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September 14th, 2020

Appel Fellowship

The Impact of Western media's portrayal of Islam on my Perception of the Religion

Introduction

I hated *Qu'ran* school. Every Sunday, at what felt like the crack of dawn, I would sit in front of my laptop, with a scarf covering my head, to Skype with this man in Pakistan for an hour as he relentlessly corrected my Arabic pronunciation. Sometimes I would find myself ignoring him when he corrected me, blazing through, barely breathing so as not to give him the opportunity to interrupt. I hated the *duas* I had to memorize and the blue folder where they resided that I would sneak peeks at as I was quizzed. Now, I find myself wishing I had that blue folder with me. It would provide me some comfort knowing I always had them.

I wish I could say that I practice Islam perfectly: that I pray even once a day, that I go to the mosque for *jummah* prayer, that I fast all the days of Ramadan, that I even pray *jummah* prayer, that I fast any of the days of Ramadan. Or even that I understand why I fast when I do, that I remember perfectly when each Eid is, that I don't scoff when my mom tries to teach me the morals of each *Qur'anic* story, that I understand the importance of doing all these things. I wish I could say that I don't feel like an imposter trying to claim Islam as my own, that I don't feel judged for the way I practice, that I don't pay attention to the questions from my friends, that I don't hear the mocking *allahu-akbars*. I wish I could say I understand what it means to be Muslim.

Growing up in a post 9/11 world, I felt truly ashamed of being Muslim, before I even understood what being Muslim meant. Never did I attempt to understand my relationship with spirituality, instead I wanted to suppress whichever parts of myself were Muslim. I grew up around a lot of hateful rhetoric towards Muslims from the communities I was a part of. The Indian community has felt disdain towards Muslims for centuries and the American community resented all Muslims, more so after 9/11. From that judgment, I discerned that I loved celebrating Eid, but I hated telling people I don't eat pork. I decided that suppressing my religion in public, but enjoying it in private, was the best option. Over time, I felt a strong kinship with my religion, less so about spirituality, and more so about defending it. Whenever anyone would try to speak ill of Islam, I would feel a responsibility towards protecting it. I hated that people could think Islam was steeped in hate because of a few extremists and apply this to the rest of the population. Specifically, the 2016 refugee crisis made me realize the extent of Islamophobia in Europe. Living in the UK, right across from a mosque, I felt pride seeing the thousands of Muslims flood out of the mosque during Ramadan. Yet, I never stepped foot in the mosque. I have a deeply complex struggle with myself that results in my inability to understand spirituality outside of my familial influences and one that contributes to me feeling like an imposter.

The media has contributed to this struggle I face through the continuous villainization of Muslims. In Hollywood, Brown actors are most often given stereotypical roles. And those who play Muslims are almost always terrorists or a Saudi Arabian king. The media has not acknowledged the majority of Muslims who are ordinary people, trying to develop an identity amidst the stereotyping. In this essay, I will evaluate three TV shows: *Homeland*, *Master of None*, and *Ramy* to interrogate the different portrayals of Muslims in Western media and try to understand how these portrayals have contributed to my perception of Islam.

Islamophobia's Reverberations throughout the World

In a podcast for *Michigan Radio*, Professor Khaled Beydoun outlines two major forms of Islamophobia.¹ The first being private Islamophobia: the fear and anger individuals, such as citizens, feel towards Muslims.² Incidents such as acid attacks and bombings of mosques would be classified as private Islamophobia. The second being structural Islamophobia, which is institutional and resides in state sponsored policies and rhetoric within the government.³ Structural islamophobia justifies the use of private Islamophobia. Since institutions are making statements, declaring Muslims as a group to be wary of, people are more susceptible to believing this and taking action. Beydoun, furthermore, cites the work of Edward Said, an American intellectual who studied how Islam was portrayed and, ultimately, wrote a book called *Orientalism*. The thesis of *Orientalism* is that the West perceives themselves as the opposite of the “orient”, which Said cites as the Muslim world.⁴ After the end of the Cold War, when the Soviet Union could no longer be considered the enemy, another group was needed to fit this rival narrative that was geopolitically required, and Islam fits into this perfectly.⁵ Said’s thesis has perfectly encompassed the unchanged Western view towards Islam that has been reflected in structural Islamophobia, as Beydoun declared.

