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Cutting Through Bigotry:
Sitcoms Against America's Islamophobia

Introduction

This Bachelor's thesis on Creative Writing considers how American television can combat its image of being Islamophobic through humor for its academic research, and contains a piece of original fiction; a pilot episode for a sitcom called Cuts, which reflects the issues portrayed in the essay.

The decision for a Creative Writing approach to this Bachelor's Thesis came from a noticeable lack of positive representation of Arab and Muslim-Americans in American television series. The essay part of this Bachelor's thesis will research how humor will help in fighting America's Islamophobia post September 11. The Creative Writing aspect of this Thesis will then serve as a good example of exactly how bigotry against Muslim and Arab-Americans on television can be addressed and changed, and how humor can be a great asset in attaining that goal.

The piece of original fiction will then concern the liberal Jewish couple Judi and Ben Abrams, who have just recently adopted Palestinian twins of 14 year old. Judi is a specialized plastic surgeon with a practice at home, Ben works at an uninteresting office, and the kids are being homeschooled. The sitcom will revolve around the friction between the different ages, religions, and political views. Judi will have to keep her 'fangirling' in check when she operates on her first celebrity, Ben deals with his sexist boss, and the kids have an assignment from both their teacher as well as from a Palestinian extremist terrorist.

Lastly, the reflection will discuss in what way the Cuts pilot observes the bigotry against Muslim and Arab-Americans on American television, and how it distances itself from that discrimination as well.

Comedy in Defense of Arab and Muslim-Americans

In the years since the terrorist attacks of September 11, Arabs and Muslims have been extensively portrayed in the media as generally bad people. Most often the Arab and Muslim men were shown to be a threat to American freedom, as well as to the freedom of Muslim women, who are portrayed as oppressed and not allowed to think for themselves. Drama series such as *24*, *JAG*, and *West Wing* have been guilty of portraying Arabs and Muslims in this manner, *24* most notably for portraying them on the receiving end of gruesome torture techniques. On the other hand, Muslim-Americans have been portrayed as the victims of hate crimes, bigotry, and racial profiling in popular television shows as well. Evelyn Alsultany, professor of American Culture at the University of Michigan, explains in her book “Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11” why these kinds of representation are unable to combat negative stereotypes and “possibly even reinforce negative understandings of Muslims and therefore perpetuate biases” (14). This happens in the media through “simplified complex representations, which professor Alsultany has characterized as “[a] representational mode that has become standard since 9/11 [that] seeks to balance a negative representation with a positive one”(14) She argues that this phenomenon of simplified complex representations emerged out of the multicultural movement of the Gulf War, which tried to show the value of diversity and cultural tolerance, but which has become more and more standardized since the terrorist attacks of September Eleventh. While likely to have good intentions, writers, directors, and producers began, according to Alsultany, complicating their portrayals of Arabs by plainly adding Arab-American or Muslim-American characters to their shows with whom the people of the United States could relate. Even though these relatable Arab characters brought something new to the table for the American viewer in terms of Arab identity, they were still unable to uproot the negative views of the anti-American Arabs set by its predecessors, and this created “a new kind of racism, one that projects antiracism and

multiculturalism on the surface but simultaneously produces the logics and effects necessary to legitimize racist policies and practices”(Alsultany 16). Despite these sympathetic representations of Arab and Muslim Americans Alsultany notes that “hate crimes, work place discrimination, bias incidents, and airline discrimination targeting Arab and Muslim Americans increased exponentially” (4) in the aftermath of September Eleventh and continues to occur. The dramas have a penchant to place Muslims on opposite sides, the “good” and “bad” Muslims. The good ones are shown as “modern, secular, and Westernized” and ‘bad Muslims’ are “doctrinal, antimodern, and virulent” (Mamdani, 24). To put the nasty connotations associated with Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans out of people's minds, comedy is needed: Animated sitcoms and live-action sitcoms have the power to humanize what is foreign, and by portraying satirical views of bigotry as well as showing millions of Americans the comical problems of everyday Arab and Muslim Americans on national television is a good way to combat America's Islamophobia.

Satirical cartoons such as *South Park*, and *The Simpsons* have been able to tackle the big issues in the United States for over 20 years. They do not hesitate to mock anything from religion, to race, and sexuality. The way these animated sitcoms discuss important topics in their ways of “hyper-irony” and “manic-satire” (Hughey & Muradi) works as a mirror to society. If any of these shows mock something, it must be bad. In the case of Islamophobia, these shows can become so bigoted that it is easily seen as over the top and that self-reflection is needed. In his book “Evil Arabs in American Popular Film: Orientalist Fear” Tim Jon Semmerling discusses Orientalist fear in five movies and a CNN documentary, and concludes how the *South Park* movie can teach how absurd this fear actually is. He states that “*South Park* can be [...] an informative barometer and lampoon of when the discourse of popular culture has just gone too far, taken itself too seriously, and lost sight of its real status. [...] If a topic makes it to *South Park*, then its popularity in American culture has probably reached levels of absurdity and deserves a reality check” (Semmerling 248). Such is the case with bigotry against Muslims, Arabs, Muslim-Americans, and

