

Azeezat Johnson (AJ) That's how like, we're taught philosophy. That's how we're taught society's function. It's that like, okay, well, it needs to work for the vast majority. And if you are in the minority, shame, but at least but at least this works for the vast majority without actually thinking about like, does it work for the vast majority? And who is this majority that is actually being like, called upon through this right because it's often white people.

Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan (SMK) Salaams, Peace, and blessings, you're listening to Breaking Binaries Season Two, with me, your host, Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan. Known online as @thebrownhijabi. As a society, we're obsessed with explaining our world through the use of straightforward opposing categories. So good or bad, moderate or radical, pretty or ugly, victim or villain The list goes on. All these sets of binaries, though, tend to be quite superficial, and they hide the real complexities, the politics and the nuances of how we've been encouraged to think, following from the conversations of season one, every episode this series, I'll be sitting down with a different friend to break down, break apart and interrogate a different binary and see how doing so helps us think more critically about ourselves and our world, and therefore, how we transform it.

In this episode, I was joined by my friend Dr Azeezat Johnson, to break down the binary of majority and minority. Azeezat is a research fellow in human geography at Queen Mary University of London. Her current project unpacks the racial history that informs black Muslim women's lives in London. She asks how these women create and embody practices of home whilst navigating the imperial nostalgia and racism that has been exposed through Brexit. She's also the co-editor of *The Fire Now: Anti-Racist Scholarship in Times of Explicit Racial Violence*, which is an incredibly important anthology and archive I recommend. Azeezat is also someone who I've generally learned a great deal from. She's expanded my analysis, particularly when it comes to white supremacy. And I feel honored to have had the chance to bounce thoughts and ideas with her thinking about how we can exist more fully and more complexity with sincerity was navigating all the burdens and lenses upon us.

SMK Asalaamu alaykum Azeezat, I'm honoured that you're here on Breaking Binaries. How are you doing?

AJ Yeah, I'm doing all right, looking forward to like recording this. And yeah, yeah, let's do it.

SMK So yeah, so we spoke about doing this podcast for a long time. And I think between the time that we spoke about it, and now it actually feels more pertinent, or at least I've kind of seen it being evoked a lot, and that binary is: majority and minority. So I'm really interested by this. And I think it would be helpful to begin by asking you what you had in mind, specifically, when you wanted to do this binary. And where people might have seen majority of minority evoked in their lives in the day to day lives?

AJ Yeah, I mean, so obviously, with the term BME and BAME, and I've been thinking a lot about what it means that so many of us have come to see ourselves through the logics of "minority". So we see ourselves as being a minority within a wider country, and we see justice as being served to the majority, but not necessarily the minority.

And I guess my question is, like, what does that then do like when the issues that affect that are affecting minorities are seen as things that can be, like, ignored or overlooked? Because after all, "it's only the minority?" What does that then do to the world we're living in? Right? And so I guess

the argument that I, I'm really interested in us thinking about, I really want us to think about like, how white supremacy is embedded in our very framing of like, majority and minority, right?

I really want to think about like, viewing ourselves as a minority is part of a white supremacist fantasy that positions whiteness as the majority- just like in Avengers when, like after part one when these like Thanos snapped his finger and like what 50% of the world is meant to have died? and yet like all of the original Avengers are still kicking about? all of the white people are still like the majority who are like leading this like revolution against Thanos is nonsense. As a white supremacist fantasy. This is the connection.

SMK Wow, Okay, I'm gonna reel us back a bit and ask you so I- Yeah, I definitely have seen people using things like, even these strange terms, like "I'm from a minority background", and I think that's, that feels like an off comment, even if I wasn't to analyze it too closely. It's like, what does it mean to call yourself "of a minority background?" I think it assumes as you're saying a certain context. But I guess the question that I think people would raise is, okay, but why are you taking issue with something that maybe sounds context dependent? So for example, you know, when I've seen a news headline that says, "the white population of Birmingham is going to be a minority soon", it does grate, like it feels wrong. But could it be argued that that's just like a quantity? This is this is about, you know, numbers of people. And once numerically, there is a minority, that's something worth noting, in a country, which has formerly had a white majority.

AJ Yeah, but I mean, *has* it ever had a white majority? I think that's what I actually kind of push back against. Because that's what I'm thinking about in the language of majority and minority. Yeah, like there is no, I mean, you know, we've spoken about it a lot. Everyone spoken about a lot, there is no Britain, there is no Europe, outside of Empire, right. And so like the global majority, the majority that has always made up Britain, have been cut off from the spoils of empire that now modern day Britain is enjoying. So like talking about any one population within these particular aisles, as a majority or minority doesn't actually allow us to position ourselves as part of the wider community and wider like histories that actually do inform, like, how Britain has come to be, you know what I mean?

SMK And I guess that's why it feels loaded as well, then, like, when you read that, it, it automatically feels negative, that white people would be in a minority. And if that's negative, then what implies to me is that like the norm, the thing to be upheld, is whiteness, as I guess the way that we should be imagining Britain.

