How Stereotypes Gain Their Power: Evelyn Alsultany on Hollywood’s Arabs and Muslims
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In the following interview, Alsultany provides her expert opinion on post-9/11 representations of the Middle East in American television and film.

In the introduction to your book *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11*, you discuss orientalist representations of Arabs and Muslims throughout U.S. history. Can you share some of the ways Americans have been led to associate Arabs and Muslims with patriarchy and misogyny?

In his 2001 book, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Jack Shaheen documents over 900 films produced by Hollywood since the beginning of cinema in 1896 and their portrayal of Arabs. He demonstrates that Arab men have predominantly been represented as sheiks and terrorists and Arab women as harem girls or oppressed veiled women. Out of the over 900 films Shaheen surveys, he classifies 50 as evenhanded and only 12 as containing positive portrayals.

Stereotypes gain their power through repetition. Through repeating the same few images of a particular group of people, it comes to stand in for what we think we “know” about them. If we have never been to the Middle East or do not know Arabs or Muslims, then it becomes easy to form an idea of what we think the Middle East is—not because of one image, but because of repeated images that reinforce the same message—for example, that Arabs and Muslims are uncivilized, violent, and hate freedom.

Representations of Arab men 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. What has happened is that the violence of Palestinian resistance movements that have opposed the illegal Israeli military occupation has been portrayed as terrorism while the violence of Israel has been portrayed as defense.

Other political events have also factored into how Arabs have been represented in popular culture - the Mid-East Oil Crisis in 1973 led to the rich oil sheik stereotype. The 1979 Iran hostage crisis, led to conflating Iranians, Arabs and Muslims (as outlined in Melani McAlister’s book). Though Iran is not an Arab country, during the Iran Hostage Crisis, Iran came to stand in for Arabs, the Middle East, Islam, and terrorism, all of which came to be used interchangeably. This event further solidified the association of Islam with terrorism and also Muslim women as being oppressed because of the images of Iranian women wearing the chador.

While such political events do indeed involve violence and often terrorism, what is not addressed is why someone would resort to violence. As Edward Said’s work has shown, the context is often absent and the representation not only gives the false impression that Arabs and Muslims are uniquely violent, but also gives the impression that Arabs and Muslims commit acts of violence because they are Arab and Muslim, and not because of political conditions—whether colonialism, occupation, invasion, or marginalization from political processes.

Similarly, many people associate Arab and Muslim women with the veil and oppression. While some Arab and Muslim women live in conditions lacking of equality, this is not an adequate representation of
the lives of all Arab and Muslim women. Furthermore, it is inaccurate to consider the hijab or headscarf as a symbol of oppression. It is a religious marker of modesty.

Failing to portray Arabs and Muslims in all of their diversity and complexity can be seen as linked to foreign policy. If we, as Americans, see Arabs and Muslims as inherently violent, then it would make sense that we need to invade their countries and be at war with them. If we were to see Arabs and Muslims as human beings making up complex and diverse societies, then it would be more difficult to support policies that negatively impact them.

Your argue that an important shift occurred in the representation of Arabs and Muslims after 9/11, stating that in addition to being explicitly demonized on American film and television, Arabs and Muslims are now portrayed as sympathetic characters. Can you describe why these portrayals have emerged and, moreover, how they fluctuate across gender lines?

My book, Arabs and Muslims in the Media, was inspired by my surprise in finding an increase in positive portrayals of Arabs and Muslims after 9/11. What I found was a trend in television shows and films: if there is a focus on terrorism perpetrated by Arabs or Muslims, then to diffuse the stereotype the production team typically includes some kind of positive representation of an Arab or Muslim, usually a patriotic U.S. citizen or innocent victim of hate crimes. While this is certainly an improvement over past representations of one-dimensional villains, it is far from ideal since such representations often seem gratuitous, thrown in to appease Arab and Muslim watch dog groups like CAIR and MPAC, and those of us who are sick and tired of the same old stereotypes. Therefore, my book asks: How do we understand these seemingly positive developments, especially when considering that at the same time that sympathetic portrayals of Arab and Muslim Americans proliferated on U.S. 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?

