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Reviews

Nussaibah Younis, *Fundamentally* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2025), pp. 336, ISBN 978-1399623926. £9.99

Fundamentally is the debut novel by Nussaibah Younis, a British writer with Iraqi and Pakistani heritage. The novel, shortlisted for the Women's Prize (2025), follows academic Nadia who, escaping heartbreak after the end of her open relationship with Rosy, accepts a job with the UN in Iraq to rehabilitate the women of ISIS. The novel draws on the writer's own experiences as an academic and peacebuilding practitioner, advising the Iraqi government on proposed programmes to deradicalise women associated with ISIS.

The novel begins with a short prologue, set in September 2019, which finds Nadia and ISIS bride Sara in a barren landscape, as they escape a camp in Iraq through the Turkish border. Younis immediately sets the witty, satirical tone of the novel, as the two women joke that they should have got an ISIS smuggler to traffic them *out* of ISIS: 'They're sick smugglers though, you gotta admit' (p. 2). The novel is littered with comedic one-liners that make it feel like the narrator is breaking the fourth wall to joke with the reader, *Fleabag*-style: 'She was only a Reddit thread away from joining Boko Haram' (p. 115), quips Nadia about her mother's supposed teetering fundamentalism. Younis makes light of fundamentalist Islam, placing *Fundamentally* in the genre of irreverent dark British comedy which pokes fun at Islam and terrorism, such as the film *Four Lions* (2010), directed by Chris Morris, which follows the antics of four British Asian men from Sheffield as they attempt to become jihadis.

While *Four Lions* is about becoming Islamic terrorists, *Fundamentally* is about the *unbecoming* of Islamic terrorists. The first third of the novel focuses on Nadia's attempt to launch her rehabilitation programme for women amid the complicated political backdrop of other competing UN agencies and programmes. The second third follows the programme's launch at the women's camp. There Nadia meets Sara, a London-born British Pakistani and they begin an unlikely friendship, one of the central themes of the novel. However, Nadia's drunken exposé of Sara to a journalist at a work party, leads to Sara's story being published in the press

and the subsequent revocation of Sara's citizenship. The character of Sara is reminiscent of Shamima Begum, one of the Bethnal Green trio, who travelled from East London to Syria to join ISIS at age 15, and whose British citizenship was revoked following Begum's comments to the media. Desperate to reconcile with her daughter Habibah, who is in the care of her grandparents, Sara marries a local sheikh. The last third of the novel details the escape of Nadia, Sara and Habibah, who flee across the border to Turkey to start a new life.

As one might expect, *Fundamentally* explores why the women in the camp joined ISIS. And the reasons are varied. Aishah is groomed by her youth worker (p. 143); Khadijah is radicalised by the perception that French Algerians are second class citizens (p. 144); Elli is trafficked by her husband (p. 198); Sara follows friend Jamila to ISIS for the promise of a better, freer life (p. 46), and love-bombed Jamila follows Belgian convert Wilbert. As Nadia reasons, 'Jamila's love-addled brain was so far gone, she'd have followed him anywhere. And what could I say? Where wouldn't I have gone for Rosy?' (pp. 51–52). Nadia's direct comparison between herself and Jamila shows how the two characters are meant to serve as a foil for one another. Both moved away from home out of love. While Jamila travelled to Iraq to join ISIS for matters of the heart, Nadia travelled to Iraq to join the UN out of heartbreak. Younis is perhaps a bit heavy-handed with this comparison to ensure that the irony isn't lost on the reader. But it also corroborates research findings that one of the major reasons women join ISIS is due to relationships, romantic or otherwise.

At the camp, Nadia runs a holistic rehabilitation programme consisting of psychological assessments, personal support plans, and moderate Islamic teaching given by a hippie Californian sheikh: 'Jason's teachings made me long for the coherence of fundamentalist Islam' (p. 193), Nadia jibes in her trademark comedic style. Any hope for repatriation involves a full vetting of the women by at least six intelligence agencies. With the programme facing challenges, Nadia imagines several joke ideas for alternative rehabilitation programmes, such as one group receiving moderate religious teachings, while the other is a control group that sits in a cool room to escape the intense Iraqi heat (p. 141). Perhaps Nadia's more silly ideas for the programme could have been successful if given half a chance, especially as the novel uncovers the politics and corruption rife within the UN. She despairs at the state of the UN, 'institutionalised, feckless and corrupt' (p. 96), after one particularly unsuccessful meeting with the Iraqi

Minister of Humane Affairs. The Minister extorts an all-expenses-paid holiday to Beirut – and is caught having an extramarital affair – before agreeing to sign off on Nadia's programme. In fact, Nadia is critiqued by her colleague Frank as to the programme's focus: rehabilitation or deradicalisation, as he proclaims, 'Deradicalisation, what a ridiculous notion' (p. 104). Frank's comment reveals how senior colleagues within the UN don't even believe in the concept of deradicalisation. The nuance between rehabilitation or deradicalisation is never explored in the novel, and the UN's failure in understanding these concepts ultimately points to the failure of the programme.

The programme is only successful at repatriating one foreign-born woman, Khadijah, a university-educated French woman in her early thirties with an affluent family, whom Pierre, a UN colleague, declares 'the right kind of French immigrant' (p. 179). It is only through the leveraging of Pierre's networks and his personal affinity to Khadijah, both having studied philosophy at the Sorbonne, that Khadijah eventually returns home. For the rest of the women, it is a more dire fate. A forum with tribal leaders designed to air grievances and facilitate the return of local women, quickly turns sour when leaders begin to joke 'They'll take the pretty ones' (p. 155). They then demand two hundred dollars from the UN for each returned woman. Their extortion points to the uncomfortable truth that the rehabilitation of these women is less about fundamentalism, and their deradicalisation from it, as it is about money.