The Patriot Act is one of the most notorious forms of policing implemented against not only communication but also Muslims. Serving as a means to protect the U.S. from terrorism, the act gave the government access to people’s communication records. Muslim Americans, South

¹ Graham, Lester, host. “Author breaks down the “roots and rise” of Islamophobia in America”. *Stateside*, Michigan Radio, 22 Mar. 2019. <https://www.michiganradio.org/post/author-breaks-down-roots-and-rise-islamophobia-america>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Asians, and Arab Americans reported the most complaints of being assaulted by government officials, which increased hate crimes.⁶ When people are being targeted for being Muslim by government officials, this enforces private Islamophobia, since civilians are given the notion that this is the justified norm. Eventually, the War on Terror, and corresponding legislation, created a divide between Muslims, who were considered to be the enemy, and the West, the self-proclaimed heroes, resulting in a spread of Islamophobia.⁷ Not only has this manifested in increased violence against innocent civilians in the Middle East, but it has also fortified the jihadist movement. People needed someone to blame for the largest attack against the Western world, and since terrorism is not necessarily an identifiable threat, it was easier for people to label all Muslims – and often South Asian Americans and Arab Americans – as terrorists.

Forms of structural and private Islamophobia were catalyzed and worsened through the refugee crisis. As Syrian refugees began to seek new lives, countries were both unwilling to take them in and turned towards a nationalist stance when faced with the option. Refugees were considered a threat because they were from the Middle East and there was an inherent fear of terrorism. Brexit, the election of Matteo Salvini, Boris Johnson, the rise of the AFD in Germany, are all a direct result of the refugee crisis. The anti-immigrant stance, adopted by many of these political parties, is enticing towards residents who seek to blame immigrants for taking jobs and terrorist attacks, which enabled private Islamophobia.

⁶ Ahmed, Arshad, and Farid Senzai. “The USA Patriot Act: Impact on the Arab and Muslim American Community.” *Institute for Social Policy and Understanding*, 2004, pp. 14 www.ispu.org/the-usa-patriot-act-impact-on-the-arab-and-muslim-american-community/.

⁷ Massoumi, Narzanin. “Why Is Europe So Islamophobic?” *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 6 Mar. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/03/06/opinion/europe-islamophobia-attacks.html.

In 2018, there was a 52% increase in Islamophobic events in France and 74% in Austria.⁸ Europeans view Islamic values to be the opposite of theirs; being a Muslim in Europe means you are not trusted by most of the population.⁹ The rhetoric of nationalist leaders throughout the past five years has worsened the demonization of Muslims. Matteo Salvini is infamous for the anti-immigrant stance that propelled him into power. Despite having an overall positive attitude towards migrants, the anti-immigration Sweden Democrats made never-seen-before gains of 18% during the 2018 election.¹⁰ In 2019, Poland saw tens of thousands of nationalists marching through Warsaw to support the win of the conservative Law and Justice.¹¹ This is not only limited to Europe. Narendra Modi, the prime minister of India, is notorious for pushing his Hindu-first propaganda through increasing restrictions in the disputed land of Kashmir and passing anti-Muslim legislation. Meanwhile, the genocide of Rohingya Muslims in Myanmar was carried out by the Buddhist government.

The rise of Islamophobia throughout Europe and the Western world has been reflected in media. The instances of Muslims being portrayed as terrorists have not faded. In the popular British TV show, *Bodyguard*, the opening scene is one of a woman in a hijab holding a suicide bomb. The rhetoric that is common in American TV shows has presented itself in European and British media. Such stereotypes are the backbone of action TV and movies, which, in turn, spurs Islamophobic rhetoric and events.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ "Europe and Right-Wing Nationalism: A Country-by-Country Guide." *BBC News*, BBC, Nov. 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-36130006.

¹¹ Ibid.

The rise of Islamophobia in the West has been the result of a complex set of fundamentals that seek to strengthen Western identity at the behest of the rest of the world. Through creating an “us” vs. “them” paradigm, the West has ineffectively attempted to reduce fear of terrorism, whilst creating a more difficult world for those considered to be on the other side - Muslims in this case.

