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Arabs and Muslims in the Media after 9/11: Representational Strategies for a “Postrace” Era

Evelyn Alsultany

After 9/11 a strange thing happened: there was an increase in sympathetic portrayals of Arabs and Muslims on US television. If a TV drama or Hollywood film represented an Arab or Muslim as a terrorist, then the story line usually included a “positive” representation of an Arab or Muslim to offset the negative depiction. Dozens of TV dramas portrayed Arab and Muslim Americans as the unjust target of hate crimes or as patriotic US citizens. President George W. Bush was sure to distinguish between Arab and Muslim “friends” and “enemies,” stating “the enemy of America is not our many Muslim friends; it is not our many Arab friends. Our enemy is a radical network of terrorists, and every government that supports them.”¹ News reporters interviewed Arab and Muslim Americans, seemingly eager to include their perspectives on the terrorist attacks, careful to point out their experiences with hate crimes.

Yet at the same time that sympathetic portrayals of Arab and Muslim Americans proliferated on US commercial television in the weeks, months, and years after 9/11, hate crimes, workplace discrimination, bias incidents, and airline discrimination targeting Arab and Muslim Americans increased exponentially. According to the FBI, hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims multiplied by 1,600 percent from 2000 to 2001.² In just the first weeks and months after 9/11, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, and other organizations documented hundreds of violent incidents experienced by Arab and Muslim Americans and people mistaken for Arabs or Muslims, including several murders. Dozens of airline passengers perceived to be Arab or Muslim were removed from flights. Hundreds of Arab and Muslim Americans reported discrimination at work, receiving hate mail, and physical assaults, and their property, mosques, and community centers vandalized or set on fire.³ In the decade after 9/11, such discriminatory acts have persisted.

In addition to individual citizens taking the law into their own hands, the US government passed legislation that targeted Arabs and Muslims (both inside and outside the United States) and legalized the suspension of constitutional rights.⁴ The government's overt propaganda of war was palatable to many citizens on edge and regarded with suspicion by others as the government passed the USA PATRIOT Act, initiated war in Afghanistan and later in Iraq, and explained the terrorist attacks to the public by stating "they hate us for our freedom."

Given that Arabs and Muslims have been stereotyped for over a century, given that 9/11 was such an opportune moment for further stereotyping, given that the US government passed domestic and foreign policies that compromised the civil and human rights of Arabs and Muslims, and given that demonizing the enemy during times of war has been commonplace, why would sympathetic portrayals appear during such a fraught moment? As overt war propaganda has become increasingly transparent and ineffective over the decades since World War II and the Cold War, the production and circulation of "positive" representations of the "enemy" have become essential to projecting the United States as benevolent, especially in its declaration of war and passage of racist policies. Positive representations of Arabs and Muslims have helped form a new kind of racism, one that projects antiracism and multiculturalism on the surface but simultaneously produces the logics and affects necessary to legitimize racist policies and practices.⁵ It is no longer the case that the other is explicitly demonized to justify war or injustice. Now the other is portrayed sympathetically in order to project the United States as an enlightened country that has entered a postrace era.

The representational mode that has become standard since 9/11 seeks to balance a negative representation with a positive one, what I refer to as "simplified complex representations." These are strategies used by television producers, writers, and directors to give the impression that the representations they are producing are complex, yet they do so in a simplified way. These predictable strategies can be relied on if the plot involves an Arab or Muslim terrorist, but are a new standard alternative to (and seem a great improvement on) the stock ethnic villains of the past. I argue that simplified complex representations are the representational mode of the so-called postrace era, signifying a new standard of racial representations. These representations often challenge or complicate earlier stereotypes yet contribute to a multicultural or postrace illusion. Simplified complex representations have taken numerous forms in TV dramas and news reporting, some of which I outline here to highlight the various mechanisms through which positive imagery of Arabs and Muslims

can operate to justify discrimination, mistreatment, and war against Arabs and Muslims.

Simplified Complex Representations in TV Dramas

Watching dozens of television shows between 2001 and 2009, it becomes evident that writers have increasingly created “positive” Arab and Muslim characters to show that they are sensitive to negative stereotyping. Such positive representations have taken several forms, such as a patriotic Arab or Muslim American, an Arab or Muslim who is willing to help the United States fight terrorism, or an innocent Arab or Muslim American who is the victim of post-9/11 hate crimes. If an Arab/Muslim terrorist is represented in the story line of a TV drama or film, then a “positive” representation of an Arab, Muslim, Arab American, or Muslim American is typically included, seemingly to subvert the stereotype of the terrorist.

