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BOOK REVIEW

Fundamentally: A Novel

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Fundamentally: A Novel

Nussaibah Younis

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Nussaibah Younis's debut novel *Fundamentally* arrives at a moment when the figure of the "ISIS bride" has become one of the most contested border subjects of the twenty-first century. Younis's decade advising the Iraqi government on deradicalization gives her fiction rare practitioner's insight. The result is a work that entertains and interrogates, a sharp-edged comedy set against the humanitarian architecture of post-conflict Iraq, where borders operate not merely as lines on a map but as instruments of inclusion, exclusion, identity, and sovereign power.

The novel follows Dr. Nadia, a British-Pakistani academic who flees heartbreak in London to lead a UN deradicalization program for foreign women detained in an Iraqi camp in Ninewah. There she meets Sara, a young British-Pakistani woman from East London who joined ISIS following her best friend and finds herself stateless, maternally responsible, and morally suspended in a legal grey zone that the international community has been reluctant to resolve. The novel's driving question is, how do we rehabilitate those who have crossed the most morally charged borders of our time? The question is posed with wit and compassion rather than didacticism.

The novel's contribution is its literary mapping of what scholars have termed "aterritorial" or "functional" bordering (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 3–12). The camp in Ninewah which is modeled with deliberate fictional license on al-Hol and al-Roj in Syria, is not presented as a liminal space awaiting resolution. It is written as a permanent technology of containment. Its barbed-wire perimeter, administered by overlapping and mutually unrecognized paramilitary authorities, presents the mobile, relational quality of contemporary borders. Borders here are not crossed once; they are continuously re-enacted through security clearance rituals, identity documents, biometric surveillance, and the bureaucratic circuits of UN interagency politics. When Nadia must hand-select the correct permission papers for different checkpoint officers who refuse to recognize each other's authority, Younis dramatizes the heterogeneous, scattered nature of the post-Westphalian border, a border that is omnipresent yet nowhere fixed (Balibar 2004, 78–83).

The novel engages with equal sophistication the internal, identity-making dimensions of bordering. Younis is particularly adept at tracing what scholars have called "everyday bordering" which is the micro-practices through which national belonging and exclusion are negotiated in quotidian life (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2019, 1–20). Nadia's trajectory from devout Muslim teenager in Leicester, through secular academic in London, to UN officer in Baghdad is one of repeated border crossings that are cultural and psychic as much as they are geographic. Her relationship with her mother, a born-again Muslim who disowns her daughter for apostasy and subsequently attempts reconciliation, maps the internal frontier between religious observance and secular identity that millions of diaspora subjects negotiate daily. Sara's story is an iteration of the same story, a teenager whose parents' rigidity and her own social marginalization make the border-crossing offered by ISIS recruiters seem like a form of freedom.

This is the context of the novel. *Fundamentally* offers a novelistic interrogation of the racialized security state's reduction of Muslim women to either victim or

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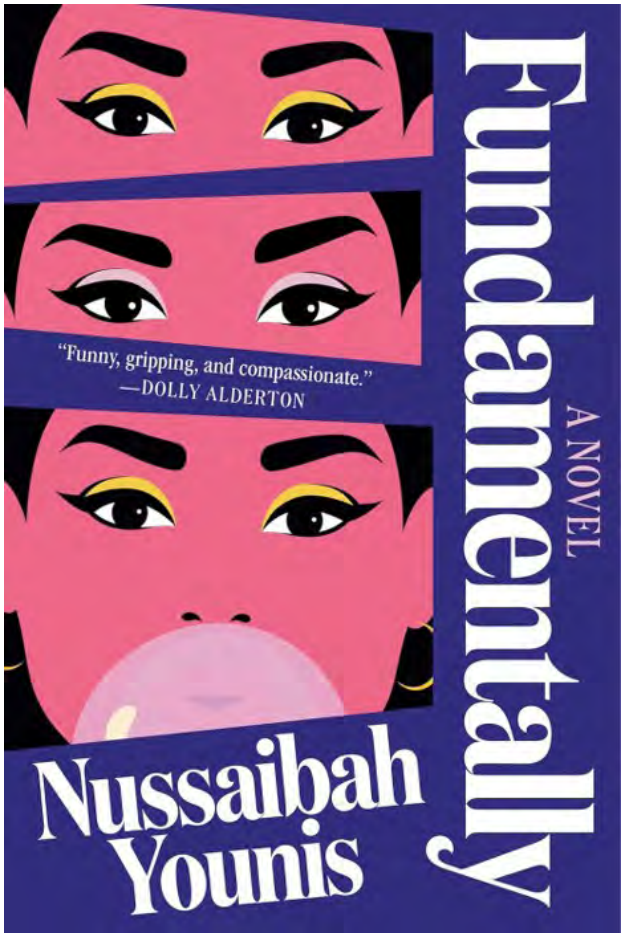