Why Homeland Made Me Question Myself

NCIS LA, Homeland, Covert Affairs. I love watching these shows; they are action-packed, keep me on my toes, and most of all have interesting plot lines. Especially during the pandemic, I see myself living vicariously through these characters who are running through foreign cities, as I sit on my couch eating a new bag of chips. Yet all of these TV shows tend to focus on one thing: the War on Terror and demonizing Muslims.

As a Muslim-American, I grew up hearing *allahu-akbar* in two contexts. The first being in a peaceful setting and finding myself in thinking of God as great. The second being in the context of TV terrorists committing suicide in the name of *Allah*. Admittedly, at a young age, it was confusing to not be able to explore my spirituality without the barrage of hatred that was so intrinsically hidden in everyday life, including television. Because of the actions of a few in the Middle East, Muslims around the world were subject to blame; however, that is a reality that I decided to live with. I did not quite bother with trying to upend the system or fight against it, because it was futile. Why shouldn't Muslims be hated for 9/11, why shouldn't the actions of a few be projected onto an entire population? I laughed at the Islam-terrorism jokes, watched NCIS LA with fervor, and lived with the terror and knowledge that all Muslims would be blamed for the next attack of terror.

Recently, I began watching Homeland. I think there is consensus that Homeland is incredibly problematic, there is no question that they leave little room for the liminality of the War on Terror, but, for me, it felt like a new experience watching it.

The first few seasons of the show are about a prisoner of war, Nicolas Brody, who was held by a terrorist group in the Middle East for several years. The main character, Carrie, was convinced that he had been turned into a terrorist during his time as a prisoner. The first indication

to the audience that Carrie was correct was when Brody pulls out a *janamaz* (praying mat) and *Qur'an*, this is supposed to send a message to the audience that he is, in fact, a terrorist, one who “succumbed to Islam.” As a Muslim, I knew what this was supposed to indicate but I could not help but hope that he might have just found strength in this peaceful religion. I sought to find a show that would indicate the liminality of life and not depict it in rigid terms.

Homeland truly placed me in a frenzy, as my thoughts raced around my head a mile-a-minute, all contradicting themselves. I thought about Brody’s relationship with Islam and why the writers thought his practice of Islam immediately indicated that he is a terrorist. I thought about the War on Terror and how the U.S. does, in fact, kill countless innocent children and I can empathize with Brody’s desire to end this killing. But, ultimately, I thought about what it would be like to watch this TV show as someone who is not Muslim, as someone who has no reason to see the best in Islam. Presumably, most people who watch the show fit into that profile of being oblivious of these nuances.

Being a Muslim means that seeing any aspect of yourself being represented in a show gives you the need to evaluate it thoroughly because that is now the representation for your entire group. Being of a non-Judeo-Christian background means fearing incorrect representation or the actions of an individual because you know that is how the entire world will define your population. The nuance and liminality that is afforded to most people in the world do not apply to BIPOC.

The Responsibilities of Being Muslim

Religion is a list of requirements. All intended to further one's morals and spirituality, these requirements exist to create structure. Being Muslim means that those requirements include doing my due diligence to ensure the world does not hate all Muslims. There is this consistent desire to be likable that comes through suppressing my religion and integrating myself into Western society entirely.

While watching *Master of None*, Aziz Ansari, who portrays a Muslim, took that stance. He decided he wanted to portray Muslims as good by indicating that they, too, are able to participate in Western culture. During the episode entitled Religion, Ansari was meeting with relatives before Eid. His parents specifically told him not to eat pork and pretend to be more religious in front of his relatives. Ansari abides by his parents' rules but then convinces his cousin to eat pork and attend a barbecue food festival on the day of Eid. The episode culminates in Ansari declaring his love for pork in front of his parents and relatives.

There has always been a significant barrier between the way in which past generations have practiced Islam compared to my generation. Ansari astutely draws attention towards the fact that Islam, to him, is incredibly different from that of his parents. His association with the religion is being told he is a terrorist, which is an environment unlike that of his parents' youth. Ansari has sought to reject his religion and prove that he can defy its values to appease the society he is living in. Towards the end of the episode, we see him pick up a *Qu'ran* and try to learn about it, in his own way.