Examples of patriotic Arab or Muslim American characters who assist the US government in its fight against terrorism, either as a government agent or civilian, include Mohammad “Mo” Hassain, an Arab American Muslim character who is part of the USA Homeland Security Force on the show *Threat Matrix*, and Nadia Yassir, a dedicated member of the Counter Terrorist Unit on season 6 of *24*.⁶ In *Sleeper Cell* the “good” Muslim is the lead African American character, Darwyn Al-Sayeed, 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.⁷ This strategy challenges 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 potential charges of stereotyping.

Multiple stories appeared on TV dramas with Arab or Muslim Americans as the unjust targets of hate—as victims of violence and harassment. The viewer is nearly always positioned to sympathize with their plight. In an episode of *The Practice*, the government detains an innocent Arab American without due process or explanation and an attorney steps in to defend his rights.⁸ On another episode of *The Practice*, an Arab American man is barred from being a passenger on an airplane, and it is debated in court whether airlines have the right to discriminate in a post-9/11 world in which Arab and Muslim identities are considered a security threat.⁹ This emphasis on victimization and sympathy challenges long-standing representations of Arabs and Muslims as terrorists that have inspired a lack of sympathy and even a sense of celebration when the Arab or Muslim character is killed.¹⁰

However, many of these sympathetic portrayals of Arabs and Muslims do the ideological work of justifying discriminatory policies. For example, a TV drama that portrays an Arab American as the unjust victim of post-9/11 discrimination often appears in a story line that concludes that it is unfortunate but inevitable that Arabs and Muslims will have to deal with discrimination because of the exceptional national security crisis. So, on the one hand, we have unusually sympathetic portrayals of Arabs and Muslims on network television. And on the other, the image often appears in a narrative that justifies discrimination against them. Furthermore, the inclusion of positive representations of Arabs and Muslims come in limited forms: patriotic Americans and victimized Americans.

In addition to Arab and Muslim patriots and victims, TV dramas use numerous devices to circumvent the charge of stereotyping, including flipping the enemy and fictionalizing the country of the enemy. “Flipping the enemy” involves leading the viewer to believe that Muslim terrorists are plotting to destroy the United States, and then revealing that those Muslims are merely pawns or a front for Euro-American or European terrorists. The enemy’s identity is thus flipped: viewers discover that the terrorist is not Arab, or they find that the Arab or Muslim terrorist is part of a larger network of international terrorists. During season 2 of *24*, Counter Terrorism Unit agent Jack Bauer spends the first half of the season tracking down a Middle Eastern terrorist cell, ultimately subverting a nuclear attack. In the second half of the season, we discover that European and Euro-American businessmen are behind the attack, goading the United States to declare a war on the Middle East in order to benefit from the increase in oil prices.¹¹ By including multiple terrorist identities, this strategy seeks to challenge the idea that terrorism is an Arab or Muslim monopoly.

It has become increasingly common for the country of the terrorist characters in television dramas to go unnamed. This strategy rests on the assumption that leaving the nationality of the villain blank eliminates potential offensiveness; if no particular country or ethnicity is named, then there is less reason for any particular group to be offended by the portrayal. In season 4 of *24*, the terrorist family is from an unnamed Middle Eastern country. They are possibly from Turkey, but where exactly is never stated; it is, we assume, intentionally left ambiguous.¹² In *The West Wing*, the fictional country “Qumar” is a source of terrorist plots; in season 8 of *24*, it is “Kamistan.” Fictionalizing the country of the terrorist can give a show more latitude in creating salacious story lines that might be criticized if identified with an actual country.

Despite the shift away from the more blatant stereotypes of previous decades, Arab and Muslim identities are still understood and evaluated primarily in relation to terrorism. This binary focus, in turn, overpowers the strategies described above. Though some television writers and producers might desire to create innovative shows, devoid of stereotypes, such efforts are overwhelmed by the sheer momentum of the current representational scheme. Representations of Arab and Muslim identities in contexts that have nothing to do with terrorism remain strikingly unusual in American commercial media.¹³

Simplified Complex Representations in News Reporting

Versions of simplified complex representations that commonly appear in news reporting include the use of disclaimers and native informants, often found in stories about oppressed Muslim women. An examination of representations of Arab and Muslim women in the commercial news media after 9/11 reveals an overwhelming number of stories about the oppression of Muslim women. Within a year after 9/11, headlines often read as follows: “Lifting the Veil,” “Free to Choose,” “Unveiling Freedom,” “Under the Veil,” “Beneath the Veil,” and “Unveiled Threat.”¹⁴ Journalists promised to take viewers “behind the veil” to reveal a secret, hidden, mysterious world that would shed light on why Arabs/Muslims are terrorists. The oppression of women is framed as providing insight, a vital clue, into why terrorism occurs. What is revealed “behind the veil”? An assault of evidence is then presented, testifying to the oppressive and backward nature of Islam, especially when it comes to women. Story after story chronicles Muslim women dying in “honor killings”; facing female genital mutilation; being beaten on the streets of Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia for violating the dress code; sentenced to death for adultery and being buried alive in the ground or stoned to death; beaten for disobeying their husbands; raped by male family members; and being unable to get a divorce or child custody rights.¹⁵

