size, as suggested by the word “little” in its title, is also cozy, if not reassuring, given that large and real-life urban mosques are sometimes seen as potential sites for radicalization.

In the final season, when the Muslim community finally builds its own mosque, the new mosque possesses more distinct and elaborate features that include multiple minarets and stained glass windows. Although the construction of the mosque is incorporated into the plotlines of the last few episodes, the actual space is featured only briefly during the mosque’s grand opening in the series finale. A wide-angle shot from the mosque’s balcony is used to reveal its minimalist aesthetics. This is clearly seen in the promotional photograph for this mosque-opening episode which CBC has placed on the show’s website (see figure 4.2). This space of simple grandeur is dramatically lit with the character Sarah kneeling for her morning prayer. The undertone is one of romantic fascination, returning the space of the mosque from the political to the sacred.

![Figure 4.2. A promotional photograph for Little Mosque’s finale with the character Sarah (Sheila McCarthy) in the new mosque, and Amaar (Zaib Shaikh) in the background. Reprint permission courtesy of WestWind Pictures.](image)

For the rest of the episode, the site of the mosque is visually downplayed as the mosque’s grand opening coincides with another storyline that culminates in the marriage of one of the non-
Muslim characters who wishes to have her wedding at the mosque. The prayer hall is thus adorned with abundant floral arrangements and experienced as the setting for a Christian wedding ceremony, with the bride walking down the aisle to the familiar Pachelbel’s *Canon in D*. Moreover, the imam also announces that the new mosque will shelter the former Mercy Anglican church, which has been destroyed by a fire, thus reversing the mosque-in-church premise on which the series began. This mosque space is idealized as a space for a loving and loveable Muslim community, for traditions, and for prayers. More importantly, it continues to reflect the interdependence between the Muslim and the Anglican communities.

Indeed, group prayers and individual prayers by the show’s characters are uttered and performed but stripped of any negative connotations or fearful emotive values. In fact, prayer scenes appear to have a more didactic purpose rather than a politicized framing. One up-close scene occurs in the fourth episode of the first season involving the character Rayyan (other aspects of this character will be addressed shortly). The scene appears towards the end of the show with Rayyan sitting on the steps leading to the mosque talking to the imam Amaar. During the conversation, Amaar scolds Rayyan for harboring ill will towards her own mother and urges her to go pray. Heeding to Amaar’s advice, Rayyan stands up and enters the mosque. At this point, it is clear and logical from the preceding dialogue that Rayyan intends to go pray in the prayer hall and there is nothing in the storyline that requires an actual praying scene. Whether Rayyan actually prays and confesses her insensitivity also has no further consequences on the storyline.

What occurs next, however, are four shots that follow Rayyan into the prayer hall documenting her every physical movement as she performs the act of prayer. The first shot, a close-up, focuses on her legs in trousers and her feet as she removes her shoes before entering the prayer hall. The second, a full shot, shows her walking into the prayer hall. Third, a medium shot, features her upper body and shows her raising her hands next to her ears as she utters an invocation. The shot continues as the camera rests on Rayyan while she pauses briefly and readies her mind for confession. The final shot is another close-up that focuses on her folded hands resting on her midriff while she continues to pray and confess. The choice of the medium shot and the close-up is interesting, for it is through these closer looks that Rayyan’s movements are demystified and accentuated for the non-Muslim spectators, given that practicing Muslims, or even nominal Muslims, would likely be familiar with this common habit. Once again, the scene dislocates Islam from the politicized and public discussions that have linked it to global terrorism.
and posits it in the private realm as a deeply personal and everyday religious experience. It also
has the potential to serve as a pedagogical moment to educate viewers on the practice of prayer.

Although the scene is framed to emphasize the spiritual, embedded within it are still
some mis-en-scène elements – the emptiness of the prayer room, the muted lighting of the room,
and the mood-setting non-diegetic Middle Eastern music – that intensifies the act of gazing at a
lone veiled woman. Such a scene cannot help but raise the spectre of Orientalist obsessions with
veiled women and the voyeuristic gaze towards them, most apparent in relation to sexual
curiosities about female harems.¹⁰⁵ No other character’s prayer life is rendered in a similar
fashion. Whatever gaze this praying scene is able to inspire, however, would be fleeting since the
scene ends abruptly after about 17 seconds.

