Negative Stereotypes: Islamophobia and its harm to all of us

Our Ground Rules

Today we are looking at how stereotypes can cause damage to all of us

We will be exploring this through the example of Islamophobia, anti-Muslim hate.

By the end of the lesson, you will:

- ✓ Know why stereotypes are damaging and how they operate
- ✓ Explore how it might feel to be stereotyped
- ✓ Know what Islamophobia is and learn how the media perpetuates Islamophobic stereotypes
- ✓ Understand more about the science behind the racism and prejudicial thinking that leads to stereotypes
- ✓ Learn about challenging stereotypes – including Muslim narratives of resistance

Class activity: living in stereotype

Read the following scenarios:

Sara comes from a religiously orthodox family. Because of this, her class teacher presumes her parents do not want her to achieve as much in school and she has low aspirations for herself as a girl. Her teacher enters her into the lower set without assessing her ability, and Sara therefore achieves grades that do not reflect her capabilities. Despite her family sacrificing and saving up for her to go to a prestigious university, she has to take additional classes and defer a year.

Alfie is considered untrustworthy because the area he lives in is known for high rates of theft. His friends are always hesitant to do anything social with him because they do not want to leave their belongings around him. Alfie spends lots of his time alone and starts to feel sad and lonely.

Maria likes handbags, jewellery and make-up. Her close friends have always had the feeling that this means Maria is superficial, and consequently they don't share their feelings or problems with her. Maria is highly empathetic and has great problem-solving skills. Because her friends don't think to explore this side of her personality, they miss out on meaningful advice and opportunities to get closer to their friend.

Action: In groups, discuss and explore ways Sara, Alfie and Maria might be harmed due to preconceived and false ideas about them, and ways those around them might be missing out too.

Stereotype

A stereotype is an idea about a particular group of people that is often oversimplified, untrue or unfair.

Stereotypes can cause damage to individuals in this group; as they are wrongly mischaracterised and sometimes hindered or limited as a result – just like Sara, Alfie and Maria were.

It can also cause harm to wider society, in how it limits our thinking and impacts our interactions with each other by creating false divisions and misunderstandings.
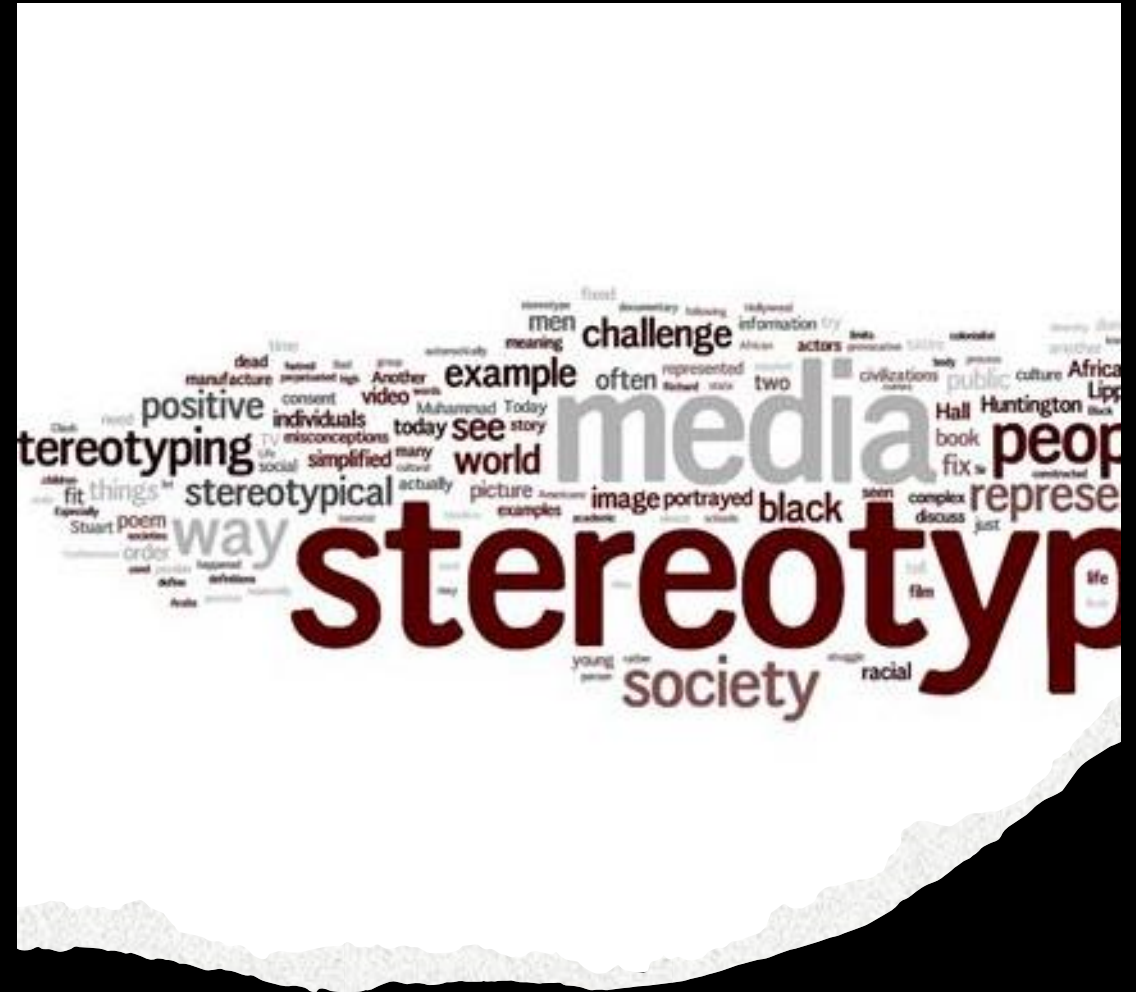
Islamophobic stereotypes