Arab-Americans in episode four of season eleven of *South Park*; “The Snuke”. It addresses the biased view of Muslims and Arabs when Cartman immediately assumes his new Muslim classmate, Bahir, is a terrorist. The episode plays largely as a parody of the television series *24*, guilty of racial profiling of American Muslims, when a plot to assassinate Hilary Clinton is discovered. Cartman then finds Bahir's parents to torture them into revealing where they have kept the detonator. After a while the show suggests a group of suicide bombing Russians are behind the plot, but it later becomes clear it was orchestrated by America's oldest enemy: The British Redcoats. Kyle then reflects how all this proves that they should learn to not profile on race of people “because actually, most of the world hates [America]” (“The Snuke”). Something similar occurs in *The Simpson's* seventh episode of season twenty: “Mypods and Boomsticks”, when Homer suspects the new Muslim neighbors of terrorism. He overhears them speaking of blowing up the shopping mall, but fails to hear that the father has a job in building demolition. He tries to save the day by removing all of the TNT from the mall scheduled for destruction, and throws it in the river, only to accidentally blow up a bridge himself. (“Mypods and Boomsticks”) The episode received praise from the Council on American–Islamic Relations in the form of a commending letter to show creator Matt Groening. Hussam Ayloush, executive director of the council in Los Angeles, wrote "I applaud your effort in Sunday's episode of *The Simpsons* to humanize American Muslims by challenging anti-Muslim sentiment in our society. [...] By introducing a professional Muslim family, the 'Mypods and Boomsticks' episode highlighted the diverse make-up of Springfield and brought to light how Americans can work toward mutual respect and inclusion by getting to know their neighbors" (Ayloush 2). In another episode in the twenty-first season, the Simpson family visits Jerusalem, and they take a tour to the Dome of the Rock, which bears great religious significance to Christians, Jews, and Muslims. The Israeli tour guide tells them “OK, this shrine contains the rock on which Abraham was going to sacrifice his son. And Muslims believe something, too. To find out, hire a Muslim tour guide” (“The Greatest Story Ever D'ohed”). This joke is a good example of a satirical

comment on the lack of knowledge of Muslim religion by Americans, which only makes it harder for Americans to accept Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans living among them. It is a clever bit of hyper-irony: the cold and clever humor used today.

Sitcoms have long been a way to humanize taboo subjects in a lighthearted manner. It is what *Ellen* and *Will & Grace* did for homosexuality, what *The Cosby Show* and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* did for Americans who had never met an African-American family: it showed them that they were not all that different than what they were used to, and ratings on all of these shows remained high. In December 2010 CBS News-Anchor Katie Couric suggested a Muslim Huxtable family: “maybe we need a Muslim version of *The Cosby Show*. I know that sounds crazy, but *The Cosby Show* did so much to change attitudes about African-Americans in this country, and I think sometimes people are afraid of things they don’t understand” (Shahid). While mostly dismissed as a simplistic idea, the Arab-American and Muslim-American community has generally praised this idea. Definitely not a universal remedy to Islamophobia, but something that writer Firoozeh Dumas describes in her LA Times article as “sitcom diplomacy”(2). “A TV show starring us would make [the] obvious point obvious: Middle Easterners come in all shapes, sizes and belief levels, just like every other kind of American” (Dumas 10). Several writers and comedians weighed in on the idea of a Muslim-American sitcom, and thought it could very well be a good idea to combat racism and bigotry. Iranian born American comedian Maz Jobrani told MIT “It takes some time for people to get comfortable with the unfamiliar, but the more people interact with Middle Eastern-Americans or if they see them in positive circumstances, they begin to see that these people are normal and good people” (Sinatra 7). This is what many Americans fail to see. The quickly canceled sitcom *Aliens in America* on The CW was more in line with what a Muslim-*Cosby Show* would look like. It revolved around an all-American family who take in a Pakistani Muslim exchange student, who soon becomes friends with the son of the family, because, despite several religious and ethnic differences, they both face the same normal problems of bullying and love at high school.

Another sitcom that portrays Arabs in a favorable way now is NBC's *Community* which features a half-Palstinian character named Abed Nadir, played by Danny Pudi. He is socially awkward, but lovable, loves popular culture, and above all wants to be a filmmaker. His diverse group of friends who make up the cast of the show never pigeonhole this Palestinian kid in the terrorist department, and see him simply for what he is: A young man attending a community college. He is never portrayed as overtly Anti or Pro-American, just as the rest of his American study group, just as the regular American audience. This shows that sitcoms are a helpful medium in breaking the taboos surrounding "The Other". "For a Muslim-American child to see people who look like him or her, a normal family living in the U.S., will make them feel a genuine sense of acceptance. Talking to a child about the constitution and their rights will go right over their head, show them a 30-minute sitcom and they will understand tolerance, acceptance and even equality"(Piazza 15) said Linda Sarsour, director of the Arab American Association of New York. Muslim-American Hollywood television and movie producer Tariq Jalil is a little less optimistic: Hollywood would definitely embrace a Muslim *Cosby Show* with one caveat: It would have to be really good. It's the one factor that has linked shows about minorities like the *Cosby Show* or even *Will & Grace*. Currently, I believe Americans are open to any minority as long as the show speaks to universal human truths and makes them laugh" (Piazza 7). It is most likely that this simply was not the case with *Aliens in America*, but with "broadcast and cable networks [...] starting to be more receptive to scripts prominently featuring both Arabs and practitioners of Islam" (Piazza 6) this Muslim-Huxtable family is just around the corner.

Most Arabs or Muslims on American television have the sole purpose of reassuring the American audience. They are either shown as the murderous, freedom hating men that America has to destroy, or the oppressed women that America needs to save. Or as Semmerling said in his book: "Our filmic villains are narrative tools used for self-presentation and self-identity to enhance our own stature, our own meaning, and our own self-esteem in times of our own diffidence. Are the

‘evil’ Arabs in American film actually oblique depictions of ourselves: the insecure Americans? And while we depict ourselves through them, do we not do so at the expense of the Arab Others?” (Semmerling 1-2).

When Arab-Americans and Muslim-Americans on television attain the moniker of “good”, they are only so because they are righteous American patriots. Animated sitcoms such as *South Park* and *The Simpsons* utilize humor in the form of hyper-irony and manic-satire to show the audience just how ridiculous this portrayal actually is, and that Muslim-Americans and Arab-Americans can be just as averagely American as the ordinary American. The best way to show this is through situation comedies, which since the 50s and 60s have been able to lightheartedly tackle the larger issues their country has been facing and give people a positive discourse. A surge in Muslim-American and Arab-American filmmakers or Muslim-friendly filmmakers with a penchant for comedy is what is needed to make people see how much alike they all truly are.

Working Title: Cuts**Intro**

EXT. THE ABRAM'S HOUSE

A large Miami house, palm trees on the sidewalk. Driveway has room for two, one place is taken by a huge yellow low-rider with purple fire decal on the side. A sign in the front yard of a smiling cartoon penis reads JUDI ABRAMS PHALLOPLASTY. A non-exciting gray sedan pulls up in the second spot.

