“Welcome to Sparkhill, Birmingham”: Regionality and Race in Citizen Khan

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> "Growing up as a child in Pakistan is a lot different to the UK. Unless you are born in Birmingham or Bradford – then its' exactly the same"
>
> Mr. Khan in *Citizen Khan's Guide to Britain*

When *Citizen Khan* was first broadcast on BBC One on 27th August 2012, at the less than popular timeslot of 10:30, it reignited a series of debates about the role of comedy in the representation of British minority communities on television. Ever since the 1960s, the British sitcom has attempted to tackle head-on the issues of race and ethnicity as they are experienced and articulated through the popular imagination. The sitcom and the comedy sketch show have often been viewed as mirrors for the social mindset, and the act of laughter as a way of circumnavigating the mediating Super-Ego that is drama or documentary (Medhurst, 2007, 16). If 'serious drama' attempts to explore social concerns, and the documentary to understand them, then, traditionally, comedy is thought of as a way of blasting a path through them and of bringing them out into the open.

Citizen Khan is a traditional studio-based sitcom and as such easily slots into a history of similar shows. It shares their form, their constraints and admittedly some of their bluntness. It depicts the life of the Khan family, headed by father (Adil Ray), mother (Shobu Kapoor) and daughters Alia (Bhavna Limbachia) and Shazia (Maya Sondhi and Krupa Pattani). Regular characters are Amjad (Abdullah Afzal) Shazia's husband, Mrs Kahn's mother Naani (Adlyn Ross) and the white general manager of the local mosque Dave (Mathew Cottle, Kris Marshall). In its form and mode of production *Citizen Khan* was heralded as a return to the traditional British sitcoms of the 1970s.[1]

[1] Introducing a section on the sitcom on the magazine programme *Midlands Today* Mary Rhodes called it "a 1970s sitcom they forgot to make" (Midlands Today, 23rd August 2012).

Where *Citizen Khan* differs from many traditional sitcoms however is that it was written by, stars and depicts, a British Muslim. It was this fact that formed a large part of the early debates on the show and that seemed to split reviewers into supporters and critics. Some saw it as a watershed moment for a community that had long been associated in the media with seriousness and a lack of humour, others saw it as a tired throwback to a less nuanced, less diverse form of programming that used stereotypes and clichés as substitutes for jokes. Rupa Huq, for example declared that "the show's parading of borderline racist stereotypes is stuck in a 70s groove [and] it is cut from the same comedy cloth as Jim Davidson, *Mind Your Language* and *Mixed Blessings*" (Huq, 2016). Mark Lawson, in *The Guardian* stated however that the show "pays British Muslims perhaps the highest compliment television can bestow, which is treating them like any other creed and people by subjecting them to a gentle domestic sitcom." (Lawson, 2012). This split of opinion was to stay with the show until the end of its run in 2016, by which time it had notched up five series, four Christmas specials, and a successful tour.

As shown by each episode's opening monologue, one of the major 'characters' in the show is its location, Sparkhill Birmingham, an area known for the high percentage of its Asian population. Although not actually filmed in Birmingham (it was mainly filmed in and around Salford) Britain's most diverse city is a constant referent and much of the humour derives form Khan's relationship to it. Its diversity is both a source of laughter and frustration as Khan navigates it in a way that brings to mind some of the classic buffoons of sitcoms of the past – *Rising Damp's* Rigsby, *Love Thy Neighbour's* Eddie Booth and of course *Till Death Us Do Part's* Alf Garnett. Khan's self-styled image as a community leader automatically twins him with a city that has been seen as both an example of successful multi-culturalism and as a flash point for extremism. Much of the humour in *Citizen Khan* derives from the clash of cultures that inevitably occurs in a city that is so ethnically diverse as Birmingham. However (like one of its nearest comedy antecedents, *Desmonds*) it is also rooted in culturally specific references and jokes, prompting columnist Saira Khan to state that "this is British Muslim family life through and through" (Khan, 2012).