Islamophobia is rooted in racism and is a type of racism that targets expressions of Muslimness or perceived Muslimness.

(APPG definition of Islamophobia)

It is based on false and damaging ideas relating to people who are Muslim.

Unpacking Islamophobic stereotypes

Islamophobic stereotypes in the UK include ideas such as Muslims being strange, 'foreign', dangerous, and wanting to harm or deviate the British population at large.

This is despite the fact that:

- Muslims make up 6.5% of the British population and make meaningful contributions to British life in all areas ; over 20% of doctors in the NHS that have a faith are Muslim

- Despite being minoritized in the UK, 24.7% of the world's population are Muslim– approximately 1.9 billion people who come from all corners of the globe. It is a diverse and rich religion with many commonalities with other faiths; including acknowledging the sanctity of life, promoting family values, encouraging social-consciousness and more.

Young Muslims who make up nearly half of the British Muslim population face significant challenges that adversely affect their mental well-being.

Since October 7, 2023, 1 in 3 British Muslims have expressed unease or discomfort about their safety.

60%

60% believe that anti-Muslim hate in British society has increased over the past year.

Unpacking Islamophobic stereotypes

Hidden Survivors Report -BCBN, (2019) ; Tell MAMA, (2024)

Islamophobic Stereotypes in the media

Stereotypes are often created, and reinforced by media – including news, entertainment and social media.

Islamophobic stereotypes regularly feature in printed media. Stereotypes of Muslims also underpin many TV shows and movies, and Islamophobic sentiment is also rampant on social media, pushed by a small minority of its users.
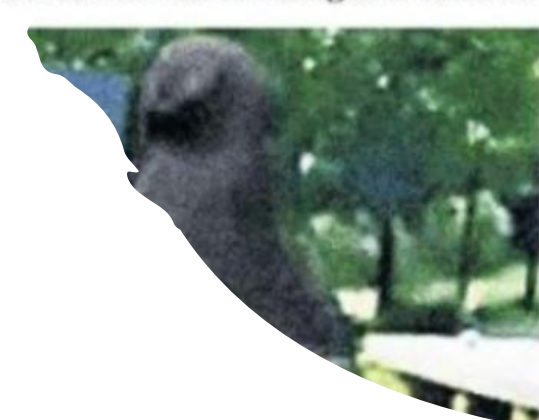
Often these negative news stories about minorities like Muslims are entirely false, or exaggerated to create further fear and panic…

And often this is because as a society, we do not want to address certain issues and real problems that make us feel uncomfortable, so we deflect these onto a scary, imagined 'other'.