AJ Yeah. And even just I mean, I remember when I was doing a project on, I don't know, like, curriculum, institutional racism, - plug keywords here - it's just, you know, universities, when they're like, "Oh, we need to do an initiative". And it's like, "you just need to handle the racism. That's all you need to do." But anyway, I remember talking to like academics about it. And what about the absence of like, black scholars in our reading lists, but also just in our universities, in our departments, or whatever? And I remember one of them saying, "Well, I mean, you know, you need to think about the percentage of like, black people in the UK? And is it that -Like, are there that many people of color missing, given the fact that there's only like, certain, you know, 11%, in the UK?" Yeah.

And I think it's always interesting to me that they locate themselves, like, all of a sudden, we are "international", you know, international curriculum, global, whatever, then allows you to, like still fall back on an imagination of Britain, as only made up by those who happen to be within Britain, as opposed to always made up by like, a global context. It was really interesting, like, when do you -

when do they get to like, employ, like, a global whatever? And when did do they then use, like, local measures? Right? Right.

SMK So you, on the one hand, you have like, don't get rid of Rule Britannia as the song to represent the country. But we also are only this island when it comes to talking about statistics and demographics.

AJ Yeah, also, because the issues that we're facing, as people who are living in these islands are not separated from the issues that our people are facing, more like, more generally, globally. And I think we actually do ourselves a disservice when we see ourselves through the logic of like, minority, only through only in this country, as opposed to actually connected to like, all of the many people across the world who are also facing, you know, problems of over-policing problems to do with housing, problems to do with like, like, food, like, justice, right? All of these are common issues that we need to be looking at across our national borders, instead of separating ourselves out.

SMK Yeah, that's really interesting, because I think, when I hear the language of minority and majority, there's also this implication that the reason that people are oppressed or you know, finding it difficult to access, you know, affordable housing or like an education system or welfare is because of the number of people right? so and then I think what you're saying is interesting, because if we suddenly went to a global perspective and say, well actually, you know, if you're a person of color, let's use that term, you are global majority. And suddenly, like what you've just said about these questions of imperialism, state brutality, policing, if that is a global occurrence, then actually it's not because we're just quantitative, the less that oppression exists.

And that feels quite useful, because I think maybe when we're growing up, particularly in school, for example, this idea that because there's less of you, you're inevitably going to face injustice kind of just seems to be indoctrinated to us.

AJ Yes, yeah. No, I yeah, I fully agree. I think that that's also I guess, that's why I've been sitting with like, what actually happens when we get used to, like, telling ourselves that we are the minority that can be forgotten, right? Because like, Oh, well, it's just our experiences that are the outlier from the vast majority. And so therefore, that can be- and also like that can be ignored, right? Like that, if our experiences are just on the side from the others, then everything can be ignored.

But I, but I also think that that's how, like, we're taught philosophy, that's how we're taught society's function. It's that like, okay, well, it needs to work for the vast majority. And if you are in the minority, shame, but we're at least but at least this works for the vast majority, without actually thinking about, like, does it work for the vast majority? And who is this majority that is actually being like, like, called upon through this, right, because it's often white people, as we can see in Avengers, but also, as we can see in this, it's just because I really hated that film. I really, really.

SMK I'm getting that -

AJ Thank you. Yeah, I'm glad. Because I- there are random times in conferences where I will legit, stop and be like, yes, and this is one of the reasons why Avengers was nonsense.

SMK Well, I wish that I could engage you on this properly. But I feel like my memory of the Avengers is not-

AJ - I do feel, I actually think that that might be for my benefit. In this context. Maybe also, it's connected to the, the way I'm framing like, majority/minority, because I remember watching Lemonade, Beyonce's Lemonade - I'm going to get to it eventually - but I remember watching

Beyonce's Lemonade, and being like, blown away at that point in time. Like at what was just representation, which was just like all of a sudden seeing so many images of black women on a screen in a way that I had not seen, or really been able to, like, see or sit with, up until then right? And then going to the cinema to go see? Was it Captain America Civil War at that time? And being like, Oh, this is the trash that you've been feeding yourself on a regular basis. And in this film, you are a minority, like even Black Panther, before Ryan Coogler came in and did his business. Black Panther was very much like, yeah, he was always going to be one particular type of black man. And it was never going to be fed, or I didn't really see that representation for like a wider kind of imagining of like, who black people could be beyond this relationship to like a white majority. You know?

SMK That's really interesting. So I guess, a question that that raises for me is around representation then, and the way that it's been given to us as kind of the solution to oppression? Do you think that is tied then to this majority/minority framing, because what I'm kind of wondering is, like, I'll speak from my own experience. So I'm a kid at school and growing up, I'm told, the reason that I have less access to wellness, resources opportunities, is because of the quantity of people who have a similar background or look like me. So I then begin to believe if I see more people who look like me in places of power that somehow will transfer onto me, and I don't know, I'm wondering if there's a connection there between minority/majority and representation politics?

