

Arabs and Muslims in the media: Race and representation after 9/11 by Evelyn Alsultany, (2012). New York: New York University Press. 227 pages. ISBN: 978-0-8147-0732-6

In the decade after the terror attacks of September 11 there have been a plethora of representations of Muslims in the media, the vast majority of which have been a typecasting of dangerous Muslim men—usually terrorists, and oppressed Muslim women. However, there have been sympathetic portrayals as well. Muslims have been portrayed as victims of racial profiling, hate crimes, and discrimination in popular television programs such as *24*, *Law and Order*, and *The Practice*. In this unique and timely work, Evelyn Alsultany, Professor of American Culture at the University of Michigan, explores why these sympathetic portrayals of Muslims in the mass media fail to challenge negative stereotypes and possibly even reinforce negative understandings of Muslims and therefore perpetuate biases. As Alsultany observes, despite the proliferation of sympathetic portrayals of Arab and Muslim Americans in the media during the weeks and months after 9/11 “hate crimes, work place discrimination, bias incidents, and airline discrimination targeting Arab and Muslim Americans increased exponentially” (p. 4) and continue to persist.

Though representations of Muslims in the media in the post-9/11 context have shown some levels of complexity, as opposed to the one dimensional caricatures of earlier times (Shaheen, 2001), these representations are occurring in what Alsultany describes as a post-race era. Post-race discourses assert that the U.S. has made notable racial progress since the time of slavery, Jim Crow laws, and Japanese internment camps, especially with the election of a Black president, and therefore racism is a thing of the past. This way of thinking assumes that the appearance of sympathetic and positive portrayals of Muslims and Arabs on television programs signals and confirms that the U.S. has moved towards a post-racial era. However, post-race declarations are problematic as they cloak and deny the persistence of racism. This occurs in the media through “simplified complex representations.” Simplified complex representations, according to Alsultany, are “strategies used by television producers, writers, and directors to give the impression that the representations they are producing are complex” (p. 21). Simplified complex representations manifest in TV dramas and films when a ‘positive’ representation of a Muslim or Arab is included to seemingly offset the Muslim/Arab terrorist stereotype which often underlies the story line. Through strategies such as inserting patriotic Arab or Muslim Americans, showing diverse Muslim identities, showing the plight of Arab and Muslim Americans post-9/11, and fictionalizing the Muslim countries threatening the security of the West, simplified complex representations are achieved in the media and giving the impression of a post-race society. However, these representations unwittingly collaborate in forming multicultural and post-race illusions. This is relevant in light of the current War on Terror, where the U.S. through the media creates a benevolent image for itself by showing positive representations of its ‘enemies’ in this conflict.

Deploying a critical cultural studies approach, Alsultany analyzes the ideologies which underlie images and story lines, as opposed to simply analyzing whether images are ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ in and of themselves. Alsultany uses this approach because she argues that examining an “image in relation to its narrative context reveals how it participates in a larger field of meaning about Arabs and Muslims” (p. 14). This is pertinent in the post-9/11 context as “a field of meaning, or an ideological field, is a means to encompass the range of acceptable ideas about the War on Terror, including highlighting the ideas that are on the margins and are therefore deemed unacceptable” (p. 14).

