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[Alsultany, Evelyn](#)

Representations: Visual Arts: Television: United States of America

Introduction

Representations of Muslims in the United States have changed in relation to major political events and US relations with the Middle East – such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Iran hostage crisis, and 11 September 2001. However, representations of Muslim women on US television have been scant and limited. There has not been a plethora of television representations in comparison with what has appeared in Hollywood films and other forms of popular culture (i.e. pulp fiction, detective novels, harlequin novels, and the like).

Representations of Muslim women in television have primarily taken on the following forms: oppressed, liberated from oppression, and post-9/11 US patriots and victims. Before outlining these various representations, it is important to contextualize representations of Muslims on television in relation to the Arab-Muslim conflation and in relation to broader Orientalist tropes in US popular culture, particularly in film.

Arab and Muslim identities have long been conflated in US government and media discourses, as well as in popular culture. Since Arabs and Muslims are usually represented as one and the same, it is difficult to write about representations of Muslims without also addressing representations of Arabs. Arab/Islamic culture is usually portrayed as primitive and barbaric and contrasted with European and American culture, which is portrayed as civilized and enlightened. For example, in the 1921 Hollywood film, *The Sheik*, Arab/Muslim women are shown being sold at a marriage market and living at the whim of men. Such conflations and Orientalist representations are not unique to Hollywood films. Much news reporting on the Iran hostage crisis in 1979–80 conflated Arab, Muslim, and Middle Eastern identities. Though Iran is not an Arab country, through news reporting Iran came to stand in for Arabs, the Middle East, Islam, and terrorism, all of which came to be used interchangeably and represented monolithically. Edward Said's examination of how the news media reported the Iran hostage crisis demonstrates case after case of a biased portrayal of Islam: "During the past few years, especially since events in Iran caught European and American attention so strongly, the media have therefore covered Islam: they have portrayed it, characterized it, analyzed it, given instant courses on it, and consequently they have made it 'known'" (1981, i). "Knowing Islam" in the US came to mean equating Islam with fundamentalism and terrorism. The uniform portrayal of Islam as threatening reduces a diverse and dynamic Islam, including its varied followers and their

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experiences, into something unknown and unknowable. As a result, it is commonly assumed among the US populace that Iranians and Pakistanis are Arab and that all Arabs are Muslim and all Muslims Arab, despite the fact that there are over 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide and that only approximately 15–20 percent of them are Arab (Pew 2011).

Why are these categories interchangeable when most Muslims are not Arab? This conflation enables a particular racial Othering that would not operate in the same way through another conflation, such as, for example, Arab/Christian, Arab/Jew, or Indonesian/Muslim. The result is particularly damaging, since it reduces the inherent – and enormous – variety of the world’s Muslim population, projecting all Muslims as one very particular type: fanatical, misogynistic, anti-American. This recurring conflation, advanced by United States government and media discourses at this historical juncture, serves a larger narrative about an evil-Other that can be powerfully and easily mobilized during times of war. The Arab/Muslim conflation is strategically useful to US empire-building during the War on Terror because it comes with baggage. It draws on centuries-old Orientalist narratives of patriarchal societies and oppressed women, of Muslim fundamentalism and anti-Semitism, of irrational violence and suicide bombings. With this conflation established, it is easy to conceptualize the United States as the inverse of everything that is “Arab/Muslim”: the United States is thus equal and democratic, culturally diverse and civilized, a land of progressive men and of liberated women. Such representations make it difficult to disentangle the Arab/Muslim conflation and to speak with more precision. Thus, the term Arab/Muslim is used here not to continue the conflation, but rather to point to the conflation in representations.

Representations of Muslims in television must be understood in relation to the long history of Orientalist images in Hollywood films and broader cultural representations in the United States. Over the last century, Arab/Muslim men have most often been represented as romantic shaykhs, rich oil shaykhs and, most notably, terrorists. Arab/Muslim women have been portrayed as sultry belly dancers, harem girls, and oppressed women. Early silent films that represented the Middle East, such as *Fatima* (1897), *The Sheik* (1921), and *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), portrayed the region as far away, exotic, and magical; a place of Biblical stories and fairy tales; a place defined by deserts populated by genies, flying carpets, mummies, belly dancers, harem girls, and rich men living in opulent palaces (or equally opulent tents). Jack G. Shaheen documents nearly one thousand Hollywood films and their representations of Arabs and Muslims. He describes the “fictional Arabia” projected by Hollywood in the 1920s–1960s, consisting of deserts, camels, scimitars, palaces, veiled women, belly dancers, concubines held hostage, slave markets, and Arab men who seek to rape white women (Shaheen 2001, 8). Films during this period, made while parts of the Middle East were colonized by European powers, reflect the fantasies of the colonizer and a logic that legitimizes colonialism (Shohat and Stam 1994, Shohat 1991). It was not unusual for both “good” and “bad” Arabs to be represented and for a white man to save the day – saving the good Arabs from the bad Arabs, freeing the female Arab slaves from their captors, and rescuing white women from Arab rapists.