BARBARA, a confident woman in her 40s, steps out of the car. Gray suit on. Clipboard in hand.

She walks to the sidewalk to get to the front door, gets run over by a cyclist. She screams, and papers fly everywhere. BEN steps off the bike. In his late 30s. He's wearing a nondescript suit that is about a size too small for him. The biking has made him sweat a lot.

BEN

Oh my god! I'm so sorry! Are you alright?

WOMAN

Yeah, I'm, ow, yeah I guess I'm alright.

BEN

Here let me help you.

(Helps picking up papers. Reads them.)

Oh! You're Barbara? From Child Protective Services, right?

BARBARA

Yes, that I am. And you are?

BEN

(rambling nervously)

I'm so sorry I hit you, it wasn't my intention, but I was just really rushing to be home on time to not miss you and, well, I certainly didn't.

He laughs nervously.

BEN (CONT'D)

I'm sorry. I'm Ben. Please come inside. I think we've been expecting you.

They walk to the door together, he opens it with his keys.

INT. HALLWAY

The hallway contains the stairs, door to the living room and a glass door with the words "Waiting Room" on it.

A woman yells from upstairs.

UPSTAIRS WOMAN

Ben! Is that you?! Have you seen my Ed Hardy thong?
I'm going out tonight!

BEN

Judi, Honey! Barbara is here.

JUDI

Who is Barbara?

BARBARA

Hi Mrs. Abrams, I'm from Child Protective Services,
we had a meeting scheduled? You guys can just call me
Hannah by the way, Barbara is my last name.

JUDI

Oh yeah, shit. Could you two please wait in the
living room on me, I'm getting ready. Go and
meet the kids, they're there somewhere. Just let's
hurry this up, shall we? Ben. BEN! Make her
something to drink.

BEN

Right this way. After you, Barbara, uhm, I mean
Hannah. You're gonna love these kids, just watch how
happy they are as they were waiting for their father to
get home.

Hannah walks to open the door, only to have it slam in her face
because someone opens it from the other side.

Fade to black. Graphic on screen reads "5 hours earlier".

CUT TO:

Ben at Work

INT. BEN'S CUBICLE

BEN is working at his cubicle desk, sitting on an office chair,
typing on a computer. Excel spreadsheet on screen. There are 4
pictures of Judi or him and Judi displayed on the walls of his
cubicle. One on a note-board has little hearts around it. A block-
calendar shows the date, JUNE 12, and a picture of Garfield saying

"I HATE WEDNESDAYS".

Something catches BEN's attention and he swivels his chair. It's his boss RANDY. RANDY, early 30s, is dressed in a tight suit which, opposed to BEN's, is the right size for him. He looks good and he knows it.

BEN

Hi Randy!

Randy walks into Ben's cubicle.

RANDY

Hiya Ben, what can I do you for today, old buddy.

While Ben talks to Randy, Randy is not paying a lot of attention. Lots of uh-huh are thrown in while Ben is speaking, but in the meantime he's just going over Ben's stuff, picking up everything, obviously bored.

BEN

Yeah, well, you know we've just adopted these two kids recently, and I know you had trouble with letting me stay home for Yom Tov and during Chol HaMoed and I hate to ask you this, you know I do, if I wasn't married I'd be here all night you know that. But the thing is, child's protective services is coming by today and well that is of course really important, don't wanna lose our kids y'know, so could I go home a little earlier today? Say 4:30 instead of 5, because that's when she'll be at our house.

Randy was paying attention from when Ben said he wanted to leave earlier today at which point he put Ben's stuff back and crosses his arms.

RANDY

Well..Ben..what you're asking me here is hard to do for me. You know that. Well...tsk tsk tsk tsk. I know I asked you to finish that report before the weekend, but if you manage to finish it today, say by 4:15? Than I'd be totally down with letting you go early, you feel me?

BEN

Yeah, totally. I mean yes, I do. Thank you, I will get to work right now. Thanks Randy.

RANDY

Don't mention it. Hey Ben, have you seen what Sandra's wearing today? I wouldn't mind having a piece of that cake in my pants, if you know what I

mean.

BEN

(Uncomfortable)

No I haven't seen her today, Randy, but I can sort of imagine what you mean. Not that I will, obviously, I'm married.

RANDY

I know that you are, Ben.

RANDY gestures towards the picture of Judi with the hearts around it.

RANDY (CONT'D)

I mean just look at her, such a cute picture of your wife there Ben, very cute, very very cute, though I don't think I would have given up my last name for her's. Whatever works for ya though.. I hope all goes well with you two? Not too well, of course, wouldn't want her interrupting your work time now do we?

RANDY laughs, BEN follows.

BEN

Yeah, it's going great. Well, better, since we got the kids.

RANDY

Have you told her about, you know, the blue pills you're taking yet?

BEN

(Embarrassed, looking around to make sure no one else heard)

Sorry? Blue pills? I don't know what you're talking about. At all. What are blue pills even, right? I don't know!

RANDY

You don't remember you told me, two weeks ago at the office party? How much of that Scotch had you been drinking in that corner all by yourself? But no matter, man, I haven't told anybody and I won't. You should tell her though.

BEN

(His voice starts to croak)

I'm, I'm scared to,-

BEN starts to sob.

BEN (CONT'D)

I feel like these kids are the only thing keeping us together these days, she's changed so much Randy, it's stressing me out. That's what the pills are for. I can't, you know, perform under all this fucking stress. And with her job, it's like she's throwing all these perfectly erect dicks in my face all the time.

RANDY

That sounds hard, man. No pun intended. Just know that your bro Randy won't throw his thing in your face, alright? But please do have that report on my desk this afternoon, alright. Then you can leave early. I can't be playing favorites here.

BEN

(Wipes his nose)

Thanks Randy, that means a lot. Please don't tell anybody about this.

At that time Ben's phone, which is on his desk, makes a sound.

RANDY grins.