The Two Powells

The 1970s were a watershed decade for Britain's second largest city. Throughout the previous decade Birmingham experienced a period of intense reconstruction as it self-conciously looked towards the end of the century and attempted to brand itself a city of the future.

Alongside the rebirth of Birmingham's core however, another more pervasive image of the city was forming: it was seen as a flashpoint for race relations, a melting pot that was beginning to boil over. The very same industries that provided the impetus for slum clearance and regeneration in the 1960s also provided the roots for the city's growing multi-culturalism, as the factories like Longbridge looked to the West Indies and the Indian subcontinent for workers to plug the gaps in the indigenous population. In 1971, some areas of Birmingham, had immigrate populations of over 30%, the highest in the country.[2]

One of the most enduring cultural moments of this period was Enoch Powell's 'rivers of blood' speech, an address that Powell himself called 'the Birmingham speech'. Powell's speech was given at the Burlington Hotel on the 20th April 1968 and, arguably, set in motion a series of events that would change the face of race and ethnicity in Britain forever. Powell's speech was inextricably linked to the West Midlands, where he was an MP. Amid the often-quoted paranoias and anxieties linked to racial dominance and "the black man having the whip hand over the white", were narratives that were drawn from the streets of Wolverhampton and the other major cities of the region. Powell cited constituents who spoke of "charming wide-grinning piccaninnies" who chanted "Racialist" at members of the white population knowing that they will be protected by the New Race Relations Bill; of Sikh workers seeking to "maintain costumes inappropriate to Britain" and of immigrants who transformed Midland streets so that they became "place(s) of noise and confusion" (Powell, 1968). Powell's speech entered the public imagination and, in the words of two high profile commentators in the 1980s caused Birmingham to be seen as 'the bleeding heart of England' (Brown and Deakin, 1985, 15).

[2] Handsworth (32.5%), Sparkbrook (30%) Source: 1971 census.

The 1970s was also the decade that saw the development of what Gavin Schaffer calls the 'racial sitcom'(Schaffer, 2017, 178). Shows such as *Love Thy Neighbour*, *Mixed Blessings*, *It Aint 'Alf Hot Mum*, *Mind Your Language*, *In Sickness and in Health*, *Curry and Chips*, *The Melting Pot* and others publicly debated Britain's changing demographic often under the (sometimes misguided) guise of exposing the racism and prejudice inherent within the dominate white population. Schaffer has argued that these shows were acutely aware of their place in an increasingly heated debate and that their writers and performers saw their mission as exposing the ignorance of prejudice in Britain. Characters such as Alf Garnett and Eddie Booth were intended (so their creators stated) as satires, the extremity of their views held up as ludicrous and anachronistic against a Britain that was inevitably changing and had been since the 1940s. Schaffer outlines that such characters were often pitted against liberally minded foils that challenged prejudice, or more intelligent Black or Asian characters that exposed them as foolish and ignorant. As he states:

> Following Speight's example, the idea that racism could be given centre stage in a sitcom as long as the racist was always seen to lose became a recurring feature of the genre in the 1970s.
>
> (Schaffer, 2017, 180)

The image of the underdog ethnic minority figure 'giving as good as he gets' was central to the defence offered by those involved in the racial sitcom. As *Love Thy Neighbour*'s Rudolph Walker outlines:

> I actually laid down certain conditions, and one of the main things I said at the time was that I would only do the part if my character wasn't made into an Uncle Tom. They assured me that he certainly wouldn't be. So it was agreed that if the bigoted white neighbor called me something I would call him the equivalent back. If he hit me, I would hit him back. In other words we would be on a par.
>
> (Walker cited in Pines, 1992, 78)

Afro-Carribean characters in British sitcoms at this time would fair better than their Asian counter-parts. If Black characters like Bill often 'hit back' at their racist others, Asian characters were portrayed as simple, backward, and often more than willing to accept the ridicule of the white population. In shows such as *It Aint Half Hot Mum*, *Only When I Laugh* and *Curry and Chips*, Asian characters are depicted as likable but simple, their subaltern status clearly etched within their dramatic purpose. They mispronounce words, they accept racist jibes with good humour, they conform to physical and intellectual stereotypes, and they very rarely hit back in the manner of Bill Reynolds in *Love Thy Neighbour.*