The character of Rayyan, a 20-something Muslim woman, is undoubtedly a challenge to
represent visually with the veil, not just because of the visual heritage of Orientalism just
mentioned, but also because of the contemporary discussions over the practice of veiling itself.
The subject of Muslim women’s dress, be it the headscarf or the face veil, has provoked heated
public debates in relation to issues of multiculturalism pre-9/11 as a target of state governance in
European countries such as France and the Netherlands. Criticized as the sign and instrument of
Islam’s oppression, veiling has also been made to carry a symbolic potency, seen to reflect an
“undesirable” form of Islam, “backward, radical, segregating or simply public” (Moors 1). More
pertinent to 9/11, the politics of veiling and unveiling is linked to military interventions in
Afghanistan, with images of burka-clad women in US media symbolizing women’s oppression
under Taliban rule, which bolstered justifications for military intervention, and the lifting of the
burkas by Muslim women following the Taliban’s downfall as a symbol of American military
triumph.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵ The various connotations of the veiled female body and the problematic visual legacy of representing Muslim
women have been detailed and critiqued by many scholars. See for example Malek Alloula’s *The Colonial Harem*
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), and Ella Shohat and Robert Stam’s *Unthinking Eurocentrism:*
ethnographies, the orient is “sexualized through the recurrent figure of the veiled women whose mysterious
inaccessibility, mirroring that of the orient itself, requires Western unveiling to be understood.” This process of
exposing the Oriental female, furthermore, “comes to allegorize the availability of Eastern land for Western
penetrating knowledge and possession” (148 and 149).

¹⁰⁶ Scholars have written about this politics of unveiling and the war on Afghanistan, including Judith Butler, whose
thoughts I covered in my introduction. For other arguments on how American news media portrayed this unveiling,
see Carol A. Stabile and Deepa Kumar’s “Unveiling Imperialism: Media, Gender and the War on Afghanistan,”
*Media, Culture & Society* 27.5 (2005): 765-782; and Smeeta Mishra’s “‘Saving’ Muslim Women and Fighting
Into this visual minefield enters Rayyan. Just like the mosque and the practice of praying, veiling is significantly re-contextualized in *Little Mosque*’s situation comedy world; it is made utilitarian as a costume, and its defense is articulated through traditions of democracy such as freedom and autonomous choice. Among the female Muslim characters, only Fatima and Rayyan wear the hijab. Rayyan’s character (played by Sitara Hewitt) is a successful doctor and obviously serves as the counter and “positive” image of a Muslim woman, being the very antithesis of the stereotyped Muslim woman supposedly victimized by the Islamic patriarchy and in need of rescue by the West. Rayyan is featured as a role model for Muslim women: intelligent, strong, assertive, highly articulate, and independent.

Describing herself as an Islamic feminist, she advocates women’s rights and gender equality; she passionately defends the practice of wearing the hijab as a religious practice – a sign of modesty – and not as the commonly perceived manifestation of Islam’s oppression. Furthermore, Rayyan defends the hijab through the idiom of liberal democracy, stressing her decision as a matter of personal choice, individualism, religious freedom and pride and not as a result of patriarchal coercion or pressure from the Muslim community. On the issue of Muslim women wearing a burka, Rayyan *indirectly* supports face veiling when she protests a ban on the burka as being “an unjust law” that wrongly regulates what people can or cannot wear. In other words, what she champions are the freedoms of choice and personal expression. As she tells another character in episode 14 of season three, “It is not about the part of me that it [the hijab] covers; it’s about the part of me that it shows.”

In every episode, Rayyan dons vibrantly colored and fashionable headscarves that have become the talk of the show. Judging from the informal post-show comments from viewers watching the situation comedy on YouTube, she has become a fashion role model for female Muslim viewers. Rayyan sports outfits that are considered religiously appropriate yet modern and professional, says the show’s stylist Resa McConaghy, who was interviewed in a segment included in the DVD set of the first season. Detailing her strategy for dressing Rayyan, an ebullient McConaghy shows off her rack of stylish scarves for the character and explains: “You can never get enough scarves to make the outfit look good.” During the same interview, Hewitt, the actress who plays Rayyan, strokes the colorful headscarves and exclaims, “It’s head candy,

---

107 Rayyan’s outfits and headscarves have even inspired a blog that details her on-screen wardrobe. The blogger also suggests alternative pieces to recreate Rayyan’s looks, see [http://hijabchique.blogspot.co.uk/2007/12/rayyans-tenth-outfit-shirt.html](http://hijabchique.blogspot.co.uk/2007/12/rayyans-tenth-outfit-shirt.html), accessed February 20, 2013.
baby. 

Ironically, no longer just a sign of modesty and even less so a symbol of Islamic oppression, the headscarf becomes a glamorous fashion accessory to accentuate Rayyan’s beauty and reflect her modern identity.

Figure 4.3. The character Rayyan from Little Mosque wearing one of her many colorful headscarves. Photograph reprint permission courtesy of WestWind Pictures.