The year 1945 figures as an important historical moment, marking the decline of European colonialism at the end of the Second World War, the beginning of the Cold War, the creation of Israel (in 1948) in the shadow of the Holocaust, and the emergence of the United States as a global power. As the United States began its geopolitical ascendancy, representations of the “foreign” contributed to the making of American national identity; the projection of erotic and exotic fantasies onto the Middle East began to shift to more ominous representations of violence and terrorism (Edwards 2005). Representations of Arabs/Muslims as terrorists emerge with the inauguration of the state of Israel in 1948, the Arab–Israeli war and subsequent Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories in 1967, and the formation of Palestinian resistance movements. Between 1968 and 1976, Palestinians and Palestinian sympathizers led 29 hijackings, forming a central part of the US news cycle and becoming a popular theme in Hollywood films in the 1970s and 1980s (McAlister 2001, 182).

After 1945 and into the 1970s and 1980s, images of Arab/Muslim men as rich, flashy oil shaykhs who threaten the US economy and dangerous terrorists who threaten national security emerged (McAlister 2001, 21). These images, Shaheen writes, “regularly link the Islamic faith with male supremacy, holy war, and acts of terror, depicting Arab Muslims as hostile alien intruders, as lecherous, oily sheikhs intent on using nuclear weapons” (Shaheen 2001, 9). As for representations of Arab women, before the Second World War they were represented as alluring harem girls and belly dancers (Jarmakani 2008). After the Second World War, images of Arab women were largely absent from the representational field, but in the 1970s they reemerged (predominantly in film) as sexy but deadly terrorists and in the 1980s as veiled and oppressed (Naber 2000, Picherit-Duthler and Yunis 2011). After the 1990–91 Gulf War, Arab women become invisible once again in the US media. Therese Saliba writes that Arab women are made invisible by the US media in two ways: they are either not represented, or when they are it is to accentuate their invisibility and therefore to support “neocolonial interests of the new world order and the US media’s repression of

the war's destruction" (Saliba 1994, 126). Representations in television mirror those in film and other media of popular culture. In *The TV Arab*, Jack Shaheen examines children's cartoons, police dramas, and comedy shows on US television from 1975 through 1984, identifying depictions of Arabs as billionaires, bombers, and belly dancers. He writes, "Television tends to perpetuate four basic myths about Arabs: they are all fabulously wealthy; they are barbaric and uncultured; they are sex maniacs with a penchant for white slavery; and they revel in acts of terrorism" (Shaheen 1984, 4). The following section outlines the shift within the last few decades towards representing Muslim women on US television primarily as oppressed, liberated from oppression, patriotic Americans, and innocent victims of the post-9/11 backlash.

Oppressed women

In innumerable ways, and from all ends of the ideological spectrum, Arab and Muslim women have been represented as veiled, oppressed, and in need of rescue. The government and commercial news media have been central to the circulation of stories about "the oppressed Muslim woman." This, however, was not always the case. A Vanderbilt Television News Archive search reveals dozens of news stories on Muslims over the last few decades and shows how the focus has changed over time. In the early 1970s, news stories dealing with Islam do not focus on Muslim women, but rather on African American Muslims. A few news stories were in circulation at the time, such as the KKK poisoning cattle raised by Black Muslims in 1970 and the death of Elijah Muhammad in 1975. Other stories about Black Muslims portrayed them as threatening. For example, in 1977 the focus is on an incident where Black Muslims seized an Islamic Center, a district building, and a Jewish service organization in Washington D.C., holding hostages and killing one of them while demanding the release of some Black Muslims from prison and holding a protest against the film, *Mohammad, Messenger of God*. In the 1970s, as Palestinian Muslims were portrayed as a threat to Israel, Black Muslims were portrayed as a domestic threat.