Milligan's character in the short lived series *Curry and Chips* also highlighted another difference between the depiction of Asian and Black characters in the racial sitcom: their portrayal by white actors. In a host of shows throughout the 1970s, white actors were 'browned up' to play Asian parts. Spike Milligan played Kevin O Grady (his *Curry and Chips* character) in an episode of *Till Death Us Do Part*, he also played Van Gogh in *The Melting Pot*, Michael Bates played Rangi Ram in *It Aint Half Hot Mum*, Ronnie Barker played a character called Guru Swami Bagdad Matahari Anandaveranda Anundaanova Mygogtablime Yogi Bear and 'an expert' on Indian cooking, P.G. Stephens played a character called Ranjit Ben Singh in the Charlie Drake series *The Worker*[3]*,* George Georgiou played Panalal in *Please Sir!*, in an episode of the 1960s comedy *Never Mind the Quality Feel the Width* an Asian character was played by the Jamaican actor Charles Hyatt, Nadim Sawalha (a Jordanian) played an Indian shopkeeper in *Open All Hours*, amongst others. As politically insensitive as they were, at least Afro-Caribbean characters in sitcoms were (by and large) played by Afro-Caribbean actors. The consolations drawn by actors such as Rudolph Walker - that at least these parts gave work to Black actors - could not be shared by their Asian counterparts.

Often, histories of the racial sitcom cite important shows such as *Desmonds, No Problem*, *The Fosters* and *The Lenny Henry Show* as providing outlets for Black British writers and performers to counter the ethnic imbalance within mainstream comedy. However, comedy series written by

[3] Stephens' character was in fact an Irishman who 'browned up' to aid in his sword swallowing act. This highlights the complexity of this act.

Asian writers and featuring Asian characters were few and far between and, in terms of the traditional studio-based sitcom, almost non-existent. Again suggesting that the conflation of Black with Asian in this context needs some revising as they shared a distinctly different history. Shows such as *Tandoori Nights* and *The Buddha of Suburbia* did feature Asian actors and writers, but were far from the middle ground occupied by Afro-Caribbean shows like those mentioned above. They capitalized on the popularity of Asian media images in the 1980s like *My Beautiful Laundrette* and *A Passage to India* and although drawing from the sitcom mirrored the less traditional form of the comedy-drama that eschewed studio production, the studio audience and the subsequent laughter track. The feel of these shows is notably different to the classic sitcom format. [4]

As Jochen Petzold outlines, Asian comedy burst into the mainstream in the 1990s with shows such as *Goodness Gracious Me* and *The Kumars and Number 42* (Petzold, 2016, pp. 169 – 190). The subject of many academic essays, *Goodness Gracious Me* especially has been read as particularly important in the representation of Asian communities on mainstream British television. [5] It not only gave opportunities for writers and comedians to reach a primetime audience, it also based much of its comedy on upturning, and therefore challenging, the kinds of stereotypes that formed the basis of 1970s shows. The importance of *Goodness Gracious Me* will become apparent as we begin to discern the success of a show like *Citizen Khan* that appeals to both white *and* Asian audiences. *Goodness Gracious Me* gently mocked white British attitudes towards minority cultures[6] whilst also lampooning Asian attitudes and archetypes.[7] However, in terms of comedy history, it firmly distanced itself from traditional white mainstream humour.

Khan and Race

Adil Ray's Mister Khan was first introduced on the BBC radio series *Down the Line*. *Down the Line*, a spoof phone-in show starring (amongst others) Paul Whitehouse, Charlie Higson and

[4] This is also the same with the BBC3 show *Man Like Mobeen* – see the discussion below.
[5] See also Malik (2010); Korte and Sternberg (2004).
[6] For example in the famous sketch "Going for an English" which is essentially a satire of white attitudes towards Asian food and culture.
[7] For example, the characters the Bhangra Muffins who lampoon British Asian youth.

