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CHIME THROUGH THE YEARS

## “SHUGS AND FATS” BY NADIA MANZOOR

*CHIME FOR CHANGE Through the Years: The Female Fabric is a series curated by CHIME Managing Editor Mariane Pearl featuring stories from the CHIME journalism platform archives by women around the world.*



We're trending again. Everyone wants to discuss us – what we wear, what we eat, where we belong. There are websites and web series all designed just for us! We are being repped, and we are self repping. **It's an exciting time for someone like me – someone who always believed that in order for me to exist in a public space, I would have to hide the Pakistani in me.**

I was raised in a super conservative Muslim family in the UK. Many of my experiences as a Muslim were amazing – my wonder at the unknown, my sense of community, my deepened respect for ritual and surrender. But that didn't erase the negative sides of my Muslim upbringing – **how my brother's intelligence was praised while I was scolded to watch my weight**; how I was encouraged to avoid 'eye contact' with men and stay modest and silent and slim; how I was forbidden from marrying a non-Muslim and told my first cousin would make a more appropriate **mate**. As I matured into adulthood, I found myself wanting to honor some of my Muslim experiences while distancing myself from others.

Now, I no longer subscribe to being Muslim in the way I was raised. I eat pork; I drink alcohol; I married a black Christian man, and I pray – but not the Muslim way. I don't fast and I don't believe that Mohammed is the last prophet – a prophet, sure, but the last?! Who's to say? But **'my kind of Muslim' doesn't grant me much cred in my community. In fact, I'm considered more of an anglo whore who doesn't represent the Muslim woman.**

As a teenager, I didn't have the self confidence to deal with the confusion around 'being a Muslim' so eloquently. When I chose to start drinking and started dating an Irish Catholic, I was immediately cast out, even though I was still deeply committed to Allah. Wasn't I still a part of my community? Didn't my personal experiences matter? It was a confusing time.

**Eventually I started calling my confusion 'cognitive dissonance' as I pursued a more culturally aware perspective while studying social work at Boston University.** I became curious about the contradictions, and my curiosity fueled my creativity. I'd don a hijab while giving class presentations about post 9/11 islamophobia, I'd note the reactions, and write about it. My writing entered another phase when, after seven years of living an ocean away from my Muslim community, I found myself through storytelling.

All my journals and academic papers turned into my one woman show **Burq Off!** An autobiographical investigation of my cultural dissonance, the narrative tracks my swaying between my family's cultural conservatism and my personal yearning for a sense of the beyond.



I want to talk about how negative stereotypes about misogyny in Islam hold truth, but that doesn't mean all Muslims are misogynists. I want to talk about how hijab manages the male gaze and is inherently hetero-normative, but women who choose to wear it, should never be shamed. **I want to talk to Allah about how much I love my Haitian Canadian husband. Yes, I'm an expert on my own Muslim experience, but I'm not claiming THE Muslim experience – no one can.**

Luckily for me, I found my way in the artist community of NYC – where anyone and everyone seems to be permissible! Yes, in the beginning I had to leave my Muslim community to find my own voice as a storyteller – but it was worth it. It allowed me to expose difficult parts of being a third culture kid through comedy. Surprisingly and beautifully, **Burq Off!** has allowed me to re-engage with my family and community and openly challenge assumptions about what it means to be a Muslim . It helped me heal issues with my father that I had never imagined possible.

Just as there's a lack of nuance in representation of Muslims, there's also a lack of humor. Why do we have to wipe away all smiles and sarcasm as soon as the topic of Islam arises? **Shugs & Fats is a social commentary and slapstick comedy that navigates the absurdities of social conformity, blah blah blah. Why don't you just take a look and form your own opinion.** Isn't that what this is really about? Becoming brave enough to think for ourselves in the face of a media society that is ever ready to spoon feed us an oversimplified idea to help us feel smarter and better read? Maybe. Maybe it's just for shits and giggles. Have a shit, have a giggle – whatever works for you.