In addition to a sporadic focus on Black Muslims, the news media also focused on certain political developments in the Middle East that irrevocably changed US–Middle East relations and US foreign policy in the Middle East. These included, in the 1970s, the civil war in Lebanon, a potential Israeli–Palestinian peace plan, and political unrest in Iran followed by the Iran hostage crisis in 1979–80. The network news media not only defined each of these events as the most pressing issues of the moment, but also dramatized them. The ABC News nightly segment on the hostage crisis was titled, "America Held Hostage" and regularly spoke of "Muslim hatred of this country" and "the crescent of crisis" (McAlister 2001, 205). Such representations also gave Americans images of Iranian Muslim women as fundamentalists, anti-American, and as oppressed by their black chadors, chanting "Death to the Great Satan." In the 1980s and 1990s, international political events on US television news focused on the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982), a series of airplane hijackings, and the Gulf War (1990–91). Embedded in all these representations were overlapping narratives of patriarchal structures, Islam as irrational, fanatical, and violent, and the region as lacking in civilization and democracy and needing foreign intervention.

In the 1990s, a focus on Muslim women as victims entered headline news in the United States in relation to two post-Cold War events: the Bosnian civil war and the Taliban becoming the official government in Afghanistan. During the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bosnian Muslims were raped and ethnically cleansed by the Bosnian Serb army (1992–95). News stories focused on Serbs raping Bosnian Muslim women as a weapon of war and also on Bosnian women demonstrating in Sarajevo demanding information about their missing men. In these news reports, Muslim women were portrayed as victims, but they were not victims of their culture or religion. Rather they were victims of the Bosnian Serb army. In 1996, the focus shifted from Bosnia to Afghanistan when the Taliban came to power. News stories from 1996 to 2001 tended to focus on the Taliban's violent and repressive treatment of women, with a focus on the practice of "honor killings" in Afghanistan (Nightline: A Matter of Honor, ABC, 15 and 16 February 1999). These stories made the trope of the oppressed Muslim woman who needs to be saved by the West meaningful to American viewers.

After 9/11, stories of oppressed Muslim women multiplied and became part of the standard news cycle, in both print and television media. This repeated narrative and association with the War on Terror has coded Islam with a series of associations including female genital mutilation, honor killings, public stoning, veiled oppression, and unequal marriage and divorce rights. Consider a sampling of post-9/11 headlines: "Lifting the Veil," "Free to Choose," "Unveiling Freedom," "Under the Veil," "Beneath the Veil," and "Unveiled Threat" (CNN Evening News, 20 November 2001 and 10 September 2007, ABC Evening News, 26 October 2006). Journalists promised to take viewers "behind the veil" to reveal the secret, hidden, and mysterious world and shed light on why Arabs/Muslims are terrorists. News pieces that focused on terrorism typically framed it as senseless, through a standard omission of the social, historical, and political conditions that produce political violence. Within this framework, the oppressed

Muslim woman offered a bizarre but potent explanation, a vital clue into why terrorism occurs: Muslim men oppress their women and regard the West with contempt for its equal gender relations; as a result, they want to subjugate the rest of the world and impose their way of life upon it.

Liberated women

The events of 11 September 2001 marked a turning point in diversifying the images of Muslim women on American television. After 9/11, three other figures were added to the standard “oppressed Muslim woman” trope: the Muslim woman who is liberated from oppression, the patriotic Arab/Muslim American, and the Muslim woman who is the unjust victim of post-9/11 hate crimes.

The shift around 9/11 is not from the representation of Arabs/Muslims solely as terrorist men and oppressed women to a sympathetic representation of Arabs/Muslims. It is from a few exceptional, sympathetic representations of Arabs and Muslim identities to a new representational strategy whereby sympathetic representations are standardized as a stock feature of media narratives. A few films in the late 1990s – *The Siege* (1998) and *Three Kings* (1999) in particular – challenged the trend of representing Arabs and Muslims as one-dimensional stereotypes; these films offered a multidimensional terrorist character and included a “good” Arab or victimized Arab American when representing an evil Arab. During the era of the multicultural movement, when these films were produced, these strategies were considered “new” and “exceptional.” After 9/11 these strategies, especially that of including a “good” Arab American to counteract the “bad” or terrorist Arab, came to define the new standard when representing Arabs. These new figures became standardized in the representational field after 9/11 as a result of the multicultural movement in the 1990s, which produced greater societal awareness regarding stereotyping. Writers and producers of television and film have made concerted efforts to avoid racial and ethnic stereotyping.

