

Asultany, Evelyn, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11*, New York University Press, New York, 2012, ISBN 9 7808 1470 7326, 239 pp., US\$23.00.

The central objective of Evelyn Asultany's *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11* is identifying and discussing what she calls 'simplified complex representations' – image-based strategies wherein the present is pronounced a post-racial era while the areas of difference allowed within the complex representation are limited and the racial stereotypes that continue to exist in the open are reinforced.

The first chapter of the book deals with the disturbing occurrence of life imitating art, where members of the American armed forces have followed the example of television characters such as 24's Jack Bauer in their methods of interrogating Muslims and Arabs instead of following their training. It is noted that the terms 'Arab', 'Muslim', 'Arab-American' and 'Muslim-American' are often conflated, repeating the Orientalist discourses of the past, which create a 'them' to oppose to 'real' Americans.

Chapter 2 establishes the simplified complex representation as the predominant manoeuvre of American popular media in the post-9/11 era. In this chapter, the focus is the inclusion of 'good Arabs' or Muslim patriots in television and the positioning of the audience to sympathise with them when these 'good' Arabs or Muslims are the victims of hate crimes or discrimination. Asultany does not flatly reject this kind of sympathy; rather, she identifies that it often forms part of a broader strategy of political distancing that relies on pity and reinscribes 'real' Americans as the superior party.

The subject of politicised pity is developed in Chapter 3, where the image of the Muslim woman as the quintessential object of popular American sympathy is examined in detail. The Muslim woman is figured as a kind of damsel in distress (to be liberated by the War on Terror), while Asultany notes the way in which pity is regulated in order to focus the Muslim woman as a victim of Islam while the strategies of the pro-War media, including TV dramas, the news and media that cross over the two (such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show*) make little or no reference to the actions of the US military that contributed to the development

of Islamic fundamentalism (such as arming the *mujahideen* by the US military during the Cold War).

Chapter 4 continues to discuss the regulation of public emotion, focusing on its capacity to portray Muslim men as undeserving of sympathy. This chapter consists primarily of two case studies: those of John Walker Lindh and Jose Padilla, both American-born Islamic converts who ultimately were convicted as terrorists. Here the device of simplified complex representation is shown to reduce two life stories to problematically simplified root causes – sexual 'perversity' or a youth of petty crime, respectively – which has the effect of defining 'Islam' and Islamic fundamentalism solely in these reductive and negative terms. As in Chapter 3, the ultimate result is that consideration of the broader historical and political contexts is portrayed as being no longer necessary as the narrative engine that reduces these complex issues to caricatures seems to have done the thinking already.

In Chapter 5, Asultany seems to suggest that the dominant American view of Muslims places them on an axis with 'American' at one pole and 'Muslim' or 'Arab' at the other. In order to be a 'good Muslim', one must be closer to the 'American' pole, demonstrated by the sharing of American values, performing public services and participating in community activities such as sport, being 'patriotic', and so forth. This shows the error in what Asultany terms 'diversity patriotism' – cultural sameness is proven to be a means and an end despite the diversity it promises.

The book ends on a cautious note – Asultany concedes that there are signs in the American arts of representations of Arabs and Muslims that do not aim at limiting difference, self-congratulatory sympathy or cultural sameness. While Asultany states that the issues of human rights in the post 9/11 period are of greater concern than the media's representations of them, she seems hopeful that an increase in diverse representations of Arabs and Muslims as human beings rather than simply as 'terrorists' or 'not terrorists' may help to usher in a positive cultural environment in which the human rights of American Muslims and Arabs will be given greater consideration.

– Jason Archbold