RANDY

Ben! You old horny devil! I know what that sound is! Getting some action on the side?

BEN looks confused

RANDY (CONT'D)

Don't pretend like you don't know! You got a Snapchat didn't you? I know what Snapchat is for, they don't just call me Randy 'cause that's my name. I think I understand your story better now, your wife has changed a bit and you're no longer sexually attracted to her, so you're getting some online action. Nice!

RANDY winks at BEN.

BEN is still confused.

RANDY (CONT'D)

Hey man, you've got nothing to hide from me. I know all the youngsters these days use it for dick-pics and boob-shots, and you did just tell me things weren't going so great with your wife. I totally get it, man.

BEN looks at his phone.

BEN
(Angry)
Hey man, It's simply just a picture my wife sent me.
See? It says Judi right here.

BEN shows RANDY his phone.

I don't have any action on the side, what kinda guy do you think I am? I love my wife.

RANDY
Oh yeah?

BEN
Excuse me?

RANDY
Prove me that it's just a boring picture your wife sent you. Prove me that you're not sexting 20 year olds during work hours, or your wife for that matter. I'd hate to have to fire you for sending cock-photos during work hours.

BEN
I promise you I'd never do that, isn't that enough?

RANDY
Come on Ben, if it's just your wife you have nothing to hide from me, right? I tell you what, if you show me what your wife sent you, I promise I'll let you go at 4:15.

BEN
You promise?

RANDY
Cross my heart and hope to die.

BEN, looking pretty confident, grabs his phone.

BEN
Don't think I'm just doing this to get home early. I want you to know I would never send anybody pictures of my junk during work hours.

Ben opens the picture, his wife, JUDI, is holding up a penis really close to the camera, her head is behind it with a big grin and a thumbs up next to it. The caption reads "My First Celebrity! And it's a big one!"

Both men are at a loss for words. BEN seems in shock, RANDY disgusted.

BEN

..uhm, ..

RANDY

Save it. You can leave at 4:45.

RANDY stomps away. BEN rests his head on his desk. In the background you can hear Randy yelling.

RANDY

(Yelling in the background)

Hey Sandra! Nice jugs.

BEN's phone makes the same sound again. He opens the new picture reluctantly. It's a picture of his wife's hands. The caption reads: "Never washing these hands again!". He sends her a text back reading: "Please don't forget, Barbara at 5!".

Judi at Work

Smartphone in hand, "never washing these hands again" on screen. JUDI turns her smartphone off, and puts it back in her pocket.

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE

Inside the doctor's office, techno music is playing softly, the walls feature several biological posters, cupboards with medicine and assorted equipment. A PATIENT in a surgery gown is lying on the doctor's table in the middle of the room. JUDI, also in her late 30s, is wearing surgery scrubs and hat, but you can see she is wearing bejeweled pants and sneakers underneath. Off-screen you can see her wrapping up the patient's genitals. She forms her hands in a cup and lowers them. She looks towards the patient's face, which the viewer never gets to see. She giggles.

JUDI

Cough please.

The patient coughs. Judi shrieks and puts her hand before her mouth, which she sniffs after a couple of seconds and sighs a happy sigh. The patient did not wake up, he just coughed. She puts away her surgery equipment and takes off her scrubs. She's wearing a crop top revealing her belly button and a tribal tattoo on her lower back. She walks through the door into the waiting area.

INT. WAITING AREA

There is one more man, MR. WALLACE, waiting in the nondescript waiting area, again anatomical posters of male genitalia on the walls, six chairs against the wall are empty.

MR. WALLACE

Hello Dr. Abrams, new hair?

Judi completely ignores him and walks through the hallway to the living room. There we see the Palestinian kids, 14 years old, both on the couch with their homeschooler PATRICK. PATRICK is in a bright orange sweater, ATIF has short messy hair is wearing cargo pants and a t-shirt that reads "What's Horny and Has a Star on Its Back?" on the front, and a picture of a star on the back. MAHDIYAH wears a green Hijab and a brown sweater and black pants. She is never seen without her iPad, which she uses to communicate in English. They are all watching the A-TEAM on TV, but MAHDIYAH is reading something else on her iPad.

JUDI

(Screaming over the sound of the TV)

You'll never believe who I just done some work on! I can't say, obviously. But let's just say he's totally famous, from singing as well as from TV and you kids need to be totally psyched about him, we'll listen to his latest CD when I'm off together. I think you know who he is, Patrick.

PATRICK

(Yelling over the sound of the TV)

I don't, but I'm still totally jealous and so proud of you Judi! Keep on being fabulous. And introduce me maybe.

He winks at her.

She walks straight back through the waiting room to her practice without responding to PATRICK, she makes several cheery dance moves.

MR. WALLACE

Hi again, got some new scrubs too? You look 10 years younger.

JUDI

Oh Mr. Wallace, you flatterer, thank you, that's exactly what I was going for. I'll see you in just a little bit for your monthly check up.

Back in the doctor's office. The patient is sitting up straight on the surgery table, he's yawning with his arms.

JUDI

(Rambling excitedly)

Oh you're up, sorry if I woke you up by screaming. You didn't hear what I said did you? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have told my kids about you. But maybe you can go say hi to them in a couple of minutes? If you're feeling up to it I suppose. Those sedatives sure are something aren't they? I've tried them a couple of times, just for fun, I'd never get surgery myself, I'm good as is. Wouldn't you say so? Of course you would, you're drugged, drugged people always tell the truth. I hope you're happy with what I've done for you, but please don't look yet, let those bandages stay on there a couple of days, I should do it. It was a fun job, I don't know when the last time was I did a circumcision, your parents must be European. Is this for personal reasons or hygiene reasons? Don't answer that, it's both pretty personal. You can tell me if you want to though.

She giggles.

I was just kidding about the European thing by the way, I realize now that was an awful thing of me to say. This foreskin, is it alright if I hold on to it for a while? Of course it is. I'm kinda Jewish, you know, so this is kind of like my forbidden fruit. Not that I'm gonna eat it, of course. Kashrut would definitely not allow that. Not that I've been to synagogue in quite some time, but I'm proud of what I do here, especially since there aren't that many Jewish plastic surgeons in Miami, no sir. I even think I'm the only Jewish phalloplastic surgeon in town. And a hot babe to boot.