My position in the book is that since 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” has 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 to 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. I am building here on arguments made by Critical Race Scholars, for example, by Howard Winant, Jodi Melamed, and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva about how race is operating in a presumably “post-race era.” 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 post-race era.

Regarding gender, what I found is that there is much sympathy and concern for “the oppressed Muslim woman” in news reporting on the War on Terror, yet there is a lack of sympathy for Muslim men who are presumed to be terrorists. Why is this important? Sympathy signals that the U.S. is not demonizing all Muslims as was done in past wars. However, sympathy for Muslim women (a monolithic and dangerous representation of Muslim women) allows for the withholding of sympathy from Muslim men because we can assume that even if they are not terrorists, then they are still guilty of oppressing women and we should therefore not care if they are at Guantanamo Bay prison without due process or rights.
In the case of “the oppressed Muslim woman,” my point 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 U.S. intervention in the Middle East. Evoking outrage for the plight of the oppressed Muslim woman inspires support of U.S. interventions in Arab and Muslim countries. It is no coincidence that inspiring outrage at the impact of U.S. foreign policies—such as sanctions in Iraq that killed approximately 500,000 children to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan that have killed over 100,000 civilians and the detention of hundreds of Muslims at Guantanamo Bay prison without being charged—is not part of the regular news cycle. The U.S. government and commercial media’s selective framing of the War on Terror seeks to restrict outrage to narratives that absolve the United States from accountability and support its interventionist projects.

In your book, you assert that if a film or TV drama portrays an Arab or Muslim as a terrorist, then the storyline will also include a so-called “positive” representation of an Arab, Muslim, or Arab American to “offset” the potential stereotype. Since your work was released in 2012, has this trend become more common?

The term I came up with to describe this phenomenon of inserting a positive representation to diffuse a negative one is “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 do so in a simplified way. They are predictable strategies that 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. If an Arab/Muslim terrorist is represented in the storyline 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 Arab/Muslim terrorist. These representations often challenge or complicate former stereotypes, yet contribute to a multicultural or post-race illusion.

We can see this trend in current television dramas, such as Homeland and Tyrant and in recent films, such as Argo. In the film, Argo, all Iranians are portrayed as violent and unreasonable with one exception: the housekeeper at the Canadian diplomat’s house, who functions exactly for this purpose, to be able to say that not ALL of them were depicted stereotypically. We do not get to know her in any way. We are suspicious of her throughout the film and what makes her “good” is that she is willing to betray her nation to protect Americans. This is the most common technique of simplified complex representations: the insertion of a “good” Muslim who is defined as good because of their allegiance to the United States. Other examples of such characters include Nadia Yassir, a dedicated member of the Counter Terrorist Unit on season 6 of 24, and more recently Fara Sherazi a CIA analyst who wears the hijab on season 3 and 4 of Homeland. In the case of the TV drama, Tyrant, the show is actually written around this concept, rather than inserting a side character. Tyrant is written around a tension between two Arab brothers—one who is a dictator played by the Arab actor Ashraf Barhoum, and one who has lived in the U.S. for 20 years and returns to bring democracy to the country, played by British actor, Adam Rayner. While it is a compelling TV drama, it centers around the problematic idea that the Americanized brother can bring democracy to the Arab world.

Can you recommend to our readers any recent American film or television programs that you believe reject this paradigm (the presentation of “good” and “bad” Arabs and Muslims in the context of terrorism)?
There have been a few good starts through which we can draw inspiration: the character Abed (played by Danny Pudi) on *Community* is Palestinian American. He is a weird guy but it has nothing to do with his ethnicity or religion (though the show does fall into some problematic stereotypes when Abed’s family members appear). In 2003, Whoopi Goldberg had a short-lived sit-com, *Whoopi* that featured an Iranian American character, Nasim (played by Omid Djalili). The character Mohammed (played by Haaz Sleiman) in season 1 of *Nurse Jackie* is another good example. We need more of such characters on U.S. television as well as shows like *Little Mosque on the Prairie* that was aired in Canada. In order to compete with meaning that has been generated about Arabs and Muslims through hundreds if not thousands of films and television shows, it is necessary to produce alternate images and stories that would offer insight into the diversity of Arab and Muslim American life.

**Bio**

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