Felix Dexter presented audiences with a host of absurd characters who contacted the fictional DJ Gary Bellamy (Rhys Thomas) to talk about various topics. Partly unscripted and resembling the rapid paced delivery of Higson and Whitehouse's *The Fast Show*, *Down the Line* featured numerous characters from a range of performers; Khan being merely one of many. The Khan of *Down the Line* and its television spin off *Bellamy's People* (BBC, 2011) was not from Birmingham at all but Leicester and the character was altogether a more satirical vision of a specific Asian archetype than the universalized fool we see in the latter episodes of *Citizen Khan*. In an episode of *Bellamy's People*, for example, Khan shows the host around the Asian community and one shop in particular where, despite claiming his 'community leader' status, those who work there remained nonplussed as to who he is.

In these early manifestations, the source of the comedy is based in two main areas: firstly, Khan's erroneous sense of superiority (he claims to be known by everyone despite their clear lack of knowledge of him) and, secondly, the satirical reversal of views and opinions that might, in the context of far right discourse, be considered racist and divisive. As we shall see, these comedic strategies are inextricably linked, and both situate the show within a history of the traditional British sitcom.

Let us look at an early example of these strategies in action: in an episode of *Down the Line* Khan phones into Gary Bellamy's radio show and gives his prediction of the future of Britain:

> Khan: This minimum wage, I'd lower the minimum wage. People don't mind working for this.
> Bellamy: How much would you lower the minimum wage to?
> Khan: If I want to pay somebody one pound, and he is happy to earn one pound, then what is your problem?
> Bellamy: Its not humane is it? How can you live on one pound an hour? That's wrong.
> Khan: Are you bloody crazy? I am not talking about paying somebody one pound an hour, are you crazy? I am talking one pound a day.
> Bellamy: Well that's wrong too.

Khan: They are fine, they are happy. Everyone in Pakistan is happy. They are all happy there.

Bellamy: Just because its ok in Pakistan doesn't mean its ok here.

Khan: This is becoming Pakistan now.

Bellamy: Is it?

Khan: Of course it is – everywhere in Birmingham, Bradford, Tower Hamlets.

Bellamy: You can't say that.

Khan: I can say it, but look – they world is changing now. People don't realise. You tell me this: who is having most babies?

Bellamy: What's that got to do with anything?

Khan: Who is having most babies? Not your peoples, my peoples. Pakistani peoples. In years to come who is going to more in this country? Pakistanis!

Bellamy: You sound like someone from the BNP.

Khan: I am BNP – British National Pakistani.

It is possible to see here the links between Khan's assertions on the genetic dominance of the Pakistani community and Enoch Powell's Rivers of Blood speech. The image of British cities such as Birmingham and Bradford supporting a progressively dominate Asian population has been at the centre of nationalist rhetoric since the 1960s and continues to underline right wing discourse today. By declaring Birmingham a Pakistani region, Khan adopts, and thus disempowers, what has become the standard charge against immigration and the failure of multiculturalism in Britain. Of course, like all satire there is a kernel of truth in the absurdity. Birmingham's history as a multi-cultural city and the fears that proliferated the British media concerning the perceived Islamification in places like Small Heath and Saltley, contextualise and lend weight to the image expressed by Mister Khan.

This is not the only time that such humour will be used by Ray's character; every episode of *Citizen Khan* begins with the assertion (in voice over) that Sparkhill, Birmingham is the "capital of British Pakistan" and throughout the five series he makes constant and comic reference to the Islamification of UK cities. In the book that was spawned by the series, he claims that "since [Birmingham] is soon to become majority Muslim we are getting rid of the ham" (Khan, 2016,

136). In his essay on *Goodness Gracious Me*, Rainer Emig calls this humour 'tickling back', it is the comedy equivalent of the postcolonial 'writing back', the adoption of a dominant language by a normally subaltern population (Emig, 2010, 169). Citing Homi Bhabha's notion of postcolonial double articulation, whereby oppressed populations usurp the cultural tools previously used against it, Emig expresses the extent to which such comedy is in dialogue with the host culture. Ownership over the stereotype or the cliché becomes a way of arresting power.