Indeed, Rayyan is able to wear her veil triumphantly, reversing the negative connotations and turning the practice into an expression of freedom. McConaghy, meanwhile, is able to transform the controversial act of veiling into showcase moments for trendy headscarves. But this shift in signification and function is not necessarily oppositional. Perhaps what is more subversive are the moments when Rayyan is not actually wearing the hijab. Each week as the plot dictates, Rayyan is veiled while in public but when she is within the private realm of her one-screen home, she is without the veil. Viewers see her, shorn of this visible sign of religious difference, engaging in the banal activities of daily life: cooking, arguing with her parents, and watching television. Her body takes up a very generic aesthetics: casual outfits, both Western and ethnic pieces, and dark free-flowing hair. Her presence is ordinary, commonplace, and undistinguished, except for the fact that she is both likeable and attractive. The show thus highlights the full life of a Muslim woman, both with and without the veil, and both in public and in private. The figure of the Muslim woman, rather than the symbolic battle ground for Islam’s assumed conservatism or West’s progressivism, or the visual illustration of the strangeness of the Muslim other, is instead normalized. Her presence is no longer made noteworthy, at best, or controversial, at worst, only when she is envisaged with the veil. Her life and identity are no longer singularly defined by this one item of clothing, as significant as it is in her life. Moreover,

---

108 DVD commentary from Little Mosque on the Prairie: Season One.
this unveiling, situated in a different context, lacks the American military triumphalism associated with the unveiling of Afghan women under Taliban rule; neither does it carry with it Orientalist sexual and voyeuristic overtones. Unveiling is subversive here not because she is “liberated” from her veil but because her quotidian presence invites a visual shift from the conscious and heightened way of looking to the ordinary.

With its studio settings – the family kitchen, the friendly café, the neutralized mosque – and ordinary Muslim figures, the show locates Muslims and Islam within domestic and private spaces and out of the confines of global terrorism. Rather than being collectively under the scrutinizing gaze of news cameras, perennially vilified as a group and religion responsible for extreme violence, and existing as the headline-grabbing leading actors in global news events or the “unassimilatable” in Western multicultural societies, Little Mosque’s Muslims are made banal and ordinary, subjected to the emotional entanglements of everyday life, personalized with their own individual histories. While references to terrorism and 9/11 abound in the show, which is thus still haunted by that outside world of political violence and conflicts, Little Mosque’s Muslims and Islam nevertheless become timeless, or perhaps more accurately, untimely, in the sense that their presence is a timely response to post-9/11 misrepresentations, and yet, their portrayals are no longer conventionally and conveniently anchored in historic times and cataclysmic events – catastrophes, hijackings, and bombings, to name but a few. Instead, they now dwell in domestic times of uneventfulness. No longer the people framed by and seen through global public events, they are now literally and metaphorically domesticated in the fictional sets of a television studio.

While warm, cozy and inviting television studio sets create a visual backdrop that recalibrates the often hostile mode through which to see Muslim bodies and Islam, the situation comedy’s most prominent attribute of humor also generates oppositional possibilities to neutralize an antagonistic gaze. Against the backdrop of post-9/11 media stereotypes of Muslims and Islam, laughter and comedy have become an important strategy for contesting representations. As the Egyptian-American stand-up comedian Ahmed Ahmed says, “We can’t define who are on a serious note because nobody will listen. The only way to do it is to be funny

The fact that a group of American Muslim comedians have named their comedy project as *Allah Made Me Funny: The Official Muslim Comedy Tour* to emphasize the obvious idea that indeed, Muslims, too, have a sense of humor, points to the deep-rooted and unfavorable stereotypes of Islam as being oppressive, draconian, and strict, and its followers as being somber and ascetic.\(^{111}\)

In the case of *Little Mosque*, humor and laughter are important elements, but on their own the comical contents themselves are not resistant per se. After all, jokes might fail to generate laughter, as many of the one-liners and situations in *Little Mosque* are so cliché and are not necessarily funny at all. Poking fun at post-9/11 effects such as airport security, the no-fly list, racial profiling, and mosque surveillance is also a precarious act. Parody does indeed point out some of the absurdities and paranoia of homeland security measures, but the show often defuses these issues with slight twists in the storyline, thus exempting it from articulating any direct critique and blunting humor’s subversive edge. In those cases, humor’s critical effect is minimalized as it acts merely as a safety valve.

What is resistant, however, are the possibilities and capabilities that are now made available for Muslim bodies as the site of comedic performance. Beyond the numerous 9/11 references, much of the laughter of the show comes from the Muslim characters’ sincere and desperate attempts to live by Islam’s rules that sometimes conflict with the more liberal mores of Western societies. The show also offers an affectionate mockery of Muslims by addressing their intra-religious differences and conflicts which are just as fierce and comical as any clashes between Muslims and non-Muslims. These comical scenes between Muslims themselves and between Muslims and non-Muslim characters drastically transform Muslim bodies from their highly politicized pre- and post-9/11 designations into bodies that generate laughter through various forms of humor techniques: caricature, exaggeration, wordplay, repartee, misunderstanding, and parody. In *Little Mosque*, Muslims are comical bodies, not menacing or victimized bodies. What is resistant about this show is how comedy and laughter, as part of the broader sensible framework of the situation comedy genre, can modify one’s gaze towards Muslims and Islam by injecting a more personal, empathetic, and familiar way of looking.


