

### **Constructing the North American Muslim Subject Through Humor**

It is “plain that religion is by no means disappearing in the modern world.”<sup>1</sup> However, religion is traditionally regarded as a private affair. Particularly in post-Enlightenment societies, religion is supposed to be relegated to the private sphere. This is evident in secular governments’ emphasis on a (purported) separation of church and state. However, as evident in self-proclaimed secular countries like the United States, France, and Britain, the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ are not conspicuously discrete entities.

What happens when the religious and the secular overlap and intertwine as evident in the mass media? How does this relationship affect existing power structures (the role of the state, religious authorities, and the media)? How does this speak to existing and potential discourses, which are not only words, but also images, as sites of power and productions of knowledge and feelings (what is true, moral, amoral)? The recent development in visual culture indicates that the religious and the secular are imbricated. This essay seeks to analyze two contemporary entertainment programs that are produced by secular corporations, but whose themes are of a religious (Islamic) nature: *Little Mosque on the Prairie* and *Arab in America*, and how they constitute Muslim subjects. The titles of both productions merit some analysis. *Arab in America* presupposes a single Arab experience in the United States. *Little Mosque on the Prairie* references a former North American television series, *Little House on the Prairie*, that is tied to the early settlers of Canada, an act that is regarded as integral to the Canadian consciousness. *Little Mosque on the*

*Prairie* is also relying on the family appeal of *Little House on the Prairie* to facilitate the acceptance of a mosque in Canada, especially since the prairie is not deemed politically threatening. This essay seeks to analyze how both works use comedy to normativize Muslims in a Western context as a means to subverting the Muslim subject's non-normativity, a political move. In addition, the essay investigates the question of humor as understood through the notion of passing as discussed by Judith Butler in *Bodies That Matter* in order to assess the different demands that both productions make on the integration of Muslims in North American society.

*Little Mosque on the Prairie* is currently in its second season.<sup>2</sup> It is a sitcom that narrates the life of different types of Muslims in their quest to acquire a new mosque. The male protagonist is an imam who moves from Toronto to the prairie town of Mercy to lead its Muslim community. (He also obviously has a crush on the female protagonist, a self-proclaimed Muslim feminist and member of the community, who shares his sentiments). It chronicles the various tribulations, like whether to celebrate Halloween and how to (publicly) celebrate Ramadan, encountered by Muslims living in North America. Some of the other issues, like dating, are also typically preoccupations of non-Muslims. Its pilot episode in January 2007 garnered 2.1 million viewers, which is “impressive in a country where an audience of one million is a runaway hit.”<sup>3</sup> The fact that it airs on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), a public television station, means that it disseminates its message of how Muslims are ordinary people. Also, its availability on DVD and on Internet sites like YouTube is expanding its amount of viewers and types of audiences. U.S. American viewers can access entire episodes through YouTube.

Its creator, Zarqa Nawaz, is a *muhajaba*.<sup>4</sup> She created a series that examines the “ordinary life of ordinary Muslims,” in a way that works with stereotypes of Muslims that are recognizable or intelligible to a Muslim and non-Muslim audience, respectively.<sup>5</sup> It is set in the (fictional) small town of Mercy, Canada and is a “story of Canada.” Nawaz has said in an interview, “I wasn’t conscious of it, but I think Canada has been very successful in its multicultural model, especially in assimilating<sup>6</sup> the Muslim community, in a way no other country in the world has been.”<sup>7</sup> Nawaz’s claim has merit, however, especially in light of the difficulty of European countries, in particular France and Britain, in integrating their Muslim populace.<sup>8</sup>

*Arab in America*<sup>9</sup> debuted as a short film (in the Short Film Corner) at this year’s (2007) Cannes Film Festival. The film producer’s attempts at developing the film into a television series have failed. According to the film’s producer, the networks that were contacted for developing the short film into a sitcom said the plot line would be more receptive and successful in a feature film rather than a television series.<sup>10</sup> The producer is now seeking financial support for transforming his short film into a feature film.<sup>11</sup>

Nabil Abou-Harb<sup>12</sup>, the twenty-three year-old producer of *Arab in America*, is a self-identified Muslim Arab-American. According to Abou-Harb, his father is a conservative Muslim of Palestinian descent who grew up in Lebanon and his mother is a U.S. American who was raised Catholic. His work was inspired by his father’s inability to acquire a job post-September 11th after losing one before that date. The father, who holds

three degrees including a Ph.D. in Engineering, is now a cook in an Arabic restaurant.