However, during the episode, at times, it felt as if Ansari was less worried about wanting people to accept Muslims the way they are and more worried about wanting to prove they could be "normal" and fit in as well. He chose to drink and eat pork, all while skipping *Eid namaz* to do

this. There is absolutely no doubt that being Muslim does not confine you to one certain form of practice, but it also felt like he wanted to show Muslims as those who could integrate.

Ansari was simply sharing his truth - his experience being Muslim. But the problem is that when there is such limited representation of one group, they tend to be defined by this. Thus, it felt as if Muslims were categorized into those who could forget their culture in return for respect from the West and into those who refused to integrate.

A New Page in Western Media

Ramy made me feel heard and seen. The first time I watched the show I was astonished. I did not realize how desensitized I had become to Muslims being portrayed as terrorists and stereotypes. Watching *Ramy*, I realized how much representation was lacking, and how being able to relate to his life was an entirely new experience for me. Ramy Youssef, the creator, portrayed the flaws and intricacies of being Muslim. He explored the struggles related to being of a multicultural, non-Western religion. Often, when media of this sort is released, the main character has either rejected the religion entirely or sought to dedicate themselves in the entirety. Never once have I seen the liminality of being Muslim and what it is like to be experiencing the push and pull of this clash of cultures.

Ramy represents the complexities of growing up in a devout, immigrant family that is trying to navigate the line between integration and individuality. I think this becomes especially complex, for him, during a post 9/11 world, where he and his family are considered to be the enemy. When there is an evident rise of hate crimes against Muslims and a rise in Islamophobia, as a child, it is hard to want to embrace this part of yourself that is hated. This resonated with me because, when I was younger, I had no intention of defending Islam or fighting against those who labeled us terrorists, as I wanted to fit in. I wanted to have a religion that was entirely aligned with Western values so that I never had to feel different.

The clash of cultures becomes a theme throughout the show. In one episode, his father's boss offered his father a glass of whiskey and he easily agreed to drink it, in order to appease his boss. Even devout Muslims are imperfect when it comes to navigating the divide. It is so much easier to not step on someone's toes and simply stifle your religious practice to appease the rest

of the world. Youssef was not taking a stance on the morality of this, but he was simply depicting that, religious transgressions are normal when discovering one's self - an idea that is often frowned upon in the Muslim community.

Youssef dove into the flaws of the community that are often glossed over. As with every religion, there are major flaws that are steeped into the culture: misogyny being one of the most prominent ones. In the *Qu'ran*, men and women are declared to be equal, but this does not translate into practice. Muslim men tend to oppress women, not through forcing practice or *hijab* on them as one would think, but instead through creating an image for Muslim women that they tend to preserve through an ideal. Men are given far more freedom in their youth and women are expected to comply through submission, especially when it comes to marriage. Ramy goes to meet a young Muslim woman for the purpose of marriage, but they end up having sex. When she expresses her sexual desires, Ramy was shocked. He had internalized this double standard applied to women throughout some of the Muslim world, where men are allowed to live but women are supposed to live their lives waiting for men. He is allowed to make mistakes and he will always be forgiven, but women do not have this luxury. There are different expectations for women than men in Islamic society, where women are often expected to take a submissive role. However, Muslim men often only place this expectation on Muslim women, while women of other cultures are seen as human beings who have their own desires. When this was challenged in front of Ramy, he was astonished that an assertive Muslim woman exists. He had internalized that role of women to the extent that he forget that Muslim women are no different from other women. This speaks to the numerous issues in the Muslim community and how there is no certainty that Islam is always right. As a Muslim woman, I found particular comfort in the

acknowledgment of this expectation. Muslim women are simply people, and there is no reason they should be held to a different standard as men in the same position.

Ramy addressed all the issues I thought Western media would never be able to do. He addressed the intergenerational, intercultural struggle that comes with being raised Muslim in the West and his perspective was one I deeply related to. He was by no means rejecting Islam, but he was not willing to fully accept every aspect of it. Despite his attempts to find his footing, he fails. Islam prohibits alcohol, so he takes cocaine instead; Islam says that one should be pure during Ramadan, so he waits until sunset to have sex with a married woman. It is the details in the show that truly resonate with me, as it perfectly depicts the clash of cultures one experiences.