AJ Yeah, I think there is. But I wouldn't say that the that representation, representational politics are enough. Because like, Obama, you know?

SMK No, no, that's my point, though, is like, do you think because it's a limited framework, it makes us kind of end up with a limited solution, which is like, "oh, there's not enough of me. So if I saw more of me than I would have more resources, wellness."

AJ Yeah, it does become like- and it's not even like an easy solution, because it is just, you know, it's normal to want to see more people who look like you. I don't think that that's, yeah, that's normal. I think what's like, the problem occurs when like, we assume that just by virtue of like one or two more people coming into these positions that like everything changes. Or even that, like the institution itself changes. And I just I, that's what we need to push back against. Right?

SMK Yeah. So I feel that links to this, breaking down that we want to do of this binary, I mean, you, it's very clear already, that the language of majority/minority is hiding things. You've explained quite well, why ethnic minority is not the opposite of majority. And so I guess I wanted to ask, and we have already covered a bit, but like, where does this narrative come from? Then? I mean, we see in the media we hear historically, but is this linked to a history of kind of displaying the world in this way? Could you tell us a bit more about that?

AJ Yeah, I mean, I think it's definitely linked to a history of displaying the world in this way, but also specifically, of displaying, like, of thinking about democracy, and like our modern world in this particular way. Because if we think about, like, you know, a lot of the theorists that these people use to justify to say, like, as the grounding fathers of like, you know, these countries, they're often built upon logics of like, slavery and colonialism. And we assume that by virtue of like, well, we can ignore this bit, because that's not, that's just a little bit ugly. And then we can focus on all of the rest, right? And I think that's kind of related to the way I see majority/minority being like used.

I don't know. So I think about a lot about like Immanuel Kant, and John Rawls and all of these people and what it means that their theories were built on the kind of, "okay, as much good to as many people as possible" right? And also, at the same time, I mean, I know this specifically with Kant, like, they did not see black people as human or did not see see black people as deserving the same levels

of humanity as white people. So then what does that mean for these theories that they develop, and they developed where they were trying to, like, support the most number of people or whatever, when a number of us who are now people have not historically been seen throughout, like as people, right?

SMK So it's not only that, whiteness constructed itself as majority, but actually, as majority and minority there is nothing outside of whiteness, actually. And I think that's quite a, that changes, then my understanding of this whole thing, because it's kind of like, this isn't just about upholding like, this imagined whiteness as like the dominant force, but maybe also as the only relevant, valuable human force. So for me, that also feels linked to another thing that I hear people saying, when we talk about colonialism, or that Enlightenment kind of moment is, and sometimes I said flippantly, but I think it is really interesting to analyze this when people say, "Oh, I can't believe that such a small island managed to, you know, colonize the world." And it kind of seems to imply that the civilizational superiority of Britain must be true, like that must be superior, because numerically how did a small nation take over, you know, quote, unquote, the world? Does that feel? I mean, how does that play into this narrative that was constructed?

AJ Yeah, like, I'm not sure whether it evokes the same. I think, like, I see how like, with this, oh, this is not even necessarily this is a small country, but also like, specifically, you know, when you mentioned earlier how oh, people tend to say, "there are so few resources and you know, white working class kids, what about them? No one ever thinks about them. No one ever thinks about class! y'all are only talking about race, you're not talking about class".

When actually, *you're* not talking about class, like you can't, there are no conversations about class that can begin or stay primarily within the West and the fact that you are framing - like you literally all you are developing reading groups after reading groups, honouring a guy who honestly could not conceive of slavery at the time and he was theorizing, Marx, at the time when he was theorizing, like class capital. What, how? What use is that? What use is that for the world he was imagining?

And also, more importantly, what legacies does that have for the type of work and activism that we want to do now? Right? Like that's what I found so dangerous about the kind of "oh white working classes are disappearing, you know, no one cares about them, they're disenfranchised. That's why they voted for Brexit." And it's like, well, like, everywhere working class like people like-

SMK no, no, that just makes me think about, you know, the kind of slogan of, "for the many, not the few", I think that was the Labour campaign slogan, just thinking to what you're saying. It still has this limitation of like a national boundary. And it's so like, the "many" are people exploited for their labor, I suppose. But then also, we as a nation become "the few" who benefit from the majority's labour in a more global context. But yeah, I wonder whether there's a way to even, I mean, it just feels kind of useless then to think about majority minority if we actually want to think about global dynamics, or do you think that is of some use? You know, is it useful to reverse the notion and kind of say, Well, actually, the global majority, you know, is not who you say is, or does that just become a kind of useless exercise?