A November 2001 article in *Time* magazine, “The Women of Islam,” by Lisa Beyer, is one example of how journalists use simplified complex representational strategies while advancing a monolithic image of Islam as brutal, violent, and oppressive.¹⁶ The article’s subtitle reads: “The Taliban perfected subjugation. But nowhere in the Muslim world are women treated as equals.” The article begins with a few concessions, stating that the prophet Muhammad was a feminist who improved the status of women in the seventh century. The author also writes:

While it is impossible, given their diversity, to paint one picture of women living under Islam today, it is clear that the religion has been used in most Muslim countries not to liberate but to entrench inequality. The Taliban, with its fanatical subjugation of the female sex, occupies an extreme, but it nevertheless belongs on a continuum that includes, not so far down the line, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Pakistan and the relatively moderate states of Egypt and Jordan. Where Muslims have afforded women the greatest degree of equality—in Turkey—they have done so by overthrowing Islamic precepts in favor of secular rule. As Riffat Hassan, professor of religious studies at the University of Louisville, puts it, “The way Islam has been practiced in most Muslim societies for centuries has left millions of Muslim women with battered bodies, minds and souls.”¹⁷

Journalists often begin with a disclaimer—“It is impossible to capture the diversity of the Muslim world,” or “These are not Islamic practices”—before presenting an onslaught of evidence to prove the brutality of Islam. The disclaimer signals that the journalist is aware of the diversity of Muslim lived experiences and is making an effort to present a semblance of sensitivity and awareness. While lip service is paid to diversity and complexity, the vast majority of evidence supports the opposite idea.

In addition to using disclaimers to signal that the news media do not intend to contribute to a monolithic portrait of Islam, and selectively including and excluding particular aspects of the context to understand the oppressed Muslim woman, another important simplified complex representational strategy is the use of native informants. This is evident in how the above quote by the Islamic feminist scholar Riffat Hassan is used. Several Muslim women, including Nonie Darwish, Wafa Sultan, and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, have made successful careers as women who have defected from Islam and become spokespersons for its inherent backwardness. While the oppressed Muslim woman narrative has cross-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. Darwish, an Egyptian, is the founder of Arabs for Israel, the director of Former Muslims United, and the author of two books arguing that Islam is a retrograde religion.¹⁸ Sultan, a Syrian, claims that Islam promotes violence; she is the author of a book titled *A God Who Hates*.¹⁹ Hirsi Ali, a Somali, embraced atheism after 9/11; she has written numerous books in which she argues that Islam is incompatible with democracy.²⁰

In a guest appearance on CNN’s *Anderson Cooper 360*, Hirsi Ali commented on a case in which a woman in Saudi Arabia was raped and punished with two hundred lashes. In response to a question about what life is like for women in Saudi Arabia, Hirsi Ali said:

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.²¹

Hirsi Ali’s insider status authenticates her narrative. Moustafa Bayoumi argues 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 to either renounce or drastically reform Islam to be more like Christianity, Judaism, or even atheism.²² 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.”²³ While there are male Muslim spokespersons, it is the women specifically who authenticate a Western feminist narrative about Islam. These female spokespersons are often regarded and praised by the news media as “moderate Muslims.”²⁴

My point here is not that we should not feel outrage at human rights abuses and injustice. Rather, my point is that pity for the oppressed Muslim woman has been strategically used to advance US imperialism. This highly mediated evocation of outrage for the plight of the oppressed Muslim woman inspires support of US interventions in Arab and Muslim countries. It is no coincidence that inspiring outrage at the impact of US foreign policies—from sanctions in Iraq that killed approximately five hundred thousand children to the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have killed over one hundred thousand civilians to the detention of hundreds of Muslims at Guantánamo Bay prison without being charged—is not part of the regular news cycle. Sympathy for Muslim women operates to justify withholding sympathy for Muslim men because they presumably deserve to be in Guantánamo or Abu Ghraib.

Arab and Muslim victims emerge as particularly important to simplified complex representations because they allow viewers to *feel* for “the enemy.” The growth of this affect in turn comes to symbolize multicultural progress.