The creation of *Arab in America* was also inspired by the discrimination experienced by the producer's brother, Osama.

The short film, according to Abou-Harb, is directed at a strictly non-Muslim, non-Arab U.S.-American audience. (*Little Mosque on the Prairie* has a Canadian audience.

However, both the film and series have been available to an international audience). It is an effort, like Nawaz's *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, to demonstrate that Muslims are just like any other North American. *Arab in America* attempts to propagate the idea that Muslims are "just people"<sup>13</sup> so as to build an understanding of the plight of the Muslim in the United States.

### **Visual Media on Muslims by Muslims**

*Arab in America* and *Little Mosque on the Prairie* are two contemporary examples of the (recent) emergence of entertainment media that are directed at a Muslim population, or that reflects the interests of said population within a U.S. and North American public sphere. These productions are novel (from an Islamic cultural perspective) because of their reliance on a medium (television and/or cinema) that is embraced by the young. This is not to ignore Middle East-situated television entertainment channels like *al-Resalah* or *Iqra'*, but the shows on these channels differ in that they are being broadcast on Islamic, thus non-secular, television channels.<sup>14</sup> The short film and the television series are significant in that they are being written and created by self-identifying Muslims. *Little Mosque on the Prairie* provides a Muslim voice through a South Asian

perspective, which itself merits consideration in terms of how introducing Islam from a non-Arab perspective is regarded as being less contentious (however, it too, like *Arab in America*, emphasizes migration and integration).

In what follows, I will address how Muslims are actively engaging in the construction, or perpetuation of the various images about Muslims through the use of humor. No longer passive agents in their portrayal, the Muslim creators of *Arab in America* and *Little Mosque on the Prairie* are reshaping attitudes about Islam and its adherents as producers of media. In constituting Muslim subjects, through the use of visual media, Abou-Harb and Nawaz are able to “negotiate, elaborate and reappropriate different cultural forms which enable them to articulate their experience” as migrants in their respective states.<sup>15</sup> They are able to represent the Muslim subject in a different light. In neither of the productions is the Muslim subject depicted or characterized as a terrorist. Rather, he is portrayed as a being who has internalized Western norms (the imam in *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, who is an ex-lawyer who “used to sue people for no reason,” wears tight jeans and drinks cappuccinos and the protagonist in *Arab in America* speaks English sans accent and interestingly, cannot correctly pronounce Ahmed, which is one part of his original name).

### **Can Muslims Laugh? (!)**

The creators, Abou-Harb (*Arab in America*) and Nawaz (*Little Mosque on the Prairie*), are addressing Western stereotypes in an attempt not necessarily at political satire, which Nawaz specifically remonstrates, but rather to demonstrate the sense of humor that

Muslims are possible of possessing. Ziauddin Sardar, in an article in the U.K. magazine *New Statesman*, observes, “Like most other people, we’ve always had our funny side and have never been averse to laughing at ourselves. But somehow the west never appreciated that we had a sense of humour.” This portrayal of Muslims as capable of laughing *and* being laughed at is also innovative, especially given the various claims made after cartoon affairs that repeatedly focused on Muslims’ inability to laugh at offensive depictions of the prophet Muhammad.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the emphasis on laughter is also intended to produce an acquisition of a certain type of knowledge or realization—that of the struggles of Arab-Muslim migration and integration. My investigation addresses how, through the use of comic relief and fictive storytelling, rather than (dramatic) documentaries, a Western audience is acquiring a sense of who ‘ordinary’ Muslims are.