AJ Oh, I'm not sure. I think, I think no matter what we're looking at, doesn't really matter what binary what whatever, it's always going to be context dependent. Like, there's always going to be times when it can be useful in like rallying together people. And other times where maybe like, there's better language for us to like, discover, and also even now, as I'm saying it's useful, it might become less useful in the future. And that's okay, as well. Because Yeah, on the one hand, I think that there's something really important about, like, locating ourselves, within like a wider

community, and really thinking about that as like, a global struggle like a Yeah, like global struggles, that connect us all. But at the same time, we still need to, like hold on to the specifics of our own positioning, and the the privileges and violences that inform that positioning. And my worry sometimes is, through the language of like, "Okay, well, we're the global majority", we can sometimes like, erase the differences that actually are very profound.

Because even lately, I've been thinking a lot about how like the language of minority majority for BME or BAME or whatever, anyone who's positioned as a minority within that, then also actually ends up, can end up sometimes, reifying a really problematic relationship with black and brown people who are outside of like, the West, or Britain, because we feel like we're a minority here, we also feel like we can speak to experiences elsewhere that are not ours to speak to.

SMK So it almost flattens the power dynamics then.

AJ Yeah, yeah. Because there are all sorts of power dynamics that are at play, both here. And in countries elsewhere. You know, like, we need to actually, I think it's really about like, unpacking the similarities and differences across our experiences that I'm really excited by.

SMK That's helpful because I think when you were speaking, I was also thinking that say within even broadly, like anti-imperialist movements, or just whatever you might call like, a global working class movement. I wonder if we reproduce that logic of like, well, "majority rules". And then that does, as you say, just continues to leave behind quote, unquote, this "minority" who will always just be somehow erased, somehow not, it's a kind of misnomer, because it sounds like if you're the minority, it just sounds like it's something that means like, it sounds like a- almost like a, reducing the value of the importance of your demands but I think it's, but it's almost more than that as well, in the sense that it's like, your demands don't matter at all. Because like, we know, we're never really going to get to the minority because we don't have time, it's like the minority is there to justify the majority almost.

AJ And yeah, I think that's also like a really helpful way of framing it because it looks at like our movements right now. So like, what happens within like Muslim movements when like Muslim women are treated with the "minority", right, within mosques? Within Muslim like spaces of community. Because people often say, "Okay, well, who actually needs to go pray in the mosque", but that's not what mosques are, right? mosques are spaces of community. They're like community hubs. And if you do not have a community hub, available to the woman in your community, you can't- we're not speaking the same language.

And so I think that's kind of like all of those different ways that like minority/majority comes into play. And people are like, "Oh, well, you know, we have that one women's officer and that's enough". Or "we have that one person who you know, kind of cares about queer issues and that's enough", without actually having to like commit to a program that is actually going to prevent oppression for everyone, and not just accept it for anyone, right? Like no one deserves this is really what we're getting at.

SMK See, I think that's- that I completely feel that. And I think that the kinds of retorts or opposition or whatever you want to call it, that I have experienced to that kind of logic is, you know, a) it's like too utopian, like "not every, you know, how can everybody free that's just absurd, someone has to be unfree!" which in of itself, I think speaks volumes. But I suppose to me, what you've just said proves that there's a really important difference between like universalizing, and it being like, justice for everybody is going to look the exact same, as opposed to what you were saying before about, like these very intricate power dynamics, and like the just the nuances in between our experiences.

And I think then that for me, it also proves the majority/minority, on top of everything else, we've said, it simplifies the solution. It's like there is no it's not just like trying to get the the weighing scale equal. There's so much more to it. So it's about complexity, I guess, as ever. Yeah.

AJ Yeah, it is. It's also about like, it's about complexity. But it's also about like, honoring the differences amongst us, and really not like shying away from that. But actually leaning into that and really thinking about how that's there's possibility for so much more, if we actually try to, like, honor the differences between us. Because that's what like, you know, banding banding together, as a majority are banding together as a minority tries to flatten out, it tries to flatten out the differences between us, right? And we're actually like, rejecting all of that, and saying, like, No, I want us to be together in community, because like, I care about you, and you care about me and both of us are trying to like get somewhere else better,

SMK hmm. I think also like, this reminds me of bell hooks' concept of "centering the margins", that I think when I first came across this idea that if you actually center, you know, the most marginalized or most multiply oppressed person in your locale, your community, whatever, by virtue of that, every single person will benefit because you're prioritizing, occupying yourself with kind of oppression from the view of like the root of it. I think that's kind of how I took it.

And I found that really useful. And I actually felt when I read that, that that was a parallel to in the Quran, the idea of like, zakaat are the people who you're trying to redistribute wealth to, it's always about, like prioritizing the needs of the most marginalized in that society at that time. And it's not saying, "Well, you know, the majority should kind of keep the wealth and like, you know, if you don't have a job, or if you are widow, then you're a minority. So it's just a shame." And I think there's something there's a radical possibility in that.