\[^{111}\] Another similar post-9/11 comedy tour is *The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour*, which features four Arab-American comedians.
This empathy and familiarity are also enabled by the situation comedy’s series format. As Neale and Krutnik explain: “As with all series or serials, we can switch on at the same time each week and update ourselves on the lives and situations of what often become very familiar characters” (178 and 179). Episode after episode, audiences have the possibility to accrue a viewing relationship with its regular cast of characters through five substantial seasons. This series form is no doubt more pertinent to CBC viewers who saw the show every week during its regular Monday night slot. Those who are watching the show on DVDs or on YouTube might have a less organized and sequential viewing pattern. Nevertheless, this five-season run, with a total of 91 episodes, has the potential to pull viewers into the emotional entanglements between the characters.

Romantic tensions between Rayyan and the handsome imam Amaar, for example, notable already in earlier episodes, are prolonged for most of the series. Just like Rayyan, Amaar serves as a “positive” representation of a Muslim man. Young, progressive and congenial, Amaar becomes the antithesis of the many post-9/11 real-life examples of hard-line Muslim clerics who are often blamed for preaching hatred and inciting violence. Rayyan and Amaar’s love quest finally culminates in their profession of love to each other in season four’s finale, followed by Amaar’s proposal and the couple’s wedding in season five. In later seasons, their experiences of marriage and home life are incorporated into the plotlines, and in the series’ finale, the revelation of Rayyan’s pregnancy completes their story. This is one narrative arc that has the potential to pique viewers’ interest, drawing them back every week, and thus deepening not only visual familiarity but also creating relationality in the process. This sustained and emotionally-invested visual bond is not usually possible when seeing Muslims through the factual news genres which often involve brief one-off encounters with limiting sound bites.

With the aid of various expected situation comedy features – family-related settings, themes, humor, and series format – *Little Mosque* offers congenial visions of Muslims, as well as a familiar and familial mode through which to see them. The show becomes resistant not because it offers “positive” images of Muslims against a litany of “negative” representations, but because it calls upon viewers to exercise interpretive abilities, affective capacities, and emotional commitments that deviate from those incited by news media representations. Rather than a gaze intensified by the realist and somber tone of terrorism-related news, watching *Little Mosque* would require a gaze informed by the situation comedy aesthetics of everyday life.
Watching Convivial Relationships

Ensconced within the homey and cheerful situation comedy world, Muslims in *Little Mosque* no longer command a heightened presence. The externals that have often marked them adversely in the West as Muslim and foreign are depoliticized and made ordinary. While the Muslim body itself is a site for the politics of representation, it is also that body’s relationship with non-Muslims that has provoked public debates, most often through the leitmotif of a cultural clash and conflicts. Against this sense of post-9/11 antagonism, *Little Mosque* posits instead multicultural friendships and community. This, too, contributes to the show’s overall resistant potential with a counter viewing that subverts both Islamophobia and civilizationalism. The “us versus them” divide, made distinct and antagonistic by the war on terror and Huntington’s conflicting-civilizations hypothesis, becomes obscured in the fictional world of *Little Mosque*.

The series portrays a very specific vision of a Muslim/non-Muslim relationship that can be best understood and visualized through Gilroy’s concept of convivial culture, a vision of cross-cultural relationship that opposes the thesis of civilizationalism. As part of his discussion of multiculturalism in Britain, Gilroy introduces in *Postcolonial Melancholia* the concept of convivial culture, or conviviality, defining it as “the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain’s urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere” (xv). He has used the same set of adjectives repeatedly to capture the dynamic of this ordinary multiculturalism: it is spontaneous, organic, chaotic, unkempt, unruly, unplanned, everyday, routine, demotic, and perhaps even banal. What convivial culture privileges is an informed affiliation based on shared common interests and social desires.

---

112 I would like to thank Mireille Rosello of the University of Amsterdam for introducing me to Gilroy’s idea of conviviality and suggesting its possible relevance to *Little Mosque*.