Alsultany organizes her work into three major sections: logics, affects, and challenges. The section on logics examines how writers and producers of TV dramas employ simplified complex representational strategies in attempts to circumvent reinforcing Muslim/Arab narratives associated with terrorism. Most of this analysis examines FOX Entertainment’s TV drama *24* as well as HBO’s *Sleeper Cell*. These strategies ultimately fail to challenge Muslim/Arab stereotypes related to terrorism as the overarching themes of these dramas revolve around Muslim terrorists and support the notion that the government needs to wage a War on Terror. Drawing from the work of Mahmood Mamdani (2004), Alsultany notes that these dramas have a tendency to dichotomize Muslims into two camps, those who are ‘good’ Muslims and ‘bad’ Muslims. ‘Good’ Muslims are portrayed as being “modern, secular, and Westernized” and ‘bad Muslims’ are “doctrinal, antimodern, and virulent” (Mamdani, 2004, p. 24). Within this dichotomy ‘good’ Muslims are overly patriotic, unflinchingly supportive of their governments, and unquestioningly accept the necessity of the War on Terror. ‘Good’ Muslim ‘bad’ Muslim discourses lack complex historical analysis in explaining the roots of terror. In addition to providing a logical grounding for the War on Terror, these TV dramas also legitimize the use of torture to stop terrorism through illusions of living in a post-race society. As Alsultany mentions, “if the actions of the government, or the military, are not racist, the people the United States fights must be the bad guys” (p. 45). Though these dramas do not glorify the use of torture, they acknowledge that it is a necessary evil to combat terrorism, and since it is inflicted on the ‘bad guys’ in a supposed post-race society it is not construed as racist or illegitimate.

The next section of this work examines the accompanying affects associated with the logics embedded in the War on Terror. Alsultany notes that certain Muslim identities are designated as being worthy of sympathy while others are not. Sympathy for Muslim women is regulated through anti-Muslim racism cloaked under the guise of liberal feminist discourses in the media. These depictions are limited to the plight of oppressed Muslim women who are victims of violent Muslim men and a backwards culture. Sympathy for Muslim men is often limited to Muslim converts and is mediated by explaining their descent into terrorism through failed heterosexual masculinity or being a result of a biological disposition towards violence. These sympathetic portrayals of Muslims are simplified complex representational strategies found in both TV dramas as well as in news stories associated with the War on Terror.

The final section on challenges examines how non-profit organizations, civil rights groups, and TV writers and producers attempt to challenge the notion that Muslims and Islam are incompatible with the West. This is achieved through “diversity patriotism”, which is “a version of American patriotism that glorifies the notion of a diverse citizenry and emphasizes America’s multicultural unity” (p. 134). Diversity patriotism as seen through PSAs and advertisements of non-profit organizations and civil rights groups have a tendency to propagate ‘good’ Muslim ‘bad’ Muslim discourses in which patriotic Muslims are defined through religious ambiguity, having shared American values, and support for the War on Terror. Hence the overall message is that Muslims need to prove their credentials for inclusion in a multicultural American society.

Alsultany’s work provides a unique and robust examination of post-9/11 challenges facing Muslims through the media. By putting forward the notion of “simplified complex representations” Alsultany, unlike many authors who have previously delved in to this topic, is able to intelligently discuss the inefficacy of ‘positive’ and ‘sympathetic’ portrayals of Muslims/Arabs in the media as all of these representations are ultimately framed in the context of terrorism. Instead of limiting her analysis to TV dramas and news coverage of Muslims, Alsultany takes her examination a step further by looking at PSAs and advertisements of civil rights groups and non-profit organizations which unwittingly perpetuate the same biases found in more popular forms of the media. The overall thrust of Alsultany’s work, which is accomplished through insightful analysis of varying forms of media, is to demonstrate that the persistence of racism, denials of the persistence of racism, and illusions of the end of racism, clearly indicate that positive representations do not signify the end of racial biases. Rather, it is suggestive that “articulation of racism in government, media, and civic discourses has become more varied, subtle, and diffuse” (p. 169).

Alsultany, suggests logical and possibly overly simplistic ways of countering problematic representations of Muslims in the media, which include showing Muslims in the media outside of the context of terrorism and other tropes associated with Muslims/Islam. She explores a few sitcoms, most of which weren’t overly successful or long lived, that have employed this technique to make her point. Ultimately, if varying forms of media, weather TV dramas, news reports, or sitcoms do not address Muslim grievances with US foreign policy issues, continue to explain away acts of terrorism through clash of civilizational discourses, and perpetuate illusions of a multicultural/ post-race society, nothing will change—a point which Alsultany fervently embraces and asserts.

Naved Bakali
McGill University

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