The extent to which Kahn's outrageousness can mask a commentary on contemporary race relations in a city like Birmingham is displayed in the very first episode. Khan is visiting the local mosque and he is greeted outside by two of its worshippers. Khan greets Riaz (Nish Nathwani) a fellow Pakistani with smiles and genteel chat until he introduces Omar (Felix Dexter) a Somalian Muslim who is described as being 'new'. Omar offers the traditional greeting of "As-salamu alaykum", in a pronounced East African accent, and proceeds to state how he is delighted to meet such a pillar of the community as Mister Khan. Khan turns to Riaz and whispers "What's wrong with him?" to which Riaz replies "He is from Somalia". The joke here is a familiar one in the history of race humour: that the foreigner is intrinsically funny. Outsiderness equates to strangeness and strangeness to humour. The same basic source of comedy provided the basis for many of the race sitcoms of the 1970s and '80 most notably of course *Mind Your Language*, a show that Andy Medhurst saw as only existing on this tenuous observation (Medhurst, 2007, 18). The joke is further expounded upon in an episode of the same series when Khan takes Naani to the mosque and they once again meet Omar. After a brief greeting, Khan explains to her that "It is ok, this is Omar, he is from Somalia, he is Muslim like us, but he has got a funny accent."

The joke here is based on a truth about the evolving demographic of Sparkhill and Sparkbrook. Outside of London, Birmingham has the largest Somalian and East African population in the UK many of whom immigrated after the civil war in 2009 (UK Census). The image of Somalian Muslims proliferated in the British press is perhaps worse than that of any other ethnic group. Taken as a sign of global vulnerability, Islamic refugees from East Africa represented a coming together of old and new colonial fears and the popular press since 2009 has articulated these. The ignorance shown towards Omar then by Khan is not only barbed by a perceived truth, it clearly

mirrors the rhetoric of 1970s race humour. Ray himself has employed the same defence of such moments in the show as Johnny Speight and Vince Powell, as he detailed in an interview with *The Telegraph*:

> Some Muslims have judged *Citizen Khan* and accused me and co-writers on the show of being prejudiced against Muslims. Their biggest worry is that the show tarnishes their reputation. I think they should give Britain a bit more respect, in that sense. People who watch *Citizen Khan* realise this is a big, laugh-out-loud comedy show - it is not meant to be a reflection on every Muslim or Pakistani family in this country.
>
> Ray *The Telegraph*, 2015

As many writers have suggested with shows such *Till Death Us Do Part* however, the presence of jokes does not altogether negate a racist, or pejorative statement. Audiences can both laugh at and with the sentiments of fools.

The demographic make-up of Birmingham and the humour that can be derived from it is also evidenced by the character of Dave. Dave is a white Muslim convert who manages the local mosque, much the annoyance of Khan. In a comedic thread that is reminiscent of *Goodness Gracious Me*'s postcolonial reversal, Khan takes offence to Dave's ethnicity and refuses to accept his status as a Muslim. Greeted by a group of mosque worshippers (that includes Dave), Khan offers the traditional greeting, only to offer only "Hello Dave" to the mosque manager, a line that becomes a running joke throughout the series. The positioning of a white character as marginal to the central protagonist is unusual in British sitcoms and is again a testament to the show's mindfulness of comedy history. In the 1970s and 80s it was not unusual for a Black or Asian character to feature as a marginal figure and for the colour of their skin to usurp any other character traits they might have. Sitcoms such as *Only When I Laugh*, *In Sickness and in Health*, and *Porridge* all featured characters whose ethnicity was foregrounded mainly to highlight the normativity of the comedic protagonist. Kahn's reversal of the power relationship between white and Asian society not only reflects the demographic of Sparkhill in reality (where, indeed the

majority of the population are British-Asian, and 70% of the population are Muslim) but also offers a nod to the race sitcoms of the past.