113 In *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Gilroy introduces the term convivial culture in opposition to what he sees as the gloomy and destructive condition of Britain’s “postcolonial melancholia,” the country’s inability to mourn the loss of its empire. Moreover, he has placed convivial culture in the metropolitan space because it serves as “a fragmented and stratified location in which cultures, histories, and structures of feeling previously separated by enormous distances could be found in the same place, the same time: school, bus, café, cell, waiting room, or traffic jam” (70). While *Little Mosque* takes place in very different political, historical and geographical contexts, the term is still helpful due to the similar and broader issues of identity, identification, differences, and of course, multiculturalism. This concept is also appropriate despite the show’s setting in a Canadian prairie town because the “prairie” location is actually quite ambivalent. On the one hand, the show’s jokes sometimes highlight Mercy’s own regional location by making fun of Toronto, as I pointed out earlier. On the other hand, the prairie geography is seen only in the opening credits and occasionally when characters wander outside of the mosque or their homes and into the open spaces of Mercy. Moreover, its storylines usually do not concern the prairie location, with the exception of two episodes “Wheat Week” and “Mercy Beet” which are specifically connected to the prairie economy and local traditions. As testified by its successful global syndication, what distinguishes the series is its universal appeal that has transcended geography. Noteworthy is also the fact that the show’s title had been shortened to *Little Mosque*, with the prairie reference dropped, when it was being promoted for distribution in America.
More importantly, it is a way of viewing alterity relationally and dialogically. In *Little Mosque*, the relations between Muslims and non-Muslims are distinguished by this exact spirit of conviviality; each week the storylines unfold with this everyday, routine, and mundane exposure to difference. The show’s various expressions of conviviality between two communities, which since 9/11 have been perceived as being mutually suspicious and hostile, reflect that, as Gilroy has seen in the British context, cohabitation and encounter with difference need not be a source of fear, anxiety or violence.

Especially in the first few seasons, the two opposing poles of Islam and the West, actually serve as the ideological framework and the “situation” in many episodes. The Islam/West dichotomy is often identified at the beginning of the episode but it is always resolved by the end of the show with the two communities reconciling through moments of conviviality. If bin Laden and Bush became the metonymy for the post-9/11 Manichean battle, the two characters of Barber and Fred serve as the same metonymy for the two conflicting communities in *Little Mosque*. Fred, the shock DJ at the local radio station, is based on the real-life American conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh. Constantly demonizing and vilifying Islam, Fred uses Muslims and their religious differences as fodder for his radio show. Always sowing suspicion and paranoia as a way to drive up ratings, he rants ridiculously and inanely, calling his Muslim neighbors “terrorists,” “jihadists,” and “suicide bombers.” Barber, on the other end, is one of the patriarchs of the Muslim community and its most conservative member. Calling his white Canadian neighbors “infidels,” “heathens,” “barbarians” and “crusaders,” he constantly condemns Western culture as the corruptor of sexual morality and scolds non-Muslims for their lack of piety.

With Fred and Barber becoming visually identified with the ills of post-9/11 antagonisms and civilization, it is the stable friendship between imam Amaar and the Anglican Reverend Duncan Magee – the metonyms of Islam and Christianity – that serves as strategic counter images. Since the mosque is housed within the Anglican church, the spatially-determined way of thinking about cultural and religious differences through distinct territories of East and West with clear boundaries is undermined. Instead, what viewers see each week are the constant encounters and interdependence that characterize the two communities. Having the mosque within the church means Amaar’s and Reverend Magee’s offices are near each other, prompting various idyllic and convivial moments between the two spiritual leaders in almost every episode. They are often shown sharing cups of tea or playing a game of chess during their working hours,
as well as walking through the park or sharing a bench outside the parish hall. Their physical differences – Amaar is young, handsome, and slim, while Reverend Magee is older, short, and rotund – further accentuate the uniqueness of their friendship. In one episode, the two men actually ran together as a team during the community marathon, wearing matching vests with the words “the God Squad.” These two sets of male relationships, Fred-Barber and Amaar-Reverend Magee reflect a contrapuntal process of rejection and open embrace of cultural/religious differences. While the Fred-Barber pair reflects comically the anxieties and hostility that have marked the post-9/11 encounters between Islam and the West, the Amaar-Reverend Magee pair counterpoises with alternative encounters that are marked by friendship, mutual respect and male bonding. This male-friendship theme is continued in later seasons after the character Reverend Magee is replaced by the new Reverend Thorne, who strikes up an unlikely friendship not with Amaar but with Barber instead.

Despite whatever religious and cultural barriers and differences both Fred and Barber articulate in every episode, there are never any physical traces of segregation between the two communities. In fact, the two groups share a spatial intimacy. In Fatima’s café, the popular neighborhood hangout, Muslim and non-Muslim characters are often shown sharing a booth or sitting side-by-side at the counter enjoying their meals. Rayyan works in the town’s medical clinic and is shown in several episodes examining her non-Muslim patients, including both Fred and Reverend Magee. Ironically, the only visible physical barrier is the one that is in the mosque’s prayer hall to separate the male and female worshippers. It is this spatial proximity between the Muslim and non-Muslim communities that leads to Gilroy’s everyday, spontaneous, and organic moments of conviviality.