She laughs and strikes a seductive pose.

But yeah, you should really come say hi to my kids in a short while. Would you like some water?

She pours him some water while continuing to ramble on.

You must be thirsty. Are you famous in Palestine? I know super random question, but have you ever been there? I'm just wondering because I have these Palestinian kids since a couple of months now and I bet they'd really wanna see you. It was my husband's idea to adopt them, and my grandparents, who raised me, really pushed me to keep them. I was mad at Ben for a while, Ben's my husband's name by the way, but they're sweet kids, and I think he's a good father to them. Who would have guess that I would find that very attractive? Not me! Anyhoo, my kids would think I was so cool for knowing you. For touching you.

She giggles-

PATIENT

Wait.

JUDI

Yes?

PATIENT

Did you just say you were Jewish?

JUDI

Yes, I did.

PATIENT

(Confused)

And your kids are Palestinian?

JUDI

Adopted kids, but yes.

PATIENT

That's... weird, but cool too I guess.. Shouldn't they be at school?

JUDI

They're being homeschooled right now, we thought about regular school my husband and I, but these kids now a days are just so mean to each other, let our kids understand how this country works before we send them to normal school, right? The homeschooler guy, Patrick, really wanted to meet you too, by the way. I don't know if you're down with meeting gay people, but he is a really nice one.

PATIENT

I have no problem with that whatsoever, why should I? I love to meet with all of my fans..Wait, did you say you were keeping my foreskin before?

Judi laughs nervously

JUDI

No, Oh Em Gee, no I was just kidding, I threw it away OF COURSE.

She "casually" closes a cabinet door.

PATIENT

Well, it's not important. I did however wanted to know if I'll be able to play a show tonight.

JUDI

Whoa, big question there. Usually I'd say take at least 3 days rest. But I can always NOT say that in trade for some

(She whispers)
backstage passes

PATIENT

Excuse me?

JUDI

I think you heard me.

PATIENT

No, sorry, I really didn't.

JUDI

(Normal voice, embarrassed)
Backstage passes. I said backstage passes. To Your show tonight, which you just told me about.

PATIENT

Oh yeah of course, I can do that. I'll put you on the guest list.

JUDI

Great. I'll give you some extra painkillers to help you perform tonight. Not sexually perform, oh my god, no not like that. Don't do that for a while. I just meant like, you know, the show. Tonight. Which I'll see you at. Your last album is really really

great by the way. Very tight.

PATIENT

Thanks. Yeah, of course you'll see me tonight. It's the least I could do to repay you.

JUDI

And pay the doctor's bill I'll send in of course.

PATIENT laughs.

PATIENT

Yeah right, pay the doctor's bill.

He winks at her.

Judi giggles and gets some medicines from a cabinet, puts them in a bag and gives it to him. She walks him out, remembers something.

JUDI

Oh yeah, won't you come say hi to my kids and the homeschooler for just a second?

She pushes him through the door, the sounds of the A-Team blare.

JUDI

(Yelling)

HEY KIDS, PATRICK! Look who it is!

The kids both look up, ATIF just casually waves from his seat on the couch. MAHDIYAH types something on her iPad, the sound of which blocked out by the TV. They both seem not to recognize whoever this is. PATRICK however stands up, and claps.

PATRICK

I'm a huge fan man, you made my year in 2001.

PATIENT

Good to hear that, man, you can sit down again now, I'll be going.

JUDI

Well, maybe you're a bit before their time, I'll get them up to speed tonight though.

She walks her patient outside.

JUDI (CONT'D)

Ah well, guess you'll be seeing me solo at your show tonight. Introduce me to your bandmates alright?

Patient nods his head.

PATIENT

Yeah, sure. See you tonight.

The PATIENT gets in the limousine that was waiting for him. She waves as he drives away.

Kids at Home

INT. LIVING ROOM

The kids and their homeschooler Patrick are sitting on the couch, watching an American Football game. Patrick is a chirpy 25 year old, always in a colorful sweater. Camera cuts to behind the couch and shows a man, seemingly alone on the field, running backwards, catching the ball, doing a little victory dance and touching down. Patrick turns off the TV

PATRICK

And that concludes our lesson on why we celebrate Columbus Day, without who we'd never have this glorious sport. Isn't he just the greatest person in the history of ever?

ATIF applauds PATRICK, MAHDIYAH rolls her eyes and mutters something in Arabic, the name 'Hitler' can be heard.

PATRICK

I'd argue about you with what you just said Mahdiyah, or what I think you said at least, but I'm afraid I have to go and conversing with you is still such a pain in my butt. I know it's unfair of me to say, with you having had hardly any schooling where you come from, but I'm far more proud of Atif than I am of you. But I am not the self-appointed heavenly homeschooler hailing from Hawaii for nothing, and I will not give up on you dearies, no matter how much you beg me.

MAHDIYAH

(Her iPad speaks for her)

Just go already.

PATRICK

Your words would hurt me a lot less if you'd just study some more at home, and tell me yourself, instead of using your

(Imitates a robot voice and makes robot dance moves)

robot voice. Beep boop.

(Normal Voice)
 Could you do that for me darling?

MAHDIYAH
 (In her own voice, apathetic)
 O.K.

PATRICK
 Very good. I'm almost proud, but you know "O.K." doesn't count. Well, I'll see you kids after the weekend. Gimme a pounce, Atif!

HOMESCHOOLER makes his hand into a fist, ATIF bumps it with his fist.

PATRICK (CONT'D)
 Atta boy! Have a good weekend kid. Oh yeah, before I forget, I hope you kids make a good impression on the Child Protective Services lady. Atif, I have all my hope put in you. Show her how much you love this glorious country of ours, she'll love it if you make an effort. Mahdiyah, don't fuck this up for me, this was the only job I could find. Alright, see ya!.

He leaves through the hallway door. MAHDIYAH sighs and looks to the clock.