Khan and Birmingham

Despite *Citizen Khan* being largely shot in a studio in Media City, Salford, the character of Birmingham is strongly suggested through its storylines, characters and situations. However occasionally, recognizable areas of Birmingham do appear, series 5 episode 1(Cricket) for example, was shot in and around Edgbaston cricket ground, in episode 2 of series 4 (Family Photo) Kahn is seen training Rocky-style in and around Birmingham city centre and throughout series 4 and 5 we see drone shots of Sparkhill as cutaways and incidentals, situating the drama firmly within a physical as well as a demographic milieu.

The opening titles of each episode shows the Khan family being driven along Ladypool Road in Sparkbrook. Ladypool Road features throughout the series and is known locally as the centre of the Asian district. The camera catches pedestrians and shoppers on the pavement staring with bemusement at Khan, the community leader, as he waves imperially from the car. The joke that was started in *Bellamy's People*, founded on Kahn's inflated sense of his own worth, is continued throughout all five series. Aside from this however, the feeling of these opening titles is one of community, with or without Khan at its head. We see Asian bystanders, white bystanders, Sikhs, Afro Caribbeans, women in saris, men in the traditional Pakistani kameez, men and women in western clothing, old, young and shopkeepers and their customers, all to the sound of the Kam Frantic's bhangra theme tune. Bhangra itself has been taken as a signifier for the multicultural fusion of Asian youth culture with the mainstream since the 1990s. It was a perennial feature of soundtracks during the boom for British-Asian cinema in this period and its mix of traditional Punjabi instruments and Western drum machines allowed artists such as Panjabi MC and Bally Sagoo to enter into the British cultural consciousness. The opening titles to *Citizen Khan* borrow some of this faith in the successful fusion of cultures. So, although firmly situated within an existing physical place, the sitcom's titles have a narrative function, they establish the dramatic and demographic space that will shape and propel the comedy despite often only being set in a series of rooms.

The image of Birmingham as a cultural melting pot is set up in the initial moments of each episode. This idea is subtly underlined time and time again through the five series, as Khan traverses a world that is both multicultural and harmonious. Again, commensurate with its dialogue with the 1970s racial sitcom, it is the lead character's prejudices that are most obvious. It is only Khan who serves as the barrier to complete multicultural acceptance. In the early series the family have a white neighbor, Keith (Phil Nice), whose ethnicity once again becomes a source of humour for the lead character. In episode 5 of series 1, Keith is angling to watch the cricket on the Khans' television but is blocked by the comeback that "We only have Al Jazeera". The humour here is playing on the preconceptions mainstream white culture has of British Muslims, especially in areas such as the Midlands. Khan's Sparkhill however has none of the prejudices and racial tension that, in reality, has shaped the experience of most first and second generation Asian migrants. White characters are, on the whole, respectful and sympathetic towards Khan and Pakistani Muslim identity per se. In the episode "Alia's Boyfriend", for example (Series 4, episode 6) Khan's youngest daughter is revealed to be seeing a white boy, Scab. After a series of humorous misunderstandings in the local biker pub, Scab turns out to be mindful of Muslim culture and considering conversion to Islam. We are told that he is learning Urdu and has spent a year living in Pakistan. White mainstream culture (including the police in some episodes) is depicted as existing in multicultural harmony with Sparkhill's Asian community.