The debate on whether Muslims laugh is reminiscent of the debate on whether Muslims love or have the potential to love in that normative assumptions about what constitutes love are used to perpetuate negative images of Muslims.<sup>17</sup> In the same way, the normative discussion on humor performs a degradation of Muslims. Copious evidence of this debate exists as evident in newspaper articles published in the *New York Times* and the *Guardian* that deliberate the question of whether humor is allowed in Islam.<sup>18</sup> Asef Bayat in his essay, *Islam and the Politics of Fun*, acknowledges the attestation on whether laughter, or fun, is allowed in Islam. Bayat opines that the “fear of fun [or laughter] is not restricted to Islamists and Islam but extends to most religions.”<sup>19</sup> He continues, “It is not even a merely religious concern; secularists, whether revolutionary or conservative, have also expressed apprehension of and animosity toward fun.”<sup>20</sup> Because Islam has been deemed,

since its inception, as inferior or antithetical to Christianity and later, to modernity, it therefore must prove that it merits equal footing with Judaism and Christianity. These two productions are examples of how the existence and allowance of fun or humor in Islam has become “a prominent political concern in Muslim [and non-Muslim] societies.”<sup>21</sup> Although, as Bayat argues, restrictions on humor exist in religious and non-religious organizations, including Protestant puritans, the Bolsheviks of Russia, and the Jacobins of France, why then is the onus on Islam to prove that laughter or humor is tolerable? Why do other religious and non-religious traditions that advocate for the same set of regulations as the Islamists in Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the Taliban’s Afghanistan, not have to defend their stances? This idea that Muslims do not possess a sense of humor is constantly addressed with irony in *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, especially in the pilot episode. When the newly hired imam, Amaar Rashid, is detained at the Toronto airport on allegations of being a suicide bomber, he jests, “What’s the charge? Flying while Muslim?” He continues, “Muslims around the world are known for their sense of humour.” The (non-Muslim) police officer responds (in a serious manner), “I did not know that.”

Laughing is, for Westerners and non-Westerners who privilege Western norms, increasingly what constitutes one as modern and Muslims are increasingly turning to the use of comedy to address a general public sphere. By narrating themselves and their communities through humor, Muslims can now present “images reflecting their lives and aspirations.”<sup>22</sup> This is what allows both *Little Mosque on the Prairie* and *Arab in America* to capture a wider audience—the use of Western approved methods. It is only through the

use of comedic representations of Muslims that the respective producers are allowed to provide a voice for the (mis)represented North American Muslim populace. The genre of comedy enables for the self-constitution of the Muslim subject. Considering that “ethnic minorities” have traditionally been “excluded from equal participation in the mainstream media industry,” the use of humor becomes more significant.<sup>23</sup> This construction of the Muslim subject by the Muslim is not exclusive of Western influence. Stuart Hall writes, “The notion of the self, of identity is not a fully self-reflective entity.”<sup>24</sup> Moreover, “there is no identity that is without the dialogic relationship to the Other.” The Other is not outside, but also inside the Self, the identity.<sup>25</sup> The images of Muslims that are being reproduced are not in any sense discretely Muslim, but reflect the interactions of both the producers and characters with U.S. secular norms. Humor thus becomes a tool of the secular media that seeks to incorporate Muslims on its own terms.

### **Passing in *Arab in America***

I now want to turn, in what follows to how humor enables a form of “passing.” Following from Judith Butler, I understand passing as an exposing of the boundaries of hegemonic norms. The protagonist in *Arab in America*, Osama, tries to pass—a passing that is perennial, rather than occasional. Osama is capable of passing not only because he is light-skinned, but because he “refuses to introduce [his Arab-ness] into conversation, and so withholds the conversational marker which would counter the hegemonic presumption that [he] is white.”<sup>26</sup> He recognizes that his salvation, or ability to exist, relies on his denial of his Arab self. At this point, it should be noted that the first step in passing begins with Abou-Harb’s conflation of the categories of Muslim and Arab—both

Western constructs. Abou-Harb uses the two terms interchangeably and synonymously, which is problematic because of the Western idea that Islam originates and exists solely in the Middle East. Locating Islam in the Middle East allows for essentializations and leads to political prejudice. It produces another simplistic and problematic Manichean construct—Islam exists in the Middle East and Christianity in Europe. It also denies the Muslim presence in the West.