The challenge posed by deradicalisation comes to a head between Nadia and Sara, when having finally escaped to an apartment in Gaziantep, Turkey, Nadia begins to realise she has no idea what Sara believes in. Goading Sara to admit ISIS was wrong, Sara lashes out at Nadia, 'We're not in de-rad class, I don't have to listen to any more of that bullshit' (p. 265). To what extent Sara holds on to more fundamentalist beliefs is never truly uncovered, even as Sara slowly begins to rejoin society by the end of the novel, having secured a job in accounts through Christina, Nadia's humanitarian aid-worker friend.

The novel provokes the question, but never outright answers, whether the deradicalisation of ISIS members can ever be fully achieved. It does, however, explore the spectrum of Islamic belief. The closest we get to understanding Sara's position is when she explains: 'I'm not gonna strap on a suicide vest, all right, but I won't be a kafir ho neither. I'm a practising Muslim, I've got morals and that' (p. 283). The commitment to non-

violence and to some sort of moral principles is perhaps a move to a more moderate version of Islam. On the other hand, Nadia is a self-proclaimed apostate whose faith starts weakening at university, in the typical story of a closeted religious student's first exposure to new ideas and people (p. 214). For Nadia, 'being religious was like having a revision timetable for life, the day of judgement being the final exam' (p. 6). Nadia's dislike of organised religion seeps through in these lines. Iraqi-born UN driver, Farris, is one of the only positive representations of Islam and Iraqis in the novel. He disagrees with both the tribal leaders' actions, 'This is not Islam' (p. 156), and the UN decision to marry Sara off to the local sheikh, 'I would never have allowed it' (p. 232). He selflessly helps Nadia to locate Habibah and arranges the logistics of the rescue of Sara and Habibah from the local sheikh. Farris follows through on his principles with a quiet dignity in a way no other character in the novel manages to do.

Another theme of the novel is misogyny. While the misogyny of Iraqi culture is shown, with tribal leaders wanting to take only the beautiful women, Younis also highlights the misogyny inherent in the Western corporate world. The comparison of fundamentalist Islam to corporate America is a theme explored in more depth by Pakistani novelist Mohsin Hamid in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007). Whether it's UN Head of Security, Tom, who tells Nadia to smile more (p. 33), the security guard at the Ministry of Humane Affairs who greets Pierre instead of Nadia (p. 75), or Charles, a UN programme lead, acting in charge of the forum with tribal leaders when it is his peer's Priya's initiative (p. 155), Younis exposes an underlying culture of sexism in the UN. By juxtaposing it with the experience of ISIS brides, Younis shows that the sexism experienced by women in the novel really is two sides of the same coin.

Younis drives home this point with the story of Sara, who in the hope of reuniting with her baby daughter Habibah, marries a powerful local sheikh, at the advice of Nadia's UN colleagues. As Layla, Sara's tent-mate yells: 'You gave her to the old, ugly sheikh […] It's the same as before, to have our rights, we must give sex. You preach at us, but you are no better than ISIS' (p. 231). Being married into sexual slavery seems then to be both an ISIS and UN practice! The prevailing belief of ISIS brides in the novel is that they joined the organisation because of sexual desire. Sara corroborates this: 'everyone thinks I'm just some foreign whore' (p. 159). We later find out that the real reason for her joining ISIS was to escape the mundane domesticity of her home life, 'I wanted to do something *big*' (p.

272). At Nadia's horror that Sara will now be raped in this marriage, Lina, Nadia's manager exclaims: 'Raped. She's an ISIS bride, that's literally what she signed up for' (p. 233). Despite the threat of marital rape, Sara's marriage is seen by UN colleagues as a desirable outcome, a way for a woman to paradoxically secure her protection and reintegrate in society.

There is also intersectional misogyny experienced by the foreign women who have joined ISIS. One of the viewpoints rife in the UN is that the local women are the real victims (p. 163). Priya argues, 'ISIS wouldn't have succeeded without all these mental foreigners showing up' (p. 163). This sentiment is echoed by Habibah's grandparents and Sara's former parents-in-laws, who suffering from the death of their sons bemoan through Farris, 'Their sons were good men, only looking to get married, and the foreign women tempted them, led them to their deaths' (pp. 222–23). The sole blaming of foreign women absolves everyone else for joining ISIS, permeating a culture of victim blaming. It also points to the paradox of the organisation's success lying in the number of foreign women joining, considering their relative powerlessness in society, whether in ISIS-controlled territory or not.

Fundamentally is a thought-provoking and funny read which I really enjoyed. Ultimately, *Fundamentally* questions whether fundamentalist ideology really is fundamental to anything; it is neither fundamental to the friendship between Nadia and Sara, nor to any of the women's successful repatriations. What *Fundamentally* does advocate for is the power of human connection and empathy, in the face of beliefs which are fundamentally different to our own.

Zaynab Seedat

Zaynab Seedat completed her PhD at the University of York. Her thesis, entitled *Writing the South Asian Muslim Terrorist: Religion, Politics and "Terror" From a Postcolonial Lens*, examined depictions of terror in contemporary Muslim writing, with a focus on South Asia. Her research takes an interdisciplinary approach but particularly uses postcolonial theory to foster a critical understanding of Islamic terrorism in relation to colonialism and empire.

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