We can compare this vision of Birmingham with another sitcom made by the BBC, *Man Like Mobeen*. *Man Like Mobeen* is the creation of Guz Khan and began as a strain of the comedy available in BBC3. It follows the life of Mobeen Ali (Guz Khan), his sister Aqsa (Duaa Karim) and his two friends Eight (Tez Ilyas) and Nate (Tolu Ogunmefun). Set in Smallheath, an area that neighbours Sparkhill, the world of *Man Like Mobeen* is immediately more atuned to the realities of contemporary debates about race in British society. In one episode for example (H-ALRight, series 1, episode 4) the central character, Mobeen, encounters a far right supporter, Robbie Worthington (Jason Maza) a clear reference to Tommy Robinson founder and spokesman of the English Defence League (EDL). In 2017 Britain First organized a march through Sparkbrook with Tommy Robinson at its head. Sparkbrook was specifically chosen, according to the

organisers, because of the risk it posed to British identity and security. The organisers refer to it as "one of the Muslin enclaves that is responsible for 1 in 10 of the convicted terrorists in this country" (Britain First, 2017). This was not the last time that Mobeen encounters racism and prejudice from white characters. In an episode set in a hospital waiting room (Wrestling with the NHS, Series 2, Episode 2) the audience is presented with a white middle-class character, Rafe (Tom Bennett) who suggests that NHS waiting times are affected by immigrants. In a satirical rendering of post-Brexit thinking, Rafe assures Mobeen that he is "not one of them…[he] was born here." Mobeen ironically quips back that he was born and raised in Birmingham, he is "one of the good ones".

Unlike *Citizen Khan*, the Birmingham of *Man Like Mobeen* is studded with racism, both organised and casual. Both shows depict the city's diverse demographic and consequently the possibilities of British multiculturalism, but only *Man Like Mobeen* acknowledges that this comes at a price, that tension has never been very far away in Britain's second city. Mobeen himself is tolerant and accepting of those around him, unlike Khan, and the humour arises out of his incredulity in the face of an absurd world. Racism is endemic within a society that is itself flawed. Individuals negotiate the problems and tensions of living in a multiracial society as best they can and Mobeen attempts to both protect and educate those around him. In contrast to this image, Khan's hermetically sealed sitcom city seems naive and politically backwards. Reflective of another phase in British cultural history, the 1990s, where films like *Bend it Like Beckham* (2002) promised a harmonious British multiculturalism that (as it transpired) was unrealistic and unreachable.

The differing modes of production for *Citizen Khan* and *Man Like Mobeen* mirror and, to an extent, are underlined by the shows' formal properties. Both exemplify forms of comedy production that, at various times throughout television's history, have vied for dominance and are determined by taste, developments in technology and the demands of the platform. In essence, both shows offer similar narratives: both are set in areas of Birmingham, both feature South Asian families and their relationship to white society, both feature male characters that are, in some way comic absurdities, and both pit their protagonists against more wily and knowing

females. However, as I have suggested already both shows are remarkably different and offer contrasting views of modern Britain.

In order to be able to explore the differences further I want to examine the opening 5 minutes of the first episode of each show; comparing how the mode of production shapes the narrative and determines the feel of the show. The first difference that we see between the two shows is the opening titles, or lack thereof. As already stated, *Citizen Khan*'s opening titles signal, in the traditional way, the beginning of the show and we might assume the entry into the character's world. *Man Like Mobeen* has no such title sequence, the action simply starts mid-sentence. The three main characters in the series – Mobeen, Eight and Nate – are found staring into a black rubbish bag discussing whether it is a laptop or a dead cat. The confusing absurdity of the premise underlines the shock of the show dropping into a conversation between the three without prior explanation. By contrast, *Citizen Khan* opens on a familiar scene common to many domestic sitcoms: Mrs Khan and Shazia are found in the living room discussing a forthcoming wedding. Despite such a traditional sitcom opening *Citizen Khan* makes several references that situate it within the Asian community, undercutting the usual demographic of mainstream comedy: Mrs Khan proudly cleans the sofa cover upon which Shazia sits, they talk about the shame of a wedding guest turning down their invitation, and presently Mister Khan enters the scene carrying armfuls of toilet rolls from the cash and carry. The humour is culturally specific but understandable by those outside of the demographic.