One scene exemplifies the process of confrontation and negotiation that finally leads to a moment of conviviality. The scene is a snapshot of a community not troubled by the Muslim presence and open to share its public spaces. The scene occurs in the episode “Swimming Upstream” in season one. After breaking her ankle following a fall, Fatima is urged to take up aqua aerobics at the local public swimming pool as part of her rehabilitation regime. The swim instructor, however, turns out to be a man and she, as a devout Muslim woman, refuses to bare her swim-suitied body to the male instructor, despite the fact that he is gay. After a failed attempt to convince the mayor to allocate extra funds to hire a female swimming instructor, Fatima is forced to find another solution by donning an Islamic swim suit, a three-piece outfit that includes a hood that covers her head, a tunic and pants that cover the rest of her body. Only her face,
hands and feet are revealed.

The scene begins with a medium shot of the poolside, showing the gay swimming instructor setting up the CD player for their aqua-aerobics class. That is followed by a close-up of a pair of black legs (Fatima is Nigerian) limping into the swimming pool area. The camera then searches up gradually to accentuate this fully-clad body, revealing it to be Fatima in her bright-yellow swimming suit. This is followed by a medium shot foregrounding Fatima, with two overweight white Canadian women in the background. Instead of being an object of ridicule in her funny suit or a sight of strangeness that triggers discomfort in the white townsfolk, Fatima actually becomes the object of envy as one of the white women says to her friend: “I wonder where she gets that suit? It would really cover my cellulites.” For this full-sized white woman, who earlier in the episode supported the idea of the female instructor as a way to evade male visual scrutiny, this encounter with Fatima becomes a moment of informal female bonding and solidarity as both are united in their desire to subvert the male gaze. Much like Rayyan’s hijab, the Islamic bathing suit is seen positively; it is even given a new utility to cover bodily imperfections.

This fleeting moment of female solidarity then transitions to another encounter between Fatima and her gay instructor. Their conversation, captured by medium, over-the-shoulder shots, is capped off by his sweet compliment to Fatima: “Girl, about that get-up,” he says, pointing at her swimsuit, “you make that work.” The comment is well received, as a close-up shot shows a smiling Fatima delighted by this praise. Once again, Fatima’s perceived foreign presence is not only transcended but welcomed. Fatima finds a way to adhere to the rules of her faith, while the non-Muslim townsfolk, rather than seeing her as a threat or a source of fear, simply find another way of looking at her. The scene finally ends in a boisterous vision of Gilroy’s conviviality as Fatima follows women of various shapes and sizes, all swinging to salsa music as they descend into the public pool for their aqua-fit swimming class (see figure 4.4). This is the everyday convivial culture that, according to Gilroy, looks beyond differences and seeks cross-cultural affiliative solidarity and pleasures. In this overtly idealized scene, tolerance, inclusion and spatial intimacy become counter values that defy the post-9/11 discourse of antagonism.
One of the hallmarks that distinguishes the relationship between the two communities of *Little Mosque* is one of interdependency: Reverend Magee’s Anglican church uses the rent paid by the mosque to stay financially afloat; Fatima needs both her Muslim and non-Muslim customers in her café, and so does Yasir, whose construction business is dependent on the town’s white and non-Muslim clients. Similarly, the white mayor is always courting her Muslim constituencies; and even Fred is parasitic on the Muslims, for it is his anti-Muslim outbursts on the radio that drive his show’s ratings and secure his livelihood. In a way, the situation comedy is recasting that famous phrase coined by Spivak, “White men are saving brown women from brown men” (296), to show how white men, brown men, and brown women are saving each other after 9/11.

In the episode entitled “Eid’s a Wonderful Life,” this mutual reliance leads to another moment of conviviality. The episode starts with the Muslim and Christian communities at odds due to a scheduling conflict that leads to a battle over parking spaces, as both sides want to celebrate their December holidays on the same night. The Christians hope to mark Christmas, while the Muslims hope to mark Eid-al-Adha, the annual Islamic Festival of Sacrifice. As the episode progresses, the two communities are actually able to resolve their differences. What paved the way for this celebration was their mutual lack. Due to a misunderstanding, Reverend Magee had no congregants on the evening of his celebration but a table full of Christmas food, while a comical internal mosque feud resulted in Amaar having a mosque full of Muslim worshippers but no food. The episode ends on a moment of conviviality that accentuates the strong sense of mutual care that exists between the two groups. The whole scene consists of medium shots capturing the togetherness of and fellowship between Christians and Muslims.
These shots also highlight various acts of hospitality: Reverend Magee, surrounded by Muslims, is slicing and serving the Christmas turkey, while Fatima is pouring drinks. This utopian scene is further accentuated by the non-diegetic music, a song that calls for peace and “the world (becoming) as one.”