When our school systems are tested, when our food processes seem more and more alien and removed, and when our welfare systems seem challenged we might want to look for simpler causes for these complex issues.
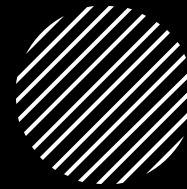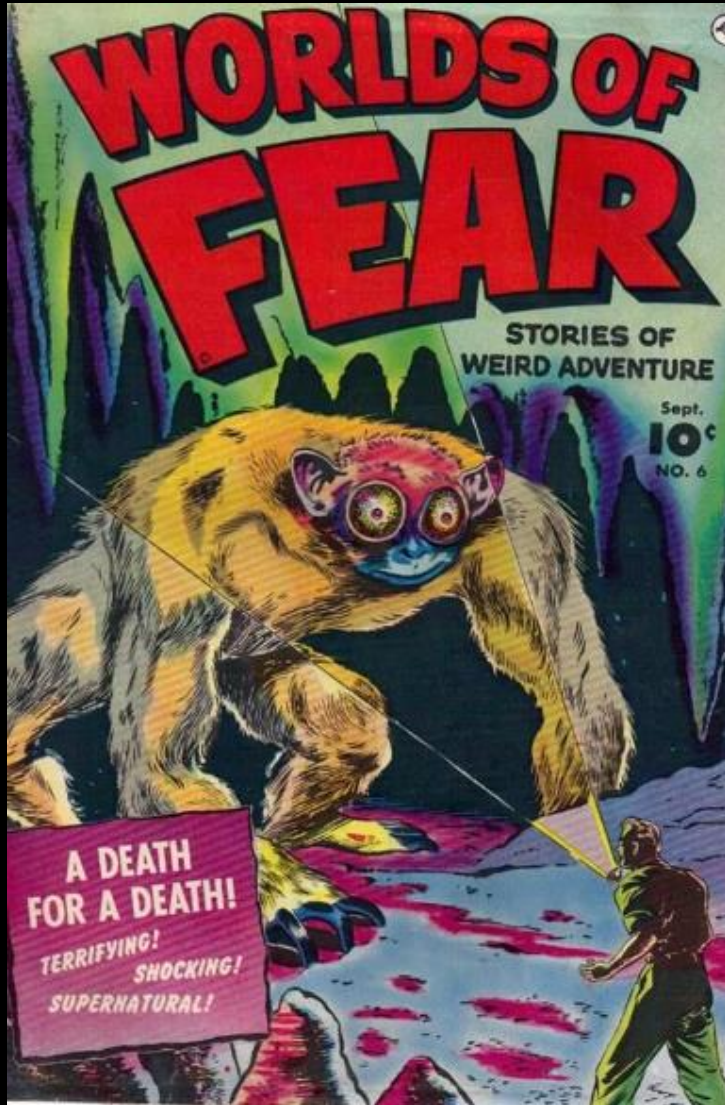
Islamophobic stereotypes, and other stereotypes of minority groups, are so prevalent because sometimes we can fear things that are different. Our brains are designed to be cautious of 'threat'.

These false media narratives stoke that fear by creating imagined threat or exaggerating 'otherness'. These stories impact us as emotional beings, more so than facts and figures which prove they are not true.

This is how division and hostility is created.

In reality, as humans, we have more that unites us than that which puts us apart from each other. It just takes effort, understanding and emotional intelligence to realise this.

The Privilege of the Individual

Stereotypes strip people of their individuality and often their humanity.

One of the impacts of being in a minority group is loosing your right to individuality. For example, if a crime is committed by someone of a minority-background, the media may attribute the traits related to that crime to an entire group of people, and they may be held accountable for something unrelated to them.

This does not happen to majority groups and culture who are, rightfully, afforded the right to being seen and treated as individual.

This also means we can reduce, and sometimes entirely erase, the humanity of those in minority groups – not just Muslims.