The liberated Muslim woman is someone who once faced gender oppression but is now liberated and speaking out against her former life. Such women testify to and authenticate the notion of the “barbaric nature of Islam.” Several Muslim women public figures, including Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Nonie Darwish, and Wafa Sultan have made successful careers as women who have defected from Islam and now testify to its backwardness. Nonie Darwish is an Egyptian who has renounced Islam and is the founder of Arabs for Israel, directs Former Muslims United and has written two books arguing that Islam is a retrograde religion. Wafa Sultan is a Syrian who has also renounced Islam and claims that Islam promotes violence; she is the author of a book entitled *A God That Hates* (2009). Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a Somali who renounced Islam and embraced atheism after 9/11; she is the writer of numerous books as well as the film *Submission*, and claims that Islam is incompatible with democracy. These women play a crucial role as commentators, often appearing on news shows to offer expert opinion and testimonial on the dangers of Islam.

While the oppressed Muslim woman narrative has trans-ideological appeal and has been taken up as a cause by both the right and the left, these native informants collaborate with right-wing agendas that aim not only to help oppressed women, but also to denounce Islam entirely. For example, Hirsi Ali is a fellow at the conservative think tank, the American Enterprise Institute and Nonie Darwish received the Exceptional Courage Award from the conservative Clare Booth Luce Policy Institute. Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s story about being forced to have a cliterodectomy as a young child in Somalia is cited in the pamphlet by right-wing activists Robert Spencer and Phyllis Chesler, “The Violent Oppression of Women in Islam.” David Horowitz’s video based on this pamphlet is narrated by Nonie Darwish (2007). The pamphlet and video argue that the post-9/11 War on Terror declared by the US government is not just about bombs and hijacked airliners. It is also about the oppression of women – often in horrific ways. Nor is this oppression an incidental byproduct of terrorism. The Islamic law – Sharia – that terrorists are fighting to impose upon the world mandates institutionalized discrimination against women (2007).

The oppressed and liberated Muslim woman are two sides of the same coin. Mohja Kahf writes that there are two kinds of stories about Muslim women that circulate and sell in the United States: a victim story or an escapee story (Kahf 2010). Muslim women are portrayed as victims of a brutal religion or as having successfully escaped it. If a story does not fit one or both of these two molds, then it is unlikely to attract attention. While the often nameless, and seemingly endless, stream of oppressed women in news accounts occupy the category of the victim, a much smaller but equally powerful group of native informants promote the narrative of the escapee. The US media uses them to demonstrate that Muslim women’s voices are indeed included in the presumed “post-race” era. However, beneath this apparently enlightened perspective, their voices are often used to advance a particular framing of Islam that promotes Western imperialism.

On a guest appearance on *Anderson Cooper 360* on CNN, Hirsi Ali offered commentary regarding a case in which a

woman in Saudi Arabia was raped and punished with 200 lashes. Hirsi Ali is asked what life is like for women in Saudi Arabia:

For all women, the reality is stay in the house unless you have a pressing need to go outside. If you have a pressing need to go out you must wear the veil. If you marry, your husband can say three times, “I divorce you” and you are divorced. The other way around is not possible. The problem of child brides in Saudi Arabia is as common as drinking espresso coffee in Italy. It is because the Prophet Muhammad married a nine-year-old girl, every man in Saudi Arabia feels that he can marry a minor or he can marry off his daughter who is underage. You will be stoned, flogged if you commit or give the impression that you may have committed adultery. It is not nice being a woman in Saudi Arabia (29 November 2007).

Anderson Cooper replies that he has been told that Islam means “peace” and asks Hirsi Ali to comment on that:

Well it depends on how you define peace. If you define peace as flogging a victim of rape with two hundred stripes because she was in the wrong place at the wrong time, then maybe that is peace. But that is not how we in the West or anyone who believes in the universal declaration of human rights believes to be peace ... In the West when we say peace, we mean something totally different from developing a bomb to eradicate Israel, or from flogging a poor young woman, a nineteen-year-old with two hundred lashes of the whip.