AJ Yeah I agree. And also, like, it's not just about people that you happen to, like, feel in community with, it's not just about people that you happen to feel connected to. It's everyone, right? Like, no one deserves to die under brutal circumstances, whether or not they agree- whether or not they're part of your community or not- whether or not they like, are compatible with your particular principles or not. Because that's also where I've seen a lot of like, queerphobic things that have happened within the Muslim community as like, well, "this isn't it's not part of our Deen and so therefore, like let's hands off", instead of it being like, actually, we personally believe that no one should suffer under this. I actually think that it that's what I want to organize towards, I want to make sure that everyone actually can like, just be just live their lives without fear of abuse or persecution.

SMK Right. I think when we sense a Safety and Justice, that to me feels useful, because it's like you don't, if you have a problem with somebody being safe or having access to justice, then really, you have a problem with humanity itself. Like that's, that's, that to me, it seems a fairly simple principle. Yeah, did you I guess this is about like the way that that those same narratives are employed, to then just continue to always exclude or harm or violate somebody's rights.

AJ Because like, I think it's, I guess for me what's most important is that we actually want to be moving towards a world where like everyone can be Free, and that there is justice within that . And the only way in which everyone can be free is if we actually like, honor everyone's needs. I don't know, it's always a really weird one when you're then stuck in these conversations where people are like, "okay, I recognize how that oppression affects me specifically. But I'm fully incapable of holding how I can then like, continue that for other people. When I position them as, "well, they're just a minority," or, "oh, that minority is now getting a little too loud, they were expecting us to do all

these things for them." Instead of being like, no, everyone has a right to that right, like everyone has a right!

SMK So that kind of proves that we also might- whilst like all people of colour, BAME people, BME, whatever, are positioned as a minority within the UK, there's all these other contexts in which you may be a majority, or at least you may be benefiting from the function of that narrative of being a majority. And yeah, and I think, you know, speaking as a non-Black Muslim, that's clearly something that's employed within the UK context. And I think it's, yeah, it's very easy to replicate in many other ways as well.

And I think that Islamically like I was thinking about this in the sense of resistance, and like, how we're kind of encouraged that a minority of people who truly, you know, rigorously committedly, are fighting for justice, they will always be, you know, supported by Allah, they will be, you know, have kind of the- being on the side of truth, I suppose, always being more important than being on the side of kind of like, keeping everybody happy, like weighing the balance up. And I feel like I don't see that reflected at all today, where it seems like much more important to do what the whole community is happy with. and-

AJ yeah, and I think I guess this also connects back to the conversation we had like, Oh, sign-posting! British Library" Yeah, look at this"

SMK We did a conversation for the British Library, which is a podcast that may be out by the time this is out may not be... I can't really - what is time! But you should listen to that.

AJ But also like in that it was the conversation around erasure, right? Like when we're thinking about intersectionality. And intersectionality is really like a framework where Kimberlie Crenshaw was thinking about like this, like how black women specifically and women of color more generally, are erased from the conceptualization of laws that are meant to tackle race discrimination on the one hand, which only focus on like men of color, and like sex discrimination, on the other hand, well, gender discrimination, on the other hand, which mainly focus on like, white women, right? And so like, there's this, there's nothing that actually cares for women of color, and like black women, black women, specifically.

So I guess it's the same thing when we're thinking about the logic of majority/minority and how like, there's an erasure that happens there to the minority, like to "the minority", and who the minority is, where, like, your experiences, your traumas, or harms, they're not really seen as, as the most important thing for any of us to organize around, right? It can always be, yeah, it can always be parked for the sake of keeping things moving for the sake of like, getting somewhere quicker.

And actually, what we're doing is we're rejecting that, and we're saying like, "there is nowhere else for us to get outside of thinking about the people who are most marginalized within our world". And I'm not saying that that's like, easy because it requires it really does require you to be able to like, be called out, be checked for various things that you might say that are going to inevitably forget people who we're always told to forget because their issues are not as important as everyone else's, right.

But it, it's a shift so that it's not even about like "what issues am I organizing on right now". It's recognizing that whatever I'm doing right now, there's always always space for me to have forgotten other people, for me to have, like, other people that I need to expand this theory to actually, like, care for, you know, and so there's already within that, like more scope to move on. Because you're not worried about like, "well, it's only these people that I want to- and I'm going to deal with these

people first and then eventually they'll get to you." It's like "No, I'm not. I'm not saying that. All I'm saying is that this is where my energy is right now. But I also know that there is more there is so much more to be done. And once I have been pointed to the many others that are like being erased by particular narratives, I am going to work towards doing better for many more people, right?"

SMK Yeah. It kind of reminds me of how we read even like pie charts, for example, where you are encouraged to just ignore whatever's the smaller part of the pie. And I think there's something in that as well that's like, not wanting to deal with complexity, nuance, like, just the fact that the answers will be difficult, like I think, well, not even difficult, but they will require, like actual analysis. And I kind of feel that that's what you know, Kimberlie Crenshaw, framing this thing of intersectionality is also just saying, "it's more complicated than you want it to be. But that's the reality of people's lives."