As the opening episode continues *Man Like Mobeen*'s surrealism takes on a more worldly tone, as the absurdity of the dead cat in the bag is replaced by the madness of police harassment. By the 2nd minute of the show Mobeen and Eight are surrounded by armed police on suspicion of drug dealing. The political has entered the comedic world in an abrupt and disturbing way that would be impossible to achieve in the studio. The camera work of this opening 5 minutes mirrors the rest of the series, it is slick, fluid and more reflective of cinema verité than the traditional sitcom. Again ,in contrast, *Citizen Khan*'s studio camera setup effaces its own existence, the mixing of camera feeds based on comic timing, rather than creative expression.

It is tempting, given the various differences between *Citizen Khan* and *Man Like Mobeen* to view the former as more conservative and the latter more progressive. In formal terms this might true. *Man Like Mobeen* is a part of a new wave of comedy that became popular in the early 2000s with series like *The Office* and *People Like Us*. However *Citizen Khan* subverts a genre that has a long history of racist representation and thus is, in its way, just as progressive. An example of this comes as Khan talks to his wife and daughter about the difference between Pakistani and English weddings, he states:

> Khan: Why do out weddings have to take so long? Maybe we should have an English wedding! Twenty minutes in the registry office, cucumber sandwich, cup of tea, thank you for coming, bye bye.

This subtle jibe at the cheapness of English weddings is followed by an exchange between Shazia, Mrs Khan and Mister Khan:

> Shazia: Dad you are such a cheapskate. Its embarrassing.
> Khan: Chup! I want no backchat from anyone.
> Mrs Khan: She has to look pretty for the wedding.
> Khan: I said 'chup'!
> Shazia (To her mother): These dresses are so beautiful.
> Khan: Chup!
> Mrs Khan: Not as beautiful as you my darling.
> Khan: Chup.
> Shazia: Aww thanks mum!
> Khan: Chup.
> Mrs Khan: Amjad is a very…
> Khan (Getting frustrated): I said 'chup' is this not bloody working?

The word 'chup' here, a Hindi word meaning 'be quiet', situates this scene in a specific cultural and linguistic milieu. Although the scene may be resonant to sitcoms of the 1970s, the dialogue singles it out as different and (in the context of scheduling) progressive. *Man Like Mobeen* does

have moments such as this (for example when Mobeen visits his Uncle Shady (Mark Silcox) in later episodes) however the formal progressiveness of the show makes any subversion harder to achieve. It is *Citizen Khan*'s place in a history of conservative television that makes moments such as the above exchange surprisingly progressive. It is the specific history and demographic male up of Birmingham that allows such progressiveness.

Conclusion

The character of Mister. Khan is rooted both with the history of the British sitcom and within the geographical area of the Midlands. As a liminal space, neither North nor South, the Midlands and its largest city Birmingham has always held a specific (and largely negative) place on British TV. The Midlander, the Brummy, has traditionally been cast as the loveable fool, the dupe or the uneducated rube. From *Crossroads*' Benny to *Auf Wiedersehen Pet*'s Barry, British television has not been kind to the inhabitants of its second largest city. That areas of Birmingham form so much a part of the identity of *Citizen Khan* then highlights its place as a mirror to the demographic of Britain and to the changing face of diversity and race. Khan's Birmingham is as recognizable (perhaps even more so to modern day Britons) as the image of the city as the workshop of the world, or the shining motorcity of the 1970s.

The world that Khan inhabits is one where although racism may exist it has no consequence. Like the sitcoms of the 1970s, racist language and abuse can be countered with humour or can simply be wandered through if you are protected by stupidity or pride. For the audience and for the culture that spawns such shows the question is one responsibility: does a comedy have an obligation to reflect and even challenge the problems of society? Or can it simply entertain? Both stances have been used examine Adil Ray's character.

Birmingham's liminality allows it to be used a surface upon which different regions and communities can project. To those in the North it is considered Southern, to those in the South it is often grouped together with the North as places that like beyond the Watford Gap. The same can be said for Citizen Khan who has been viewed as both liberating and racist, as both

stereotyped and truthful. Both city and character provide examples of hybridity in action or alternatively in crisis.

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