Osama, in order to acquire a job, must not only (legally) change his name<sup>27</sup>, but must adopt Western norms, while simultaneously denying and (publicly) relinquishing his Arab and Muslim-ness. This desire to change is based on both a presumption and experiences recognizing that adhering to Western norms signify and produce “a certain freedom, a class mobility.”<sup>28</sup> As a Muslim who should not eat pork, he must claim to be a vegetarian when his colleagues order lunch from a restaurant, “Porky’s Pork Emporium,” whose only meat options are some variants of pork. (The vegetarian house salad he orders arrives with both bacon and ham. However, his colleagues remember that he is a purported vegetarian at the company barbecue in which they serve him a veggie burger, for which his palette viscerally does not have an affinity). Following this incident, Sam excuses the presence of his prayer rug in his office by stating that he was using the rug to cover a coffee stain. (He then has to create the stain). At the (above mentioned) company Fourth of July barbecue, he justifies his drinking water over beer by pronouncing that he is a recovering alcoholic. These various denials and affirmations of false statements are demonstrative of the “question of what can and cannot be spoken, what can and cannot be publicly exposed.”<sup>29</sup> This recognition of what comprises permissible and non-

permissible speech is also evident in *Little Mosque on the Prairie*'s testing and monitoring for putatively offensive material. Which audience, Muslim or non-Muslim, is being protected from these offensive statements remains ambiguous.

His employer and colleagues all become believers of Osama's passing as a non-Muslim, non-Arab. Only one of the employees suspects that Osama is Arab and Muslim. To prove his suspicions correct, this employee, David Dasfuhrer<sup>30</sup>, insists on playing the game of Pictionary at the barbecue. When Sam's turn arrives, David provides him with the card that has an object to depict via a visual image. The card reads, "The Prophet Muhammad." Sam becomes hesitant, which draws the attention of the group, particularly David who anticipates this quandary. David says with a smirk, "What's the matter Sam? Too hard for you?" David's advantageous position is in his ability to expose Osama as a Muslim. It is "only on the condition of an association [with Osama] that conditions a naming that [David's] color [and therefore position] become legible."<sup>31</sup> David "cannot be white without [Arabs] and without the constant disavowal of his relation to them."<sup>32</sup> Finally, "it is only through that disavowal that his whiteness is constituted."<sup>33</sup> Here, whiteness, which Osama opposes, stands for Christian religion and how it underpins "modernity" and "secularism" in the West.

Sam is outed—an outing that initially leads to his career demise—and, in this instance, returns to being Osama. He responds, "I can't do it. I'm sorry guys. I'm not a vegetarian-eating, recovering alcoholic. I'm a hummus-eating, camel-riding Arab-Muslim." Osama's response is plausible because of the normative presentations of Arab and Muslim and his

response is one that perpetuates Western stereotypes of Arabs.<sup>34</sup> These Western stereotypes are existent throughout the short film. (Osama later is called a towel-head by a police officer). Also, the response ends Osama's hiding—a hiding that can only exist through the “very flaunting” of what he perceives to be Western norms.<sup>35</sup> The result of the unveiling of the ‘real’ Osama leads to his termination, which reinforces the privileged position Western norms maintain and the inferior status of Arab-Muslims, or ‘camels’ as the film’s Western characters refer to Osama as, possess in the ‘West.’ In the end, Osama cannot hide the fact he is Muslim.