I was in a part of like a roundtable this weekend, which actually was really amazing. It was like all these Muslim women who are activists in like Chicago, New York, LA, um, one thing that- oh and Minnesota, and it was the organizer from Minnesota, Kafia, she was saying, "it's not a surprise that Muslim women are the people who organized for Muslim women". And I think that was just such a good illustration, I think of what you were just saying, in a sense that it's like, this is what happens when we refuse to see beyond majority/minority, then the quote, unquote, "minority" is left to have to just do the work that will benefit everybody. But you know, that prioritizes their needs- and I think also what you were saying about humility, I mean, also, what you were saying makes me kind of remember how central humility is that like, to build those coalition's that we do dream of building for this "free" "just" world demands us to say, "I did make a mistake" or like, "yeah, I hadn't even thought of that. That's just something I genuinely hadn't ever- because I've never experienced it."

And I think I just feel like we're living in a moment where there's not space for 1) complexity, but 2) for the politics of care, I would say where it is like, yeah, you're able to learn and grow. And I mean, that's what I genuinely really appreciate about our relationship. But I don't want to make the podcast about that. But I just think it's, it reminds me that this conversation reminds me as well how these things are just cliches like, humility, care, like they're not just like, I think they can easily become that, but bringing it to this conversation that you've just raised, reminds me that something is a genuine political, and like, survival based thing.

AJ Yeah, yeah. 100%. Absolutely. Also, because even when we're talking about, like, you know, "it's no surprise that Muslim women only organized for Muslim women", it's no surprise that Black women have been organizing for black women, and for everyone else, but also, even within that, like Black women are still seen as like a minority, right, like, I mean, in terms of like "black women's issues" are seen as minority issues within, like, our understanding of anti-Blackness; issues that affect Muslim women are still seen as minority issues, when we're talking about Islamophobia- which is particularly wild, given what we know about who experiences like Islamophobia on the street, most right?

And so then it's like, well, what actually, what is this? Like, when does this become? When does this become employed? When is this weaponized? And how does this then feed into like another like a wider language that allows you to continue ignoring particular experiences, particular marginalized experiences, because you might be a bit closer to the top right? You might be in more in a position of more privilege. And so it's not even just like acknowledging, "Oh, I didn't even think about that". It's also then organizing, mobilizing off of the knowledge that you haven't thought about that and literally thinking about, "okay, so how am I going to work towards like, my own redundancy, so that

these other issues can actually come to the forefront?" Right? "How do I make sure that someone else who have had those experiences is eventually going to be able to take over this role?"

SMK I think that that also is linked to, you know, if we view the end goal as attaining the power that is currently wielded over us, then I think that the incentive is there to you know, quote, unquote, ignore the minority, because that's not going to help you get to have the power that's currently used to oppress you. So I think this is also then linked to you know, and I'm glad we're already brought it up, but that question of like, what is the wider end goal? because I think it becomes easy to understand why we need different means if we have a different end. And if our end is justice, liberation, freedom for all, you know, abolition of the world as we know it, all these different things then I think that it is much easy to say, "then yeah, we don't need to worry about, oh, the majority's view because, every single person has to come with us."

AJ Yeah yeah – we want every single person to come with us. And I think its important for us – like, every single person who is like committed to abolition, right? Erm, because I am really really trying to be very specific about who I am willing to like, spend my time “convincing”, because it’s not, it’s not the-

SMK – I think some things you just leave in Allah’s hands right? You tie your camel and just – leave it in Allah’s hands –

laughter

You’ve helped expand a lot of the thinking around this language, it’s very clearly, works to obscure all sorts of things and it works to benefit -as you say- not a “majority”, it seems, but instead, a

AJ – the powerful

SMK The powerful! Right! So-

AJ I think it’s important for this conversation of majority/minority to move towards a conversation about power because that’s really what is – what’s informing the decision to locate a particular group as majority or minority. And it’s actually interesting because I remember, Gail Lewis, she was presenting I can’t remember what but we were talking about “political Blackness” and the switch from political blackness to BME, and she was saying, “well you know all of these terms are just terms that policy people come up with at a particular point in time to like – to categorise and also then inevitably oppress the people that it’s going to be policing”, right? So initially it was the language of – or not initially, but before – before it was the language of political blackness because of fights that they had to do to get us to a place where we could even employ the language of political blackness before it was then problematised for a whole number of reasons.

And then there was a crisis. And then they switched again – policy advisors were the ones to make the switch to a language of BME and BAME and all of that – so then that really forces us to think about well, these terms where we’re literally having to see ourselves as the minority, who even comes up with these terms? And if the terms are developed by the state, then that’s a function of power, that’s not actually a function of just wanting to describe different groups, it’s trying to categorise different people into different levels of importance in terms of like – how, how much organising actually needs to happen to like care for people.