MAHDIYAH
 (In Arabic)
 Our package should be here by now, Atif. PATRICK shouldn't have left so early, we can't sign for it.

ATIF
 (In Arabic)
 We can always have mom sign for it, can't we?

MAHDIYAH
 Don't be daft, Atif. Then she'll find out we used her credit card to buy stuff.

PATRICK (Off Screen)
 (Shouting from the hallway)
 Kids! A post office person just showed up with some huge packages for you guys. I signed them for you because I didn't want to interrupt your mother. The things I do for you guys. I'm really off now! Bye

Both the kids' eyes light up. They rush towards the hallway where several giant cardboard boxes are waiting for them. Most of them have warnings such as 'FRAGILE', 'CORROSIVE', 'FLAMMABLE', and 'IRRITATING' on them. ATIF grabs the two boxes without any

warnings on them and slides them towards the living room. While ATIF rips open the boxes and throws them out on the living room floor, MAHDIYAH can be seen gently lifting the boxes one by one, very carefully, and placing them in an orderly fashion next to the dining room table.

While ATIF keeps yelling things like 'oh yeah', 'fucking awesome' etc. we cut to MAHDIYAH starting a video conversation with her iPad. She calls an unnamed Arabic man, he has a large beard and unfriendly eyes. He's obviously in a cave somewhere.

SKYPEMAN

(In Arabic)

What is it? Do you have any idea what time it is?

MAHDIYAH

(In Arabic)

Hello, sir. I wanted to let you know I just got all the parts you made me order in the mail, is now a good time to talk?

SKYPEMAN

(In English unless specified otherwise)

Very good, Mahdiyah, very good. Do you mind if we continue this conversation in English? I have picked up this chick in the town bar and she thinks I'm an American Hell's Angel with a Harley. I can't wait to see all of her tatoos, if you know what I mean?

MAHDIYAH

(In broken English unless specified otherwise)

I'm not real good yet, sir.

SKYPEMAN

Nonsense! I won't hear it! Anyway, good job on the parts. I knew it was easy for you to mail-order chemicals if you would live with a respectable American doctor.

Hallway door slams open and JUDI barges in. She walks towards the fridge. CUT TO ATIF, MAHDIYAH and SKYPEMAN all looking shocked and holding their breath. JUDI doesn't notice a thing.

JUDI

(Stepping over boxes and parts)

I still can't believe you didn't know who my patient was. When you realize who he was in a while you'll be so jealous I got to touch his junk and you did not.

She grabs some hip, healthy food and walks away with it, while taking bites.

JUDI (CONT'D)

(Mouth full)

Well, I have two more patients for the day, after which I'm going out. See you kids, behave now. She closes the door. Everybody lets out the air they were holding in.

SKYPEMAN

Respectable doctor and his idiot wife it seems.

MAYDIYAH

No sir, she is doctor.

SKYPEMAN scoffs.

SKYPEMAN

Women doctors, ridiculous. What will those foolish fat Americans come up with next?

ATIF

(Pack of Oreos in hand)

Hey, that's bogus! Mom Judi is very smart and a gnarly doctor. You don't have to be so mean to Americans either, dweeb. America rocks!

SKYPEMAN

(angry, talking louder for ATIF to hear)

Shut it, insolent child! Those comic books you smuggled into the orphanage have corrupted your soul, you're a lost cause to us.

(calmer, to MAHDIYAH)

I really would have wished you had not told your brother of our plans, Mahdiyah, with his stupidity he might ruin them for you.

MAHDIYAH

No sir, Atif would not do. He is good brother.

ATIF (Off Screen)

(Mouth full)

That's right, I'm the bomb!

MAHDIYAH

Shut up, Atif.

SKYPEMAN

That's good. Besides, we all know what would happen if you were to fail your little task.

MAHDIYAH looks in fear at her right hand.

MAHDIYAH & ATIF

Yes, sir.

SKYPEMAN

Good! Now get to building, I will send you the blueprints in an encrypted file. Remember Mahdiyah, you are still in the testing phase; building this small bomb will prepare you for...well, bigger bombs. Goodbye, I will reconvene in a fortnight.

MAHDIYAH

Goodbye, sir.

On the iPad screen SKYPEMAN's finger comes to touch the screen.

SKYPEMAN

Click.

ATIF

Did he just say 'click'? What a dipstick.

SKYPEMAN (Off Screen)

(screaming in Arabic)

Mahmoud! Where is our tea? I asked you to get me and my lady friend some tea 40 minutes ago!

MAHMOUD (O.S.)

(Calmly in Arabic)

I put it next to your little gizmo when you were talking to the girl, sir. I hope it has not turned cold.

SKYPEMAN (O.S.)

(In Arabic)

For your sake, I hope it hasn't.

The iPad is laying horizontally on the table, so we only see the ceiling of the cave until he sits himself at the table again, at which point we get a good view of SKYPEMAN's beard and into his nostrils.

SKYPEMAN

Oh yes, here it is.

(He takes a sip)

Ah no, it's quite good still. He even brought us a cookie, that Mahmoud is a good kid.

MAHDIYAH

(Whispering to ATIF, in Arabic)

We should turn this off.

ATIF

(Whispering back in Arabic)

Let's just see what he does, maybe we get to see his galpal.

SKYPEMAN eats the cookie, a big part of which crumbles into his beard but SKYPEMAN does not seem to notice. ATIF, however, cannot hold in his laughter.

SKYPEMAN

(startled, struggling not to spill his tea)

What? Who was that?

(Looks down at the screen, talks in English again)

Mahdiyah, Atif? Why have you called me again? That is not protocol and you know it!

MAHDIYAH

(In English)

sorry, sir, you left open the Skype.

SKYPEMAN

What do you mean? I very clearly pressed on the 'OUT' button, it even made a clicking sound.

ATIF

(In English)

There is no such thing as an 'OUT' button sir, you need to press the phone.

SKYPEMAN

What phone?

ATIF

The red picture of a phone, that you need to press sir.

(Whispering to Mahdiyah)

What an airhead.