Undeniably, the show’s rendering of multicultural relations is explicitly sentimentalized and idealized. The show is indeed an act of multiculturalism pedagogy. Conviviality is possible because only acceptable, rather than unacceptable, differences are being addressed. Besides, these differences are already confined within a framework of eventual resolution rather than endowed with any possibilities of contingency. Those with more extreme behaviors that encroach on the communal harmonious order and demand complex encounters that cannot be resolved by a situation comedy’s happy ending are quickly banished from the plot. For example, a mysterious woman in a burka appears in episode two of season two but quickly disappears by the end of the program after the issue of the face veil is feebly addressed. In episode seven of season four, a band of radical Muslims join the Mercy mosque but are quickly expelled when they “frightened” the Anglicans.

The close daily relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, nevertheless, demonstrate how their entangled lives are moving beyond patronizing clichés such as “tolerance” and “respect” for different cultures: their fictional lives are intertwined as they are implicated in various relationships due to necessity. Visually, this is substantial: in the post-9/11 climate of Islamophobia, such acts of mutual responsibility, care, and conviviality are counter-intuitive. It is through this form of convivial relations that *Little Mosque* counter-poses abundant scenes that can visually contest iconic post-9/11 images of hostility and atrocity, from US soldiers’ treatment of Muslim detainees in Guantánamo Bay to the torture and humiliation of Iraqi inmates at Abu Ghraib. The show negates the interpretive grid of a clash between civilizations to model quotidian encounters between two communities that end in loving relationships, friendship, and mutual aid. No longer the minority group that is often represented as one that threatens the social harmony of Western multicultural societies, *Little Mosque*’s Muslims actively mend and solidify those social bonds.

The song is “Peace Train” by Yusuf Islam (a.k.a. Cat Stevens). The lyrics are: “Now I’ve been happy lately, thinking about the good things to come / And I believe it could be, something good has begun / O, I’ve been smiling lately, dreaming about the world as one / And I believe it could be, someday it’s going to come / ‘Cause out on the edge of darkness, there rides a peace train / O, peace train take this country, come take me home again.”
Perhaps the most subversive quality of convivial culture lies exactly in the show’s everyday and mundane moments of friendships, spatial intimacy, and interdependence, utopian as they may be. The frequency and ordinariness of daily encounters between Muslims and non-Muslims diegetically create what Gilroy elsewhere calls “a liberating sense of the banality of intermixture” (*Postcolonial* 150). As the show progresses season after season, these cross-cultural relationships become increasingly agreeable, reducing the post-9/11 exaggerated and racist perceptions of religious and cultural differences to a freeing ordinariness. By presenting the connective possibilities between the two communities, which may or may not already exist in real-life communities, the show not only normalizes the daily relationship between the two groups but it also accustoms its viewers with images that underscore this close and friendly, rather than hostile, relationship.

**Limits of Visual Resistance**

Much is gained for Muslims in being thus understood, banalized, and represented televisually, but something is also lost. In its eagerness to remedy a belligerent post-9/11 visuality towards Muslims to one that is re-oriented by familiarity and conviviality, *Little Mosque* also has to render the Muslim identity and Islam “safe” and acceptable for a Western and later global audience. A comment by Rayyan uttered to Barber during one of the episodes has succinctly articulated the representation challenges confronting Muslims and Islam, and the tightrope the show must walk: when Barber offers a spirited and formal explication of Islamic prayer to be used for introducing Islam to non-Muslims during the upcoming mosque open house, Rayyan reacts to his content and his ceremonial manner of delivery by saying: “no, that would sound *too weird* for our Christian visitors” (italics mine). In other words, narratives about Islam and the Muslim identity must not be off-putting and disconcerting; sensitivity must be exercised as not to unsettle or disturb.

In the show, Islam is sanctified rather than politicized, made comprehensible and validated solely through its general spiritual practices; it impacts Muslim characters limitedly through religious rituals and spiritual matters, but never in the realm of the political. The show embeds Islam and the Muslim identity solidly within a religious framework and rarely broaches the subject of politicized Islam. This depoliticization is the condition of its new visibility. This depoliticization, which is actually very political, forecloses many oppositional possibilities, given that social commitment and political participation have their places in Islam. Tariq
Ramadan, for example, has detailed the debates, scope, aims, justifications, and responsibilities for political and social involvement for Western Muslims, both personally and collectively (144-173). Buck-Morss, too, as I mentioned in the introduction, has called for a critical exchange with what she describes as the discursive field of “Islamism.” Islamism, which she stresses is not terrorism, refers to the politicization of Islam, through a discourse of opposition that confronts “issues of social justice, legitimate power, and ethical life in a way that challenges the hegemony of Western political and cultural norms” (2).