And so its possible to look at COVID statistics that disproportionately affect “BAME populations” without actually paying attention to the differences within that, or like paying attention to the brutal brutal inequalities that are informing that statistic. So we’re not talking about how overcrowded

housing, right? We're not talking about overcrowded schools, we're not talking about your everyday material circumstances that actually affect your ability to shield properly from corona, and to also like live your life and you know, just live your life more generally.

Instead, it becomes like "oh well BME people just happen to be disproportionately affected and that's just what it is", right?

SMK yeah, that's so useful. I've seen a couple of conversations around "oh the problem is just, BAME is just – we need a new word, what should the new word be?" and I think that to be is so, symbolic of how this whole conversation has – successfully – distracted us from those power dynamics you're talking about. because nobody is ever using the word racism, we're always talking about BAME, BAME people, BAME experiences, and I think that to me is just like really clear evidence that this disguises power dynamics when we're focusing on – and it's also just that classic thing of like, victim-blaming I guess, where it's like "you lot who are the minority, you have a problem, because you're a minority you don't really know what you're doing, you can't really help yourself", rather than shifting the spotlight, to power.

Also that was a really helpful, almost definition of what power is, because I think sometimes when we say "this hides power dynamics", it's hard to know what that exactly means. So yeah, thank you for that.

The question that I usually ask near the end of the podcast which is where we're moving towards, is, okay, you know clearly you've shown that this binary- majority/minority, obscures power dynamics, it gets us focusing on the wrong parts of things, it helps us leave people behind in our building a different future. So – what – can you help us think or what do you find in your own experience, a more useful way of thinking about things, is it that we should just be focusing on naming racism? I mean something that in my own conversations with you, I feel much more emboldened to name "white supremacy", for example. That is something that I just wasn't really doing before. So what is it that we should be naming instead of majority/minority. Or what sort of language do you think we could move towards?

AJ I mean, definitely naming white supremacy. That's my favourite!

SMK – and why is that so important?

AJ Why is that so important? Because white people hate it! Sorry! – just like – ooh, no but it's wild to me the number of conversations I've sat in on with like, academics talking about "decolonising" this, or you know "looking at the attainment gap" or whatever, and no one is talking about whiteness, no one is talking about white supremacy – there is no way for us to analyse how we got to this place without addressing whiteness and without addressing white supremacy. It's just not possible.

And So I think that's the same with whatever binary we're talking aboutm but speicifically with majority/minority, or gender, or race – any social construct! Is we need to be thinking about it within the framework of white supremacy and racial capitalism. So how do these binaries, how are they employed in a way that allows the continued oppression of people? And the continued exploitation of people of colour, but also more generally, just people you know?

And so I guess that's kind of where, it's not really about developing new terms, as much as whenever you are using these terms, let's actually pay attention to which bodies are we imagining as the majority and the minority, who what does that say about where our politics actually lie? And who we're actually trying to care for in this moment? Erm yeah. And I want us to get somewhere else right?

SMK yeah. That's a really helpful set of questions. Who are we imagining when we use these words? And would we imagine if we didn't use these words? Like what would it help us move towards? I think?

AJ but also not even that we need to be imagining anyone in particular, it's more – so I've been thinking a lot about like, so one of – Sara Ahmed's book, *Strange Encounters*, which was, I think, one of the first books that I fully fully read during my PhD and you know, obviously loved. It made me think a lot about – one thing Sara Ahmed does really well, is in the book, talk about how the "alien", or the "stranger", only ever comes into existence through their relationship to "the Self", so there is no "nation" without understanding the people who are "alien" to the nation.

There is no "community" without us already framing people who are outside the community as a part of us determining who is inside it... and I dunno that for me that became, lately this has been really helpful because I've been then forced to think, what does it mean for us to imagine community whilst actually including people who are external to that community? Right?

So rather than thinking about logics of majority/minority, how do we imagine whatever our organising, whatever we're doing, whatever we're organising, whatever we're teaching, always needs to include the people who will be forgotten, and who have been forgotten. And that's really a practice, right? Of like – actually, "okay I was talking about this, but there were all of these people I couldn't have included there, and now I know I need to do better, and so I am going to be moving towards this", does that make sense?

SMK it does. I think the focus on practice particularly, in a way like, I think lockdown has helped reveal this to me more than anything else – which is that we can't *think* our way to freedom. In a sense, even to speak about this podcast in a meta way – the purpose of this and this idea of like, thinking beyond these binaries, isn't just that in doing the thinking we somehow will, be unlocking this future that we want – in the hope that it will inform our practices in the world. That you know if you listen to these podcasts, if we learn from one another, we're able to go and then in our interactions with people, in our jobs, in our schools, wherever it is that we are in our day to day – in our homes, in our families, in our friendships, that we're able to enact a different type of *being* with people. And I think that's what – you saying that makes sense to me, that this isn't just kind of about going "okay well I'm going to stop thinking about majority/minority, job done!" it's what we do with that I think

AJ so like, when you're actually speaking to people on a daily, and you like "oh I never thought about that!" you say, "I am sorry, and I am going to work towards doing better now". So it's not- the onus isn't actually on them to then educate you on this thing that you have never thought about, instead it's actually on you to like realise that you need to do better.