Although “the exposure of [Osama’s ethnicity and religious ideology] leads straightway to...a ‘social death,’”<sup>36</sup> Osama regains his job.<sup>37</sup> After leaving the company barbecue, Osama gets pulled over by a police officer. The viewer assumes he has been speeding. After asking for Osama’s license and registration, the police officer becomes overtly terrified when reading Osama’s name (Osama Ahmed Abu-Bakr), seeing a towel on Osama’s head that resembles a turban (a car splash had drenched him in water as he walked to his car after leaving the barbecue), and finding a fire rocket, which Sam had purchased at the behest of his employer, in the back seat.<sup>38</sup> It is implied that Osama gets arrested because of presumed terrorist affiliations. Osama shares his jail cell with a Black male character, Latrell Williams<sup>39</sup>, to whom he recounts his story, which he concludes by saying, “You know, why would you care? You have no idea what discrimination is like.” This statement erases the long history of institutionalized racism against Blacks. It is an example of which and whose sufferings are afforded legitimacy. Talal Asad discusses this idea in both *On Suicide Bombing* and *Formations of the Secular*. He writes that there

are two types of human beings: the human and non-human, a result of the liberal secular modern state. The hegemonic group decides who is considered human—that is, “the assumption is that to qualify for rights ‘they’ must be sufficiently like ‘us’—and conversely, that if they are too unlike us, they cannot be redeemed.”<sup>40</sup> While the Western hegemonic group considers Osama non-human, he (arguably) internalizes this and impresses the same oppression to Blacks. By casting an Other as non-human, one, in turn, is constituted as human (i.e. a normative passing U.S. American). Osama’s statement to Latrell can also, because of the use of satire, be regarded as an acknowledgment of the history of the oppression and subjugation of Blacks.

### **Do Muslims Pass in *Little Mosque on the Prairie*?**

*Little Mosque on the Prairie* is an example of visual media that defines what it entails to be a Muslim. It is about all types of Muslims. The television series is demonstrative of “emerging Muslim voices who are seeking to redefine their faith away from ghastly headlines of Islamic radicalism.”<sup>41</sup> Nawaz’s motley crew of characters does exactly this. By including Yasir, the Lebanese secular Muslim<sup>42</sup>; Sarah, Yasir’s Anglo wife and Muslim convert; Rayyan, Yasir and Sarah’s muhajaba physician daughter who self-identifies as a ‘Muslim feminist;’ Baber, the Pakistani conservative mullah; Amaar, the stereotypical Westerner who leaves his father’s law firm to become an imam; and Fatima, the African muhajaba who is emphatic about adhering to tradition<sup>43</sup>, Nawaz is able to delve into various contemporary publicized issues affecting Islam’s reputation in the West like polygamy, Muslim women’s purported oppression, and dating in Islam. More

importantly, she is able to have viewers realize that the categories of Islam and Muslims are not monolithic entities. Multiple versions of Islam and Muslims do exist.

Nawaz privileges Western categories simply because “one cannot speak in the name of all Muslims because the category of ‘Muslim’ is constantly being produced and socially constructed.”<sup>44</sup> Finally, characters like the secular Yasir and the feminist Rayyan are more accessible to the North American (Western) viewer because these identities are modern constructs. The trope that Islam is anti-modernity is ubiquitous. The (Western) media and political structures perennially assert that there is a “chronic failure of Islamic societies to come to terms with the modern.”<sup>45</sup> Also, the ‘Islamic world’—a problematic term because it assumes a unified group—is deemed by the above mentioned as “a degenerate, a throwback to feudalism, and hence incapable of reaching an accommodation with the modern world.” Having these ‘modern’ characters is an attempt to undermine the idea that Islam is the antithesis of modernity<sup>46</sup> and to acknowledge that Islam’s adherents are “not so distant after all—and not so strange either.”<sup>47</sup> Islam becomes less “unknown and mysterious.”<sup>48</sup> Her resort to comedic depictions of Muslims is undoubtedly an inevitable outcome of the medium by which she is interpolated. However, it also affords her the opportunity to challenge and subvert the norms of what constitutes modernity by introducing discussions of Islamic funeral rites and animal sacrifice that are typically understood as traditional, barbaric, and anti-modern.