What it Means to Question Religion

When I began reading *Disgraced* by Ayad Akhtar, I felt my temples pounding and my face reddening. *Disgraced* is a play about a man, Amir Kapoor, who has rejected Islam and who now lives in New York with his wife, Emily. Akhtar focuses on Islamophobia and the experience of Muslim Americans navigating their culture. During a heated dinner party, Amir declares he felt a sense of pride after 9/11 and is angry towards Israel, his friends immediately leave, disgusted. As events escalate, Amir ends up beating his wife.

I was astonished as to how Akhtar could portray Muslims as anything less than perfect. When the entire world seems to be committed to pointing out the flaws, how can he play into this narrative? As a Muslim, I have developed a habit of defending Islam, which is why my immediate reaction to *Disgraced* was to defend Islam. I have developed this defense mechanism which refuses to acknowledge there are flaws, even though, there are flaws in every institution of belief.

I have since realized that questioning Islam has made me realize that religion is incredibly dynamic in that it is about personal belief. So, here is a breakdown of my thoughts before taking a moment to reflect on my motivations when discussing Islam.

Before:

As a Muslim, Amir is given authority. He is given some leverage over Emily's view of Islam. But he chooses to place the blame on the *Qu'ran*. Blaming the religious text itself. As a Muslim, it is hard for me to read this because I do feel this self-loathing leaping off the pages. Amir is insistent on denouncing his religion, so he uses the *Qu'ran* as a reason for this. Emily is standing up for this religion that she is somewhat using to further her career as an artist, surveying Islamic art. I do find myself agreeing with most of her points but wishing it was Amir saying them.

I think it is easier when the person criticizing Islam is white or someone who doesn't understand the religion, as it makes the situation less ambiguous. When it is a Muslim who has clearly rejected the religion, it hurts in some ways, because then maybe there is some validity to the arguments against Islam. I truly appreciate this complex viewpoint of Islam. But it is difficult for me to break it down considering the audience. If white people are seeing this play, they are essentially being condoned for their dislike of Islam. I truly appreciate the way in which Islam was depicted as dynamic, but sometimes I feel like we cannot present ourselves as anything more until we get over this "terrorist trope" hurdle. Maybe the way to get over it is by showing self-doubt in Muslims, but I find myself becoming too comfortable in putting up the façade that I think my religion is perfect to compensate for the actions of a few extremists.

After:

Amir found peace and solace in questioning Islam. Although he was extreme in his disbelief, it was interesting all his beliefs tumbled out as soon as he felt targeted. Muslims often feel an intense desire to defend Islam. I understand Amir's desire to question his religion, and I understand Akhtar's desire to show that Muslims are people who are also simply figuring out their spirituality. The one aspect of the play that made me indignant, initially, was the violence at the end. Seeing a Muslim man beat a white woman felt as if it fit every stereotypical portrayal of Muslims in Western media. Bernie White, who played Amir Kapoor, once experienced a white man running on stage to defend the woman because he was so taken aback with a Brown man hitting a white woman. The response that this elicits is one of disgust. However, in an interview, Akhtar said "the play begins with a Western consciousness representing a Muslim subject. The

play ends with the Muslim subject observing the fruits of that representation”.¹² He describes Muslims as still being focused on the West’s perception of them. The play seeks to redefine this, and it was successful for me. I looked at Islam, outside of Western perceptions and expectations, and found myself understanding the religion for what it is. I thought about all of the qualms I have had with it and did not try to defend it.

¹² Akhtar, Ayad. *Disgraced*. Little, Brown and Company.

Conclusion

This writing is steeped in the twists and turns of me navigating my religion and using Western media to better understand myself. I grew up in the Western world, and I had absolutely no idea who I was. Never once had I seen a Brown person on the screen, reflected humanly, as I was growing up. When media culture is a part of everyday life, it is difficult to see my identity being simplified into one stereotype. This culture has refused to accept and acknowledge the complexities and nuances that are part of being from a non-Western culture. I sincerely hope that more media is released for the next generation because it seems unfair, in a world that is mostly BIPOC, our media is steeped in the influences of only one culture.

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