SKYPEMAN

(Aggitated)

I don't see a picture of a red phone, I swear, once we're finished with America we will punish China next for fabricating such a piece of cr-

He manages to log off, the screen goes to regular Skype interface. ATIF bursts out laughing again.

MAHDIYAH

(In Arabic)

Thanks a lot Atif! You almost got me in a lot of trouble.

ATIF

(In Arabic)

I'm sorry sis, you got to admit that was pretty funny though.

MAHDIYAH

Whatever. Please don't interfere with my project again brother, I will be building now.

ATIF

Me too, I will show the child something lady how much I love this country by making the most awesomest collage she will ever see. Maybe I'll even convince you.

MAHDIYAH

(Mockingly)

You do your best now, Atif.

ATIF

Thanks sis. Oh yeah, I almost forgot...

ATIF walks towards one of his boxes and pulls out a sweater with an all-over print of the U.S.A. flag on it. He brings it to MAHDIYAH

ATIF (CONT'D)

I bought you this.

He hands her the sweater and runs back to the box, he pulls out a t-shirt with an all-over print of the U.S.A. flag on it.

ATIF (CONT'D)

(gleefully)

Look! It matches my t-shirt!

MAHDIYAH

(Throwing the sweater in a corner, disgusted)

Are you insane? I will not be wearing that. Just stay there and work in peace.

ATIF

(disappointed)

Yes sis.

ATIF seems sad for just a second, until he looks in his boxes again and starts his collage.

Cut to: DUAL SCREEN MONTAGE

In this montage we see the kids from the POV of their respective projects. In no particular order we see them both hammering, gluing, screwing etc. At one point we close-up on a sweating, focused MAHDIYAH, and then the camera turns to MAHDIYAH's POV and we see her hands connecting some wires to a kitchen timer. After that we see ATIF on the other side of the screen in close-up sweating and focused, tongue out of his mouth. The camera turns to ATIF's POV and he is carefully cutting the shape of his hand out of some cardboard with a box cutter. They both exhale relieved.

For the final scene of the montage, MAHDIYAH can be seen with protective goggles on her head, sparks are flying off her project as she welds something on it, she stops and takes off her goggles. ATIF is suddenly wearing a beret, has a fake soul-patch glued above his chin, is holding a pallet of paint and paintbrush with which he makes a final stroke on his unseen project. They both step away from their projects. This happens simultaneously on both sides of the screen.

ATIF & MAHDIYAH

Done.

Camera focuses on the kitchen table, which is clean apart from a tiny silver box with a kitchen timer attached to it with red and blue wires going from the timer into the box.

MAHDIYAH

(To herself)

I did pretty well if I might say so myself. My country will be proud of me.

ATIF

(To MAHDIYAH)

That's a good looking bomb sis, cute too. Now. If you would not mind shifting your attention to this side of the room.

Camera shifts to the living room, where everything is also clean apart from something big underneath a blanket.

ATIF

(In over the top American English)

Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you, weighing in

at 220 pounds, in the red corner...

ATIF removes the blanket. His collage is just a smorgasbord of everything U.S.A. It is a life-size cardboard cutout of the Incredible Hulk, wearing a mask of President Reagan with a ten gallon hat. The cutout has "tattoos" all over his body from different kinds of candy wrappers and junk food, pictures of classic American cars, Playboy bunnies, faces of all kinds of 80s celebrities and cartoon characters, and, as pièce de résistance, a big rebel flag on his stomach with the words FREEDOM underneath. In his one hand are several types of guns, in his other an American football AND a baseball bat. On his feet are 1980's NIKES and there's a skateboard next to him.

MAHDIYAH

(wide-eyed)

Wow! You got all that from Amazon, huh?

ATIF

Sure did. Now let's take these boxes to the trash.

They take all the boxes, which now have scraps and trash in them, out. When they are done ATIF notices something.

ATIF

Maydiyah?

MAHDIYAH

Yes?

ATIF

I think you have some of my paint on your sweater. Maybe you should change it.

MAYDIYAH looks at a big black splotch on her sweater. She sighs.

MAHDIYAH

Thanks a lot...

A woman can be heard screaming in the background.

MAHDIYAH (CONT'D)

What was that?

They both walk towards the window and see Ben has knocked over Hannah.

ATIF

I think that's her, the lady. I need to get the blanket over my surprise again, can you help me?

They try to put the blanket on top of the Hulk again, but it's too high for them to reach. They keep throwing the blanket and it keeps slipping off.

MAHDIYAH

How did you do this last time?

ATIF

I used a stool, but I put it back in the kitchen again.

MAHDIYAH looks nervously at the table with the bomb on it.

MAHDIYAH

Why don't you go stall them? I'll get the stool and cover it up, and I'll put on some new clothes.

ATIF

Will do, thanks sis.

MAHDIYAH

No problem.

ATIF runs towards the hallway door, opens and enters it. We can vaguely hear BEN and HANNAH talking in the hallway, and JUDI yelling. MAHDIYAH looks at the bomb, at the Hulk, at her sweater and at the U.S.A. flag sweater she threw in the corner. She sighs.

CUT TO:

With Hannah Again.

Black screen. Camera is from the POV of HANNAH. The screen "blinks" a couple of time, we then see the faces of BEN, JUDI and ATIF looking directly in camera.

ATIF

(In English)

Oh my god, I'm so sorry. Are you alright?

Camera is now in the hallway looking at the scene. HANNAH gets up. Ben helps her up.

JUDI

I'll get you some ice.

JUDI runs into her practice. HANNAH rubs her head until JUDI returns.

JUDI

Put this on your head, it'll help. Try to get up

quick however, I'm going out in about an hour. I have backstage passes to a concert tonight.

JUDI winks at BEN. BEN looks disgusted.

HANNAH

Well, we wouldn't want you to miss that now do we?
But thank you very much, it doesn't hurt a lot.

(to ATIF)

You must be Atif then? You Abrams boys sure know how to make a lasting impression.

BEN and ATIF both laugh nervously.

ATIF

I'm so sorry ma'am, I'm so lame.