Because the media portray Islam as a violent religion that is comprised of terrorists, apologist pundits have had to argue ad nauseam that ‘true’ Islam is a religion of peace.

The aforementioned are examples of the extreme dualities through which Islam is represented and discussed, which is why *Little Mosque on the Prairie*'s diverse, although stereotypically Western-inspired, characters are novel. They represent an Islam that is not exclusive to violence. Interestingly and ironically, the only character who fulfills Western stereotypes is the North American Muslim convert Marlin, who, at the end of the episode, converts to Christianity because the Muslims of Mercy are not 'extreme' enough. It subverts the stereotype of the Western convert as violent. However, this (re)presentation can only be accomplished by using the Western individual as a model. To construct a Muslim subject as no longer alien or strange to the West requires an imbibing of Western characteristics. In order for the Muslim subject to relinquish her self-imposed identity that of being what the West is not (violent, irrational), she must become that what the West is (progressive, rational).

To be recognized as a human (modern Western subject), the Muslim must "act from within a set of norms"—a set of norms that are established and reified by the West.<sup>50</sup> Although *Little Mosque on the Prairie*'s novelty exists on a Muslim producer creating a Muslim subject to address her "own experience [as a Muslim in North America and] to empower [her] ethnicit[y and religion]," the subject remains constructed as "the *object* of someone else's representation, not the *subject* of [her] own representations."<sup>51</sup> If "the agency of the subject is thus grounded in how it relates to the norms that are imposed on it," then this explains why Nawaz's show has been successfully received and provides the impression that self-identifying Muslims have acquired 'agency' in their identification.<sup>52</sup> Finally, other remnants of Western influence include Orientalist references, which are

found in the character's inability to consistently pronounce the imam's name correctly, Amaar (usually pronounced Omar). This is, according to Edward W. Said, similar to the mispronunciations of Islam and Muslim and that these (possibly intentional) disregards for correct pronunciations are "all part of the same arsenal of Orientalist clichés that are designed to alienate, distance, and dehumanize a people."<sup>53</sup>

Other Orientalist influences like how "the Arab is scarcely more than a neurotic sexual being" are evident in the Arab characters of *Little Mosque on the Prairie*: Yasir and Amaar. Sarah, Yasir's wife, is preoccupied with sex enabling the argument that Orientalists impose their hypersexuality onto the Oriental in attempts to reinforce the culture prestige of the Westerner. For instance, Sarah talks about sex while on her prayer rug. Yasir constantly makes sexual innuendoes (he wants sexual obligations to be included in his marriage contract). The imam, Amaar, also (inappropriately) laughs at what he deems to be a sexual reference made by Fatima.<sup>54</sup> The Arab characters' use of sexual commentary is the "culmination of Orientalism as a dogma that...degrades its subject matter."<sup>55</sup> However, in Sarah's situation, because she (Sarah) is talking about sex with the town's female mayor, Nawaz is able to complicate the idea that sex is purely an Islamic obsession.

Both *Little Mosque on the Prairie* and *Arab in America* define who the Muslim subject is by defining him or her by what he or she is not. They construct a Muslim subject who must endure Western characterizations of being terrorists, or more specifically, suicide bombers. In *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, the imam, Amaar, is detained at the Toronto

