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 heteronormative, 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.