*Little Mosque*, however, never treads into such complex matters. When it addresses potentially contentious issues, it always manages to circumvent and maneuver its way out. The show never directly criticizes Islam or the prophet Mohammed, exempting itself from the kinds of public outcry from some Muslims that had surrounded Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* back in the late 1980s, the controversial Muhammad cartoons published by the Danish paper *Jyllands-Posten* in 2005, and the more recent 2010 incident involving the depiction of Mohammed by the American situation comedy *South Park*. The Canadian show’s global success is secured through its achievement of non-provocation and normalization of Muslim identities. When this is accomplished visually, it becomes the show’s strength, as it adopts an oppositional stance in the face of the previous hostile visual legacy. But simultaneously, it also means that differences can be celebrated and made ordinary as acts of defiance against anti-Muslim perceptions only because they are firstly shown to be compatible with a Western and secular world, and thus made comprehensible and recognizable.

For *Little Mosque*, post-9/11 belonging for Muslims and Islam still rests on criteria of similitude, conformability, and recognizability. National identity, too, still trumps the Muslim identity. Muslim characters who are not Canadian-born are shown assimilating quite successfully into their fictional Canadian lives. The naturalization of the character Fatima as a Canadian citizen is actually inserted into one of the episodes’ plot. This process of enfolding inadvertently steers Muslim characters toward fictional versions of “Good Muslims,” which Bush, Blair and numerous officials have distinguished from the “Bad Muslims.” Goodness, in the war on terror discourse, is often pivoted on Muslims’ exhibition of sympathy for catastrophe victims, as well as patriotism, underlining the point that the reception of American/British/Canadian Muslims – hostile or amicable – hinges on their loyalty to national civic life and citizenship. The show has further solidified that line between, on the one side, a normal bill-paying and domesticable (Western) Muslim identity that reiterates and affirms national ideals, and on the other, a deviant
Muslimness that is politicized and radicalized. As Richard Johnson questions: “… we have to ask what would happen to them (Western Muslims) if they expressed dissent” (224). An equally significant question is what happens to Muslims, Western or not, when they are dissimilar, unrecognizable, and incompatible? Butler asks in a post-9/11 context in *Frames of War*: “What is our responsibility toward those we do not know, toward those who seem to test our sense of belonging or to defy available norms of likeness? Perhaps we belong to them in a different way and our responsibility to them does not in fact rely on the apprehension of ready-made similitudes” (36). *Little Mosque* cannot address these issues; visual dissent is what it has achieved and there lies the limit of its resistance. The show has, nevertheless, aimed to facilitate a freer visuality and imagination to engage with Muslim bodies and Islam that might pave the way for other forms of intervention on these questions of identity, identification, and belonging, be it on television or elsewhere.

**Conclusion**

Real-life terrorist attacks perpetrated by Islamic extremists have always impacted and dictated the televisual presence of Muslims and Islam in Western media, both before and after 9/11. Assisted by the situation comedy format, *Little Mosque* introduces different and oppositional ways of seeing into the visual regime, allowing a more banal gaze towards both Muslim figures and the religious practice itself. Distinct from news genres, the situation comedy loosens the bonds that enclose Muslim bodies within a dominant form of media visibility, liberating them and Islam from being consistently portrayed through the mode of realism or global violent events of terrorism and enabling resistant visibility and visuality. This creates new configurations of what can be seen of Muslims and Islam on television. This oppositional televisual transformation has led Muslims’ collective presence to be made banal, with their lives measured and narrated not through news headlines from the Middle East but through the minutiae of everyday life. Moreover, previously politicized Islamic symbols and practices are celebrated, and made visually familiar and ordinary. Their fictional bodies are now relatable through humor, while Islam itself is affectionately and endearingly parodied by Muslims themselves. In addition, Muslim and non-Muslim relationships are interwoven, reconciled, and solidified. New capabilities and possibilities can now be associated with Muslim bodies, and simultaneously, this shift calls upon the show’s viewers to exercise very dissimilar interpretive and affective capacities, as well as emotional investments, than those required by news genres.
In this way, the character Joe in the show might serve as the ideal addressee/viewer for the show itself, and his fictional development as its hoped-for accomplishment. Joe, as depicted in the premiering episode, is fearful, suspicious and hostile towards his Muslim neighbors. And by calling the terrorist-attack hotline, he is willingly and uncritically accepting his new post-9/11 civic duty to serve as a pair of vigilant eyes in the war on terror. Through regular encounters with his Muslim neighbors and having been initiated into the unfamiliar culture and religion of Islam, Joe is shown in season three, some 44 episodes after his initial alarm of seeing Muslims, sitting comfortably on a bench outside of Fatima’s café and chatting with Barber, one of the most conservative members of the Muslim community. In the final episode of that same season, Joe has acquired enough understanding about Islam to explain and enlighten his uninformed friends on Islam’s rules concerning representational art, albeit still being somewhat perplexed by those rules himself. Neither fearful nor paranoid, prejudiced nor hostile, he is altered in his behavior, outlook, and visuality.