airport after making statements to his mother on his cell phone that taken out of context insinuate that he plans to execute a suicide bombing. After making references to a bomb, suicide, and Allah's plan, he is remanded by a security official who says to Amaar, "You're not going to Paradise today."<sup>56</sup> Because "malicious generalizations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West," this type of treatment is legitimized.<sup>57</sup> Also, by showing these (problematic) normative understandings of who a Muslim is, Nawaz is able to (re)define the subject. That is to say, a Saussurian approach must be taken in that "to say something new is first of all to reaffirm the traces of the past that are inscribed in the words we use."<sup>58</sup> So to say something new is "first of all displace all the old things that the words mean—to fight an entire system of meanings."<sup>59</sup> Therefore it becomes understandable as to why the creator allows for a scene in which the male protagonist is accused of being suicide bombers at the outset of the series and the film. Nawaz is involved in "the struggle to dislocate what [Muslim/Arab] used to [and does] mean in order to make it mean something new."<sup>60</sup> This can only be executed by necessarily engaging with the terms of their exclusion. Muslims must replicated stereotypes in order to undermine them. Mas argues exactly this point when discussing the 'secular Muslim' subject in France. She writes, "We can understand 'secular Muslim' as disrupting normative understandings of 'secular' and 'Muslim' at the same time as it draws upon the conditions of those very understandings in order to do so."<sup>61</sup> She is working toward creating an image of the 280 million Arabs and 1.3 billion Muslims in the world that is not synonymous with terrorism and suicide bombing.<sup>62</sup> Nawaz's characters, unlike Abou-Harb's character, do not attempt to pass, but rather overtly address their positions as Muslims.

## Conclusion

Islam is no longer a neutral concept. I would argue that it never has been.<sup>63</sup> This religious category has always and continues to hold the position in the West as being inferior<sup>64</sup> to and, at times, regarded as competing with Christianity. More importantly, its adherents or followers are seldom afforded the privilege to speak on behalf of who the Muslim subject is. They “can be described by others, but cannot describe [themselves].”<sup>65</sup> In other words, they are not afforded the “permission to narrate.”<sup>66</sup> Said’s discussion on Orientalism is further applicable here. Said writes, “Only the Orientalist can interpret the Orient, the Orient being radically incapable of interpreting itself.”<sup>67</sup> This is why the analysis of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* and *Arab in America* is important. In respect to *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, this sitcom is even more significant because television, at least for those residing in the United States, is “the dominant leisure activity of their lives” thus proving, at least in regard to the former, a successful method in disseminating certain ideas, stereotypes, and images.<sup>68</sup> Abou-Harb’s short film reinforces the fact that “since World War II, and more noticeably after each of the Arab-Israeli wars, the Arab Muslim has become a figure in American popular culture.”<sup>69</sup> By making Osama a young urban professional, Abou-Harb is contesting the traditional Arab roles in American cinema. In films, “the Arab is associated either with lechery or bloodthirsty dishonesty. He appears as an oversexed degenerate, capable, it is true, of cleverly devious intrigues, but essentially sadistic, treacherous, low. [He is a] slave trader, camel driver, moneychanger, colorful scoundrel.”<sup>70</sup>

Also, recognizing that “media content can activate stereotypes and affect how people respond to various groups in society or evaluate themselves against media standards,” both productions then must be appreciated for their attempts to reshape attitudes about Islam and Muslims.<sup>71</sup> Abou-Harb and Nawaz both undermine the passive role to which Muslims have been subjected. These are inchoate efforts at subverting the existing power structure between the ‘West’ and ‘Muslims.’ Nawaz and Abou-Harb are further significant within the emic discourse on Islam. Through their use of media, Abou-Harb and Nawaz are non-religious authorities who are provided with the opportunity to define the Muslim subject proving that to have information or knowledge is to have power. Their productions are examples of “the role of...media technologies in propelling a democratization of religious authority.”<sup>72</sup> Religious authority has become more nuanced. Finally, their (religiously-themed) works being produced by secular companies acknowledges that religion has persisted. Religion has not disappeared despite the Enlightenment project’s wish.

Nawaz’s work, again, is directed at a Muslim populace. In addition to reforming the Muslim image to the Westerner, because of this other targeted audience, she is also able to influence certain Islamic values. This —the ability of individuals to structure their faith—is a recent and novel ability. It is only today that “decisions whether to wear the veil, grow a beard, eat halal meat, date before marriage, or get a mortgage loan with interest, can be influenced more by [the media]...than by the erudite religious authorities of Al-Azhar in Egypt or the Wahhabi clerics of Saudi Arabia”—denoting that the media has become the central site of religious meaning.<sup>73</sup> Media and religion are converging.<sup>74</sup>