threat (Razack 2008, 4–8). Sara is neither of these two. She is a sharp-tongued, comic-book-reading young woman whose route into ISIS was mediated by friendship, family failure, and adolescent idealism and not by theological conviction. Younis refuses the binary of the fanatical terrorist and the passive bride. She focuses on Sara's humour, her mathematical aptitude, her devotion to Storm and Rogue from X-Men, which gives the novel a personalized specificity that policy discourse typically ignores. This is the politics of life: a redistribution of moral attention toward those whose humanity has been administratively suspended (Fassin 2012, xi–xiv).

The UN Green Zone in Baghdad functions in the novel as a border space of its own, a bordered enclave that protects and isolates its inhabitants from the population they claim to serve (Jones 2016, 1–15). Younis is scathing in her portrayal of the Zone's illogical logic. Its Hawaiian tiki bar and Egyptian-cotton beds exist in uneasy proximity to the destitution outside, while the internal hierarchy of nationalities, contracts, and professional specializations reproduces the global inequalities that humanitarian intervention claims to address. The figure of Tom, Nadia's British security officer love interest who quotes Lawrence of Arabia and invokes Jordan Peterson, embodies a particular form of post-imperial masculine authority that the novel treats with comic affection but political clarity, a subject compensating for the dissolution of imperial certainties with individual bravado and muscular physicality (Brown 2010, 24–45).

Towards the novel's end, a clandestine smuggling operation across the Iraqi-Turkish border in the Zagros Mountains, brings its border themes into their literal expression. Nadia, dressed in a trouser suit and ballet flats, navigates the cracked corpse of a river that marks the frontier between two states, with Sara and her infant daughter dependent on her judgement. The image captures something essential about the lived experience of borders in globalized space: their different weight depending on the passport one carries, and the asymmetry between those who enforce them and those who are subject to them. Younis here deploys the border as an epistemological vantage point from which global hierarchies of belonging become visible (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, 16–21).

One of the novel's most important ideas is of deradicalization as a border-making practice. The rehabilitation program Nadia is tasked with designing is premised on the possibility of restoring women to a normative social identity of citizen, mother, daughter, through sequential stages of interview, assessment, and repatriation. Yet the novel shows repeatedly how this process replicates the very logic it claims to undo; it draws a border between the radically other and the rehabilitatable subject, determining who merits reintegration into the political community. The camp women who are "not dangerous" must perform a form of therapeutic border crossing to demonstrate their fitness for citizenship, a process that reflects as much the anxieties of receiving states as it does the actual security risk posed by individual women (Stern and Berger 2015, 188–204).

If the novel has a limitation, it is that its comedy occasionally prevents it from dwelling in the ethical complexity it has so carefully assembled. The resolution of Sara reuniting with her parents in Istanbul, offered employment and a path toward stability, is hopeful in ways that the broader context might not fully support. Younis acknowledges in her Author's Note that she has sacrificed certain facts in service of theme, most notably by transposing the Syrian camp context to Iraq. But this artistic license is justified. What the novel loses in documentary detailing it gains in symbolic coherence, and the Author's Note itself is a rare moment of authorial transparency that academic readers will appreciate.

Fundamentally: A Novel merits serious attention from scholars and practitioners of borders, citizenship, and identity. It demonstrates what creative writing can do that policy reports cannot: make borders felt from the inside. Funny, moving, and politically urgent, it belongs on border studies reading lists.

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