Rather than demonize all Arabs and Muslims, having sympathy for some of them reflects an enlightened culture that can distinguish between the “good” and “bad” ones. The continued support of US empire after 9/11 has been made possible partly through the use of disclaimers, native informants, and other simplified complex representations that signal that the United States has achieved a post-race society that no longer discriminates.

Notes

1. George W. Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” September 20, 2001, www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html.
2. See, for example, American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, “Report on Hate Crimes and Discrimination against Arab Americans: The Post-September 11 Backlash” (Washington, DC: American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee Research Institute, 2003), www.adc.org/hatecrimes/pdf/2003_report_web.pdf.
3. Ibid.
4. For a summary of government initiatives after 9/11, see Anny Bakalian and Mehdi Bozorgmehr, *Backlash 9/11: Middle Eastern and Muslim Americans Respond* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 253–65.
5. I am building here on arguments made, for example, in the following: Howard Winant, *The New Politics of Race: Globalism, Difference, Justice* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Jodi Melamed, “The Spirit of Neoliberalism: From Racial Liberalism to Neoliberal Multiculturalism,” *Social Text*, no. 89 (2006): 1–24; and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006).
6. *Threat Matrix*, ABC, September 18, 2003–January 29, 2004; *24*, FOX, season 6, January 14–May 21, 2007.
7. “Al-Fatihah,” *Sleeper Cell*, Showtime, season 1, episode 1, December 4, 2005.
8. “Inter Arma Silent Leges,” *The Practice*, ABC, season 6, episode 9, December 9, 2001.
9. “Bad to Worse,” *The Practice*, ABC, season 7, episode 8, December 1, 2002.
10. For more on the history of representations of Arabs, see Jack G. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Northampton, MA: Interlink Publishing Group, 2001).
11. “Day 2,” *24*, FOX, October 28, 2002–May 20, 2003.
12. “Day 4: 7am–8am,” *24*, FOX, January 9, 2005.
13. Even post-9/11 films with positive representation of Arabs and Muslim characters, such as *The Visitor* (2007) and *Sorry, Haters* (2005), are framed in the context of 9/11. *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (2007–2012), a sitcom televised by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, has not crossed over into the United States. Three sitcoms have been a departure from the 9/11 context: *Whoopi!* (NBC, 2003–4); *Aliens in America* (CW, 2007–8); and *Community* (NBC, 2009–present).
14. “Lifting the Veil,” *CNN Newsnight*, November 20, 2001; “Free to Choose,” “Unveiling Freedom,” *CNN Newsnight*, December 3, 2001; “Under the Veil,” ABC, *Nightline*, October 26, 2006; Anna Mulrine, “Unveiled Threat: The Taliban Is Relentless in Its Oppression of Afghan Women,” *U.S. News & World Report*, October 15, 2001, 32–34; Richard Lacayo, “Lifting the Veil,” *Time*, December 3, 2001, 34–49; and “Beneath the Veil,” *CNN Newsnight*, September 13, 2002.
15. See, for example, Richard Lacayo, Hannah Beech, Hannah Bloch, Matthew Forney, Terry McCarthy, Jeff Chu, Jeffrey Ressler, Alex Perry, Tim McGirk, and John F. Dickerson, “About Face,” *Time*, December 3, 2001, www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1001344,00.html; and David Van Biema, Marguerite Michaels, and Nadia Mustafa, “Islam: In the U.S.: Freer, But Not Friedan,” *Time*, December 3, 2001, www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1001348,00.html#ixzz0r2vh2irx.

16. Lisa Beyer, “The Women of Islam,” *Time*, November 25, 2001, www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,185647,00.html.
17. Ibid.
18. Nonie Darwish, *Now They Call Me Infidel: Why I Renounced Jihad for America, Israel, and the War on Terror* (New York: Sentinel HC, 2006); and Darwish, *Cruel and Usual Punishment: The Terrifying Global Implications of Islamic Law* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008).
19. Wafa Sultan, *A God Who Hates* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2009).
20. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel* (New York: Free Press, 2007).
21. “Crime and Punishment/Saudi Arabian Rape Case/Ali Interview,” *Anderson Cooper 360*, CNN, November 29, 2007.
22. Moustafa Bayoumi, “The God That Failed: The Neo-Orientalism of Today’s Muslim Commentators,” in *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend*, ed. Andrew Shryock (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 79–93.
23. Sunaina Maira, “‘Good’ and ‘Bad’ Muslim Citizens: Feminists, Terrorists, and U.S. Orientalisms,” *Feminist Studies* 35.3 (2009): 631–56.
24. Ibid.