FACES OF THE ENEMY

REFLECTIONS OF THE HOSTILE IMAGINATION

The Psychology of Enmity
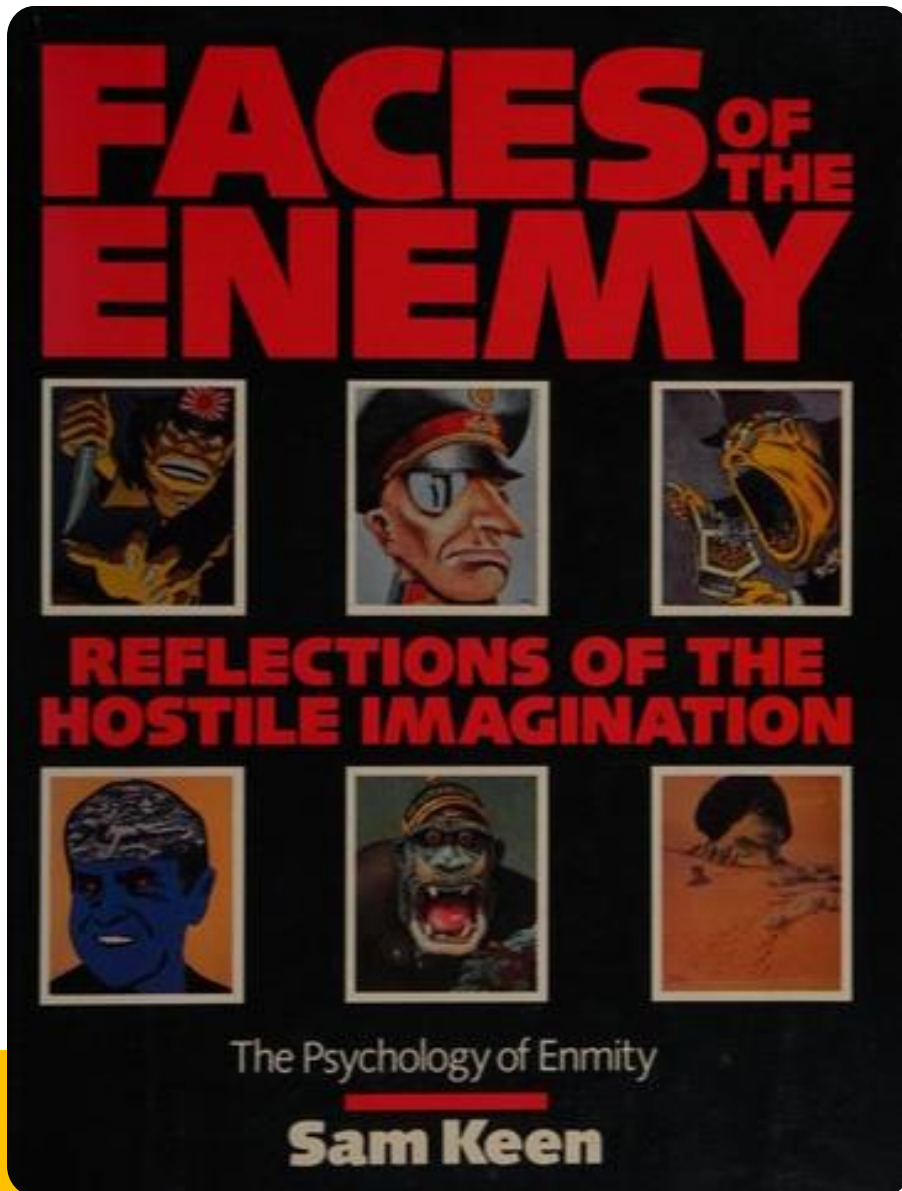
Sam Keen

HOW TO CREATE AN ENEMY | A POEM BY SAM KEEN

To Create An Enemy (Excerpts)

Start with an empty canvas

Sketch in broad outline the forms of men, women, and children.

Dip into the well of your own disowned darkness with a wide brush and stain the strangers with the sinister hue of the shadow.

Trace onto the face of the enemy the greed, hatred, carelessness you dare not claim as your own.

Obscure the sweet individuality of each face.

Erase all hints of the myriad loves, hopes, fears that play through the kaleidoscope of every finite heart.

Twist the smile until it forms the downward arc of cruelty.

Exaggerate each feature until man is metamorphasized into beast, vermin, insect.

Fill in the background with malignant figures from ancient nightmares – devils demons, myrmidons of evil.

When your icon of the enemy is complete you will be able to kill without guilt, slaughter without shame.

The thing you destroy will have become merely an enemy of God, an impediment to the sacred dialectic of history.

How to counter stereotypes

We can resist falling into thinking in stereotypes by constantly challenging our thinking, verifying our news sources, and creating greater opportunities for learning, empathy and emotional intelligence. We can get to know our neighbours, friends and acquaintances from different backgrounds better. The more we learn and understand, the more we grow, develop and benefit ourselves and others.