HANNAH

Don't worry yourself none, I'm a tough cookie. Now let's get me something to drink though. Let's go.

They all walk through the hallway door to the living room.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM

MAHDIYAH is sitting on the couch, reading something on her iPad. She is now wearing the U.S.A. flag sweater. The Hulk is covered up under the blanket.

HANNAH

Now isn't this adorable? I love your sweater! Hello, you must be Mahdiyah. My name is Barbara.

MAHDIYAH

(Typing on her iPad, Google translate voice speaks English for her.)

Hello, pleasure to meet you.

HANNAH

Thank you, the pleasure is all mine.

(To JUDI and BEN)

She's just adorable!

JUDI and BEN both smile; BEN nervously, JUDI impatiently.

JUDI

Let's hurry this up a bit shall we? Come sit at the table everybody. ATIF, could you make us some coffee or tea or...what would you like Hannah?

HANNAH

Some tea would be nice.

MAHDIYAH makes her way from the couch to the table, trusty iPad in hand.

JUDI

You heard the lady, make us all some tea.

ATIF

Could I wait a second? I've actually made something for *her*.

(He points at HANNAH)

HANNAH

(pleasantly surprised)

Oh really? I think we should let him show whatever he's made first. I bet it has something to do with what's under that blanket.

ATIF walks proudly towards the blanket covered collage.

ATIF

(In over the top American English)

Ladies and gentlemen, I present to you, weighing...

He suddenly stops. He moves his head closer to the blanket and we hear a faint ticking sound. He nervously looks at the now empty dining room table, then to MAHDIYAH, who looks scared and has her finger in front of her mouth, gesturing him to just get on with it.

ATIF (CONT'D)

(without the accent now)

in, well...you get it. Let's just, uhm..., remove this cover...

He closes his eyes and pulls the blanket down dramatically. The bomb gets tossed in the air towards the dining room. Nobody notices this but MAHDIYAH, who puts her iPad on the table and dramatically and in slow-motion, runs backwards away from the table, takes a dive and catches the flying bomb. She gets up, does a tiny victory dance and almost throws the bomb triumphantly on the ground, this shocks her and she quickly hides the bomb in a purse hanging from a chair at the dining table. Meanwhile, JUDI, HANNAH and BEN are mesmerized by the thing ATIF made.

HANNAH

Well...isn't that...something. Well done, Atif. I appreciate it greatly.

ATIF's expression went from worried to looking very proud.

HANNAH (CONT'D)

You kids go play now.

(To JUDI and BEN)

Let's just go over some logistics, this won't take long.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE ABRAMS HOUSE

The family is standing around HANNAH's car.

BEN

Thanks so much, we really appreciate it. We're loving these little bastards more and more each day.

JUDI

And please, take care of yourself, watch out for bikes and doors.

HANNAH laughs.

HANNAH

Thanks. I'll be sure to do that. Well...

(She turns the key and starts the car)

I hope I don't have to see you guys for a long while. Take care of yourselves now. You too, kids.

ATIF and MAHDIYAH

(Both in English without an iPad)

Thank you! Goodbye!

HANNAH drives away. Everybody is standing on the driveway next to JUDI's yellow car.

MAHDIYAH presents JUDI with an American football.

MAHDIYAH

(To JUDI, in English)

Play?

JUDI looks at her watch

JUDI

Sure, I have 5 more minutes until my cab shows up.

PAN OUT to show the entire ABRAMS house, driveway, front yard and all. JUDI and MAHDIYAH throw the ball back and forth.

Ben puts his arm around ATIF and they walk to the front door together.

BEN

Come on, son. Let's make some dinner.

JUDI

Sorry I did not ask you to come to the show with me tonight, Mahdiyah, but I just don't really want you there.

MAHDIYAH

Is okay.

Slowly fade out.

CUT TO:

HANNAH driving her car on the freeway, she alternates between whistling and yelling at other drivers. The camera zooms into the seat next to her, where her purse is located. A faint ticking sound can be heard.

THE END

Critical Commentary

This pilot episode of the situational comedy *Cuts* was not written with the intention of portraying Arab-Americans in a positive light. After some brainstorming the subject of 'taboo comedy in animated sitcoms' sounded to be fine, but it needed an academic niche, and because the sitcom itself already had the portrayal of several Arabs, unfortunately still a definite taboo in American television post-September Eleventh, it seemed an obvious pick. *Cuts* is written as an Arab-friendly comedy, albeit an over-the-top one. The comedy lies, first of, with the adoption of the two Palestinian children by a Jewish couple. This either shows a real lack of respect for Zionist beliefs, as well as for Palestinian politics. The children, those who are not supposed to yet see the difference, are more involved in these politics than their new parents, who are themselves more occupied with coming across as hip and worrying about sex.

The scene with Skypeman is a clear example of the hyper-irony and manic-satire used in American animated sitcoms such as *South Park*, *The Simpsons*, and *Family Guy*. He is a satirical portrayal of American opinions on Arabs. He has a large beard, lives in a cave, and he is an American hating terrorist. Or so it seems, until he reveals his soft-side when he talks about his lackey, his goofy side when he is eating in front of the camera, and his penchant for American biker girls is, to say the least, odd. The portrayal of the Arab characters in this pilot episode of the sitcom *Cuts*, Atif, Maydiyah, and the unnamed Skypeman, is never black and white. Atif may seem to be the good all-American teenage boy, but he would never tell anyone about what his sister and her extremist leader are doing. Mahdiyah, on the other hand, seems to be a born and raised hater of all that is Jewish and American, but actually falls quickly in love with several typical American things, such as catching an American Football in this particular episode. Lastly, Skypeman, the extremist terrorist, has some soft spots as well; for his lackey whom he appreciates so very much, and American biker girls. This piece of creating writing observes the tradition of portraying Arabs and

Arab-Americans in popular media by first showing their hyper-ironic selves, but the characters have surprising human characteristics which seem to be in complete juxtaposition of what would be common practice on American television, and that depart from tradition is what makes *Cuts* unlike what can be seen on television now.

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