And I think that comes back round to what you were saying about humility. Because it does require a lot of humility to go into organising knowing that you're not going to get it right, and actually you are accountable to a lot of the people who you have forgotten – so it's not even the people

SMK right! That's really useful

AJ right? So it's not even just who is in the room at that point in time, but "I am accountable to the people who have never made it into this room". I think that shifts the focus away from just *happening to* get a seat at the table, versus actually wanting all of us to be free.

Moving away from the table all together. Destroying it, if you will. Which is, no but real talk, that's why I think at this stage in the game, we're just going to have to be like, "are you about abolition? If

you're not about abolition, like, goodbye! We cannot afford – the world is very bad right now, and we cannot afford to be moving in a way that only pretends, at like addressing some of the issues, instead of actually like practicing a politics that moves us closer to freedom. Erm – cos yeah you're right, we cannot "think" our way out of this. and I refuse to like – settle – for like, "okay well at least you're not, you know, killing me, but you're ignoring the people who are killing me", that's not – we're not about that.

SMK – a just really quick last few thoughts. It reminds me of a conversation I was having with a friend. She's Jewish and I'm Muslim obviously, and I was saying like, how I feel like there's so much within the stories of different prophets and their lives that kind of proves that abolition is the kind of ethos of Islam as opposed to reformism, and I was saying like, you know, Musa, Moses, AS, didn't go to the Pharaoh kind of asking for a place within the administration, where he could probably help and speak on behalf of the Israelites, he didn't say "you know maybe free some of my people", or "offer us better housing", and yeah as my friend said, she was just like, "he didn't say free *some* of my people, he said let my people go – not let *some* of them go" – and I think that is the whole table thing.

I think you know people who kind of feel like abolition doesn't have a place Islamically, I think what tradition of Islam are we engaging with? Because for me that story in itself is everything – Moses goes to Pharaoh and says "believe in God, submit to God", and in so doing, you inherently have to let the people go who you're oppressing. As you just said, "make yourself redundant", I think that's precisely the image I have there, you have to give up being pharaoh to be, to submit is to abolish yourself as pharaoh, there can be no pharaoh and be freedom for the Israelites. So yeah I just wanted to add that thought – that's praxis for me.

AJ yeah, and I think that praxis for you like bringing it historical, which I appreciated yes thank you – but also even I think I've noticed it a lot more lately, in like, our forms of organising – that like, if you are -I don't know – I've seen a lot of, no that's not fair – there are a lot of organisers that I really and truly love, who are like doing a lot of hard work, in a lot of un- non-recognised, work that is not recognised on a regular basis. Right?

But at the same time there are other people who have built careers off of being like, a talking head, and are often invited in to like "represent", the "minority voice" right? Or to like "speak on behalf" of like, people they have no business speaking on behalf of. You know? And that's also some of the ways that "political blackness" and colourism comes into play. Because political blackness often comes into play once we're talking about police brutality against Black bodies and then non-Black people are like "I can speak as an authority on this", and "I am representing all of these other voices on this", instead of actually – there are all these other people who can speak on their own behalf, let me clear a way so they can actually do that, and they can be supported whilst they do that.

And so that kind of no, actually, in order for us to be committed to this type of work, we need to be willing to destroy any seat at the table that we are offered. We need to really be about it. And we can't be okay with being the *one* anti-racist voice in a predominantly white setting, because that's just not enough, it's just not enough for where we want to go.

SMK absolutely, yeah. Thank you so much, I feel like that's been a really fruitful conversation. Is there any final thoughts or anything I should of asked you that you want to mention before we close this up?

AJ Not in particular – I mean it did, like, veer *away* from a conversation about like Avengers, and-

SMK I am so sorry

AJ I kind of – yeah – no, no you shouldn't apologise for that. That's good that's you know – that's good

SMK I think if I had watched it more avidly, I could have engaged you more on that

AJ I feel like I was looking for a level of energy that I maybe should have signposted to you earlier so that then you could have done your homework, we could have had a different think going

SMK a whole different episode, yeah. Unfortunately, yeah sorry, that's Season Three.

laughter

But thank you so much Azeezat, honestly, this has been really wonderful, and yeah, thanks for being on Breaking Binaries.

AJ Yeah! Happy to be here!

SMK Thank you for listening to this episode of Breaking Binaries. I hope you, like me, can take something from our guest this week. Look out for episodes fortnightly and if you enjoy, please share. The music you've been hearing is made by an old high school friend, that came through, so shoutout to Violence Jack at [@getviolencejack](https://www.getviolencejack.com) online. Thanks to all my guests for chatting to me every week and helping us to think a little more critically, and I hope, humbly, about our world.

I do believe that part of the way we transform the world is by transforming the ways we think about it. Thank you for listening. I've been your host, Suhaiymah Manzoor-Khan, bye!