Moustafa Bayoumi writes that these Muslim women commentators are modern-day neo-Orientalists who narrate stories about Islam for Western consumption. The stories they tell are about Islam as a system of tyranny that defeats human liberty, and the subsequent need either to renounce or drastically reform Islam to be more like Christianity, Judaism, or even atheism (Bayoumi 2010). These female native informants are a version of the “good Muslim” who confirms to Western viewers that Islam poses a threat to women and to the West. Sunaina Maira writes:

By definition, “good” Muslims are public Muslims who can offer first-person testimonials, in the mode of the native informant, about the oppression of women in Islam ... and the hatred, racism, and anti-Semitism of Arabs and Muslims. These Muslim spokespersons are the darlings of the Right-wing and mainstream media, publish widely distributed books, and have slick websites (Maira 2009, 635).

Patriotic Americans and Innocent Victims

While there are male Muslim spokespersons, it is the female spokespersons specifically who authenticate a Western co-opted feminist narrative about Islam. These Muslim women spokespersons are often regarded and praised by the news media as “moderate Muslims,” while promoting racism and Orientalism through an authoritative voice as Muslim women who have escaped oppression (Maira 2009, 644).

While the most common representation of Muslim women on US television is of “the oppressed Muslim woman,” the most common representation of Muslim men on US television is of the terrorist. Occasionally Arab/Muslim women appear as terrorists. For example, on the fourth season of the TV drama *24* (FOX 2005), Dina Araz is an Arab/Muslim female terrorist who has lived with her husband and child in the United States for years, secretly conspiring with others to attack the United States and murder hundreds of thousands of innocent Americans. After 9/11, dominant representations of Arab/Muslim men as terrorists and women as oppressed continues.

Post 9/11 patriots

Since 2001, television writers have increasingly created “positive” Arab and Muslim characters to show that they are sensitive to negative stereotyping. Such characters often take the form of a patriotic Arab or Muslim American who assists the US government in its fight against Arab/Muslim terrorism, either as a government agent or as a civilian. These characters more often than not are male, but occasionally there are female versions of these characters. On the sixth season of *24* (FOX 2007), Nadia Yassir is a Muslim American who works for the Counter Terrorism Unit and epitomizes the patriotic Arab/Muslim American in that she actively works for a US government agency to combat terrorism. Other examples include Mohammad “Mo” Hassain, an Arab American Muslim male character who is part of the US Homeland Security Force on the show *Threat Matrix* (ABC, 2003–4); and in *Sleeper Cell* (Showtime, 2005–7) the lead African American character, Darwyn Al-Sayeed, is a “good” Muslim, an undercover FBI agent who proclaims to his colleagues that terrorists have nothing to do with his faith and cautions them not to confuse the two. In a fourth-season episode of *24*, two Arab American brothers say they are tired of being unjustly blamed for terrorist attacks and insist on helping to fight terrorism alongside Jack Bauer (FOX 2005). Islam is

sometimes portrayed as inspiring US patriotism rather than terrorism, challenging the notion that Arabs and Muslims are not American and/or un-American. Judging from the numbers of these patriots, it appears that writers have embraced this strategy as the most direct method to counteract charges of stereotyping. Such representations also reflect the pervasive political discourse of “Arab/Muslim cooperation” wherein “good” or “cooperative” Arab/Muslims are seen as a solution to the domestic War on Terrorism.

Post 9/11 victims

Another popular strategy has been to portray Arab/Muslim Americans as the unjust victims of violence and harassment. This emphasis on victimization and sympathy challenges long-standing representations that have inspired a lack of sympathy and even a sense of celebration when the Arab/Muslim character is killed. In an episode of *The Practice* (“Bad to Worse,” ABC, Season 7, Episode 8, 1 December 2002) the government detains an innocent Arab American man without due process or explanation, and an attorney steps in to defend his rights. The family drama *7th Heaven* featured two episodes with a Muslim family. In one episode, a friend of Ruthie (one of the family’s children), 12-year-old Yasmine, who is veiled and Muslim, is harassed on the street on her way to school (“Suspicion,” WB, Season 6, Episode 12, 21 January 2002). Ruthie and her family are concerned for Yasmine’s well-being and try to get her accepted at Ruthie’s private school. When Yasmine is rejected by the private school because of anti-Muslim sentiment, Ruthie quits her school in an act of solidarity with Muslims, stating that she does not want to be part of group hate. In another episode of *7th Heaven* (“Getting to Know You,” WB, Season 8, Episode 7, 3 November 2003), a Muslim American family moves to the neighborhood and the Camden family plans a party to welcome them. The other neighbors decide to boycott the party because they erroneously assume the new residents are French, and since France did not support the US government’s decision to invade Iraq as part of the War on Terror, they, like many Americans, are boycotting anything and everything French. When the neighbors realize that the new residents are not French, but Muslim American, their impulse to boycott the party is reaffirmed. After Reverend Camden articulates his deep disappointment at the nationalist strand of racism he has witnessed from his neighbors, they reflect on their assumptions about and attitudes toward Muslims, see the error of their ways, and decide to join in welcoming their new Muslim American neighbors. Both episodes focus on representing Muslim Americans as unjust victims of post-9/11 hate. On the TV drama about a college professor, *The Education of Max Bickford* (“Save the Country,” CBS, Season 1, Episode 11, 13 January 2002), an undergraduate student at the college, who is Muslim and wears the hijab, receives a note under her dorm room door containing a death threat. As a result, the college classroom turns into a space to debate post-9/11 civil rights.