How Muslims are challenging Islamophobic stereotypes

Young Muslims are countering Islamophobic stereotypes by creating their own narrative – making films, writing books, crafting poetry, creating art and building media platforms that tell their own story in their own words. These stories defy the reductive stereotypes that work to pigeonhole them

One such voice belongs to cartoonist Huda Fahmy
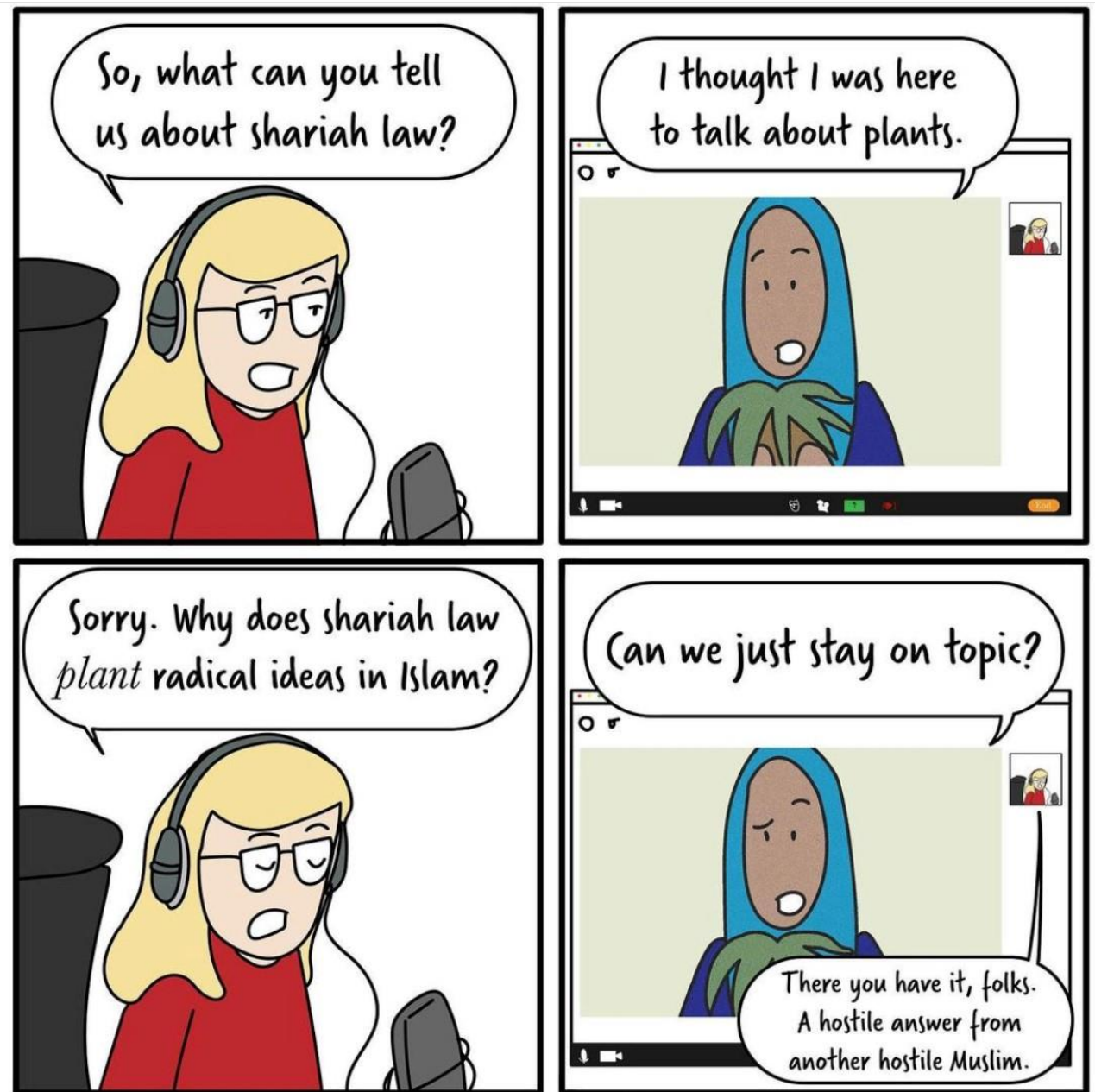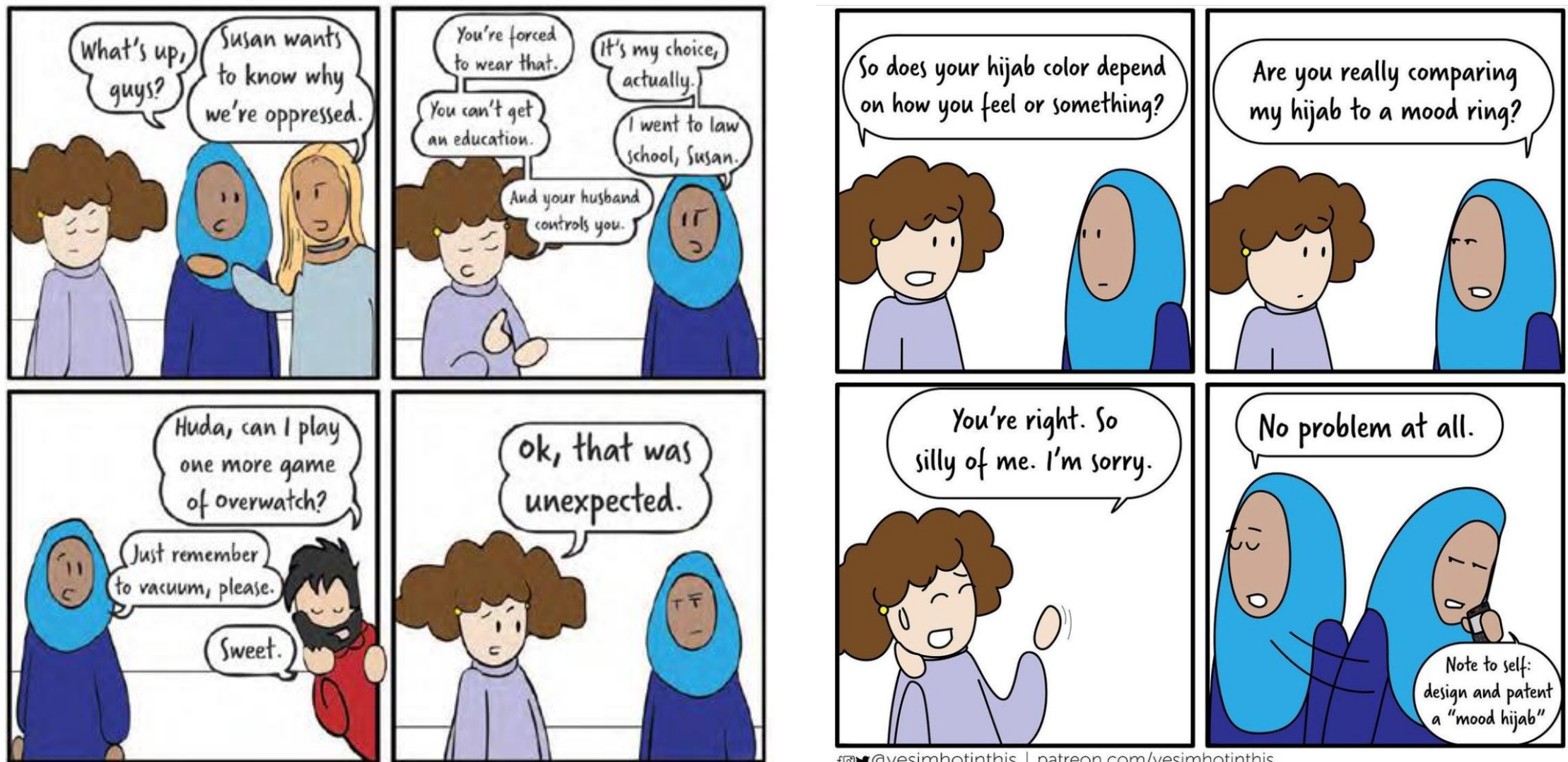
She defies stereotypes through her work – she highlight, challenges and subverts these stereotypes with her work through humour.

Task: Like Huda, create a cartoon that works to do the same with a stereotype that tries to limit you

Things to think about:

- What is it about this stereotype that is so silly?

- How has it tried to limit you?

- Where and how does it reoccur in your life?

- Can you reclaim or subvert it ? Reframe this trait in a positive light? Does the underlying assumption reveal other peoples limitations – not yours?

- Can you debunk it? How is this stereotype so ludicrous? What does it say about the people that hold you to it?

- Is it ridiculous? How?

Extension

Try to think of three ways you can actively challenge stereotypes around you – Islamophobic or not:

Writing to a media outlet in instances in which they might promote unfair representation and stereotypes

Speak to a friend or family member about what you've learned about Muslims today

Be more conscious of your words and actions on social media