These dramas are remarkable in that they encourage a post-9/11 audience to root for certain Arab and Muslim characters and to feel sadness – even outrage – when those characters are unfairly attacked. But such sympathy, it becomes clear, is possible only because of the basic good/bad binary. We support these unlikely “good guys” because they challenge (although they do not overturn) our cultural assumption that the Arab/Muslim character is the “bad guy.” These concessions are reflective of representational modes that have become a defining feature of the “post-race” moment. Herman Gray states that representations of blackness in the 1980s and 1990s rewrote “a strife-ridden past into a harmonized vision of possibility” and in so doing made it difficult to differentiate between “progressive political possibilities” and “neoliberal and conservative rewrites of the same old racial narratives” (Gray 1995, 163). Similarly, post-9/11 television dramas, through multidimensional characters and storylines, construct an internal logic of racial sensitivity and diversity that makes it increasingly difficult to differentiate between new Arab and Muslim representations and the reinscription of long-standing stereotypes (Alsultany 2012).

Breaking the molds

Representations of Muslim women on US television that do not fit the four types of oppressed, liberated, victimized, and patriotic are unusual, as are Muslim characters in leading and recurring roles. The overwhelming number of these representations are associated with the War on Terror, thereby inextricably associating Arab and Muslim identities with terrorism, extremism, and oppression. In digging through the heap of 9/11 popular culture, there are a few sitcoms and reality television shows that break out of prevailing molds.

In reality television, Sahar Dika, a 21-year-old aspiring actress from Dearborn, Michigan, was a cast member of the *Real World* in New Orleans in 2010. Rima Fakhri, the first Arab American Muslim to win the Ms. USA pageant in 2010, was one of the contestants on the USA network’s reality television show *WWE Tough Enough* (2010–11) where she trained to become a professional wrestler.

All-American Muslim, a reality show that followed five Muslim families in Dearborn, Michigan, was broad cast on

the TIC network from November 2011 to January 2012. Among the cast members are a police officer, football coach, government employee, and federal agent fulfilling the requisite patriotic American representations on US television. The show also includes cast members who break the mold, including a woman entrepreneur and a woman who marries an Irish Catholic American. The show was met with protest from the Florida Family Association (run by David Caton) who accused the show of hiding the danger that Islam poses to America and pressured advertisers to withdraw their commercials. In other words, since there are no terrorists in the show, some right-wing activists see the show as deceptive. Lowe's Home Improvement withdrew their commercials, leading to much controversy. A grassroots movement, the National Lowe's Boycott Campaign, was launched in response, and hip-hop mogul Russell Simmons announced that he would buy up the advertising space. The controversy around the reception of this reality show demonstrates that while some media producers and viewers are ready to see Muslims as human beings, a segment of the population is resistant to non-stereotyped images of Muslims in the United States.

In sitcoms, an equivalent to Canada's *Little Mosque on the Prairie* has not been produced in the United States. However, a few sitcoms with Arab/Muslim male characters have appeared, in particular, *Whoopi*, *Community*, and *Aliens in America*. Whoopi Goldberg's sitcom *Whoopi* (NBC, 2003–4) premiered two years after 9/11 and centers on Mavis Rae, a former singer and one-hit wonder who opens a small hotel in New York City. Much of the humor centers on her interaction with her Iranian handyman, Nasim, played by Omid Djalili (the first Iranian in a recurring role on US television). Nasim is the butt of jokes about terrorism, his experiences with racial profiling are highlighted, and he is fearful of deportation. Nasim is a humorous and likeable character whose life as a handyman is affected by 9/11 in humorous ways. *Whoopi* favors a representational strategy that challenges stereotypes and defuses racial tension by using humor to accentuate stereotypes to demonstrate their absurdity. Though nominated for an Emmy award, it lasted for only one season.

Aliens in America (CW, 2007–8) also lasted only one season. It is about the Tolchucks, a middle-class white American family in Wisconsin with two children in high school: a daughter who is popular and a son who is awkward and unpopular. The mother comes up with a scheme to popularize her son by signing up for a foreign exchange student from Norway to come and live with the family. She assumes that he will be blond and gorgeous, and therefore make her son immediately popular. Instead, they receive a Pakistani Muslim named Raja Musharaff; they initially try to get rid of him since his presence would ruin the popularity plan. However, the Tolchucks end up raising Raja as their own after they discover that his parents have died. Raja is an offensively one-dimensional character: he speaks with an accent, wears traditional Pakistani clothing, has strange customs, and is very naïve and square. He believes in dating only if chaperoned, will not kiss until married, does not lie, and is extremely honest and giving of himself. In one episode, he works at the convenience store and refuses to sell alcohol to his classmates with fake IDs ("Help Wanted" 2007). His host brother pleads with him to sell them alcohol to give them a chance of becoming popular, but Raja is unyielding; he does not care about being cool and subscribes to higher principles. Raja is not alone in being caricatured: Americans are depicted as ignorant and racist, but the Tolchuck family is trying to rise above their surroundings.

Despite the stereotype, the sitcom is notable for having a Muslim character in a leading role. The focus of the show is ultimately about two misfits, the white American boy who does not fit in at school, and the Pakistani Muslim who does not fit into suburban American culture. The representational strategy is to parallel these two outcasts to accentuate their similarities, while still exploring cultural and religious differences. Like *Whoopi*, the show tries to defuse post-9/11 tension about Muslims through humor, reveling in their ordinariness and reminding viewers of how much of their life is *not* about terrorism but about petty squabbles, social anxieties, and the other mundane dilemmas of being human.

Community (NBC, 2009–present), in its third season, is a sitcom about students at a community college who have formed a study group. Danny Pudi plays Abed Nadir, a Palestinian American student who is obsessed with popular culture and socially awkward. Abed is a weird guy, but his weirdness has nothing to do with his ethnic or religious identity. Despite references to his obligation to take over the family falafel business and a stereotypical appearance by his father, Abed is a refreshingly original character unlike any other portrayal of Arab Americans on network television to date.

Finally, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (CBC, 2007–present), while not broadcast on US television, is the most notable television show treating Muslims in North America to date. Winner of numerous awards, it was broadcast for six seasons by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Created by Zarqa Nawaz, a Muslim Canadian woman of Pakistani descent, it is about Muslims in a small Canadian town who start a mosque and community center. Nawaz began the sitcom with a didactic mission: to bring the lives of ordinary Muslims to North American viewers and to

educate viewers about who ordinary Muslims are. Beneath the laughs, it is about two communities colliding and learning to live together, while taking in the internal dynamics and struggles within the Muslim community. The show immerses viewers in the specifics of observant Muslim life, focusing on internal debates between conservative and liberal Muslims. The resulting discussions are both hilarious and unprecedented, including: how to determine when Ramadan officially begins (does one spot the new moon with a telescope or with one's eyes, or follow what is determined in Saudi Arabia?); whether there should be barrier between men and women at the mosque; whether Muslims can celebrate Halloween; what a Muslim-compliant bachelor party should look like; and whether Muslim women can take a swimming class if the instructor is a gay man. Nawaz says: "We try to find the hilarity in every scenario ... Muslim women cover their hair because they're worried men will be attracted to it. But what if the guy is gay and isn't attracted to it? Does that count?" (Intini 2006).

The series also addresses issues external to the community, such as racial profiling and widespread assumptions that Muslims are terrorists. The representational strategies used include humanizing Muslims by featuring them as lead characters, depicting the differences among them, and showing that Muslims are of varying degrees of religiosity. What is particularly notable about *Whoopi*, *Aliens in America*, *Community*, and *Little Mosque on the Prairie* is that the storylines do not revolve around terrorism or homeland security. They are about a boutique hotel, a high school, a community college, and a community center. Not only do the storylines represent a departure from prior tropes, but the characters also deviate from the standard molds of the oppressed woman, the liberated woman, the victim, and the patriot.

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