Although Abou-Harb's film is solely intended for a non-Muslim, American audience, its script can affect Muslims, particularly when the narrator outlines the various rules by which Muslim believers must adhere (not eating pork, praying five times a day<sup>75</sup>, not drinking alcohol). Even though "performances may be scripted (They usually are)...this does not make their outcomes fully determined; rather, performance creates a space in which it is possible for 'newness' to enter the world" as evident with Abou-Harb's work.<sup>76</sup>

Although both Abou-Harb and Nawaz have produced works that aim at portraying the Muslim subject in a way that runs counter to traditional (Western) understandings of Muslims by using Western norms and stereotypes of both the West and Islam in the West, they do this in different ways. Osama's character sees "passing" as the only outlet for possible integration in U.S. American society. On the contrary, Yasir, Fatima, Rayyan, and Amaar of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* seek integration into Canadian society by overtly pronouncing and performing their Muslim-ness. *Arab in America*'s emphasis on one character, Osama, insinuates that only a single vantage point exists in understanding or viewing the Arab-Muslim experience in the United States. Again, because of the amount of (differing) cast members, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* portrays the Muslim subject's experience in North America as capable of having multiple versions.

## Bibliographic End Notes

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- <sup>1</sup>Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1.
- <sup>2</sup>Its first season comprised of eight episodes and is available on DVD. The second season will have twenty episodes. The pitch for the show was made four years ago.
- <sup>3</sup>Christopher Mason, "Muslim sitcom off to a big start in Canada," *International Herald Tribune*, 15 January 2007.
- <sup>4</sup>*Muhajaba* is an Arabic noun for women who wear the headscarf, or *hijab*.
- <sup>5</sup>*Little Mosque on the Prairie* DVD Season 1.
- <sup>6</sup>Nawaz's use of 'assimilating' is provocative because of the word has traditionally held a negative connotation in that "assimilation implies the domination of one culture over another and assumes the superiority of one form of life and inferiority of another" (Nabil Echchaibi, *We Are French Too, But Different*, 295).
- <sup>7</sup>Sheldon Chad, "Go West, Young Imam," *Saudi Aramco World*, September/October 2007. Nawaz's claim is interesting given Quebec's recent attempt to prohibit veiled women from voting. It is significant that this is a debate affecting Quebec and not Canada proper.
- <sup>8</sup>Here, I am thinking of the Rushdie and hijab affairs in Britain and France, respectively. Both countries regard their Muslim immigrants and citizens as a threat to their country's identity, which is problematic given its assumption that an identity possesses an essence. Moreover, it is interesting given how these countries' Muslim immigrants arrive from their previous colonies, or in regard to France, from a country (Algeria) that was considered an internal department of France. (Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 248). Interestingly, the French, according to the *Arab in America* producer, have "loved it [his film]." *Little Mosque on the Prairie* has also received (favorable) international attention.
- <sup>9</sup>The short film, whose script was written in March 2006, was filmed in Atlanta and Savannah, Georgia. Taping locations for the feature film include the above mentioned and Washington, D.C..
- <sup>10</sup>For example, *Aliens in America*, a sitcom that debuted on a U.S. television network, the CW, this fall (2007), is based on the same premise of understanding Muslim immigration to and integration into the United States. It chronicles the life of an American family who request an exchange student to provide their alienated and unpopular high school son with a friend. The family anticipates a European, but are surprised to receive a Muslim Pakistani—Islam comes by accident. The producers hired a consulting team to measure popularity and featured the pilot at a mosque in Southern California, to which it was met with favorable reviews. *Aliens in America*, whose producers are self-proclaimed Catholic and Jewish American males and who knew of the *Arab in America* concept, narrates a story from a Pakistani vantage point, which makes it different from *Arab in America*.
- <sup>11</sup>According to the producer, Sony was interested in producing the feature film, but wanted to hire a new team of producers because of the current producer's inexperience with feature films.
- <sup>12</sup>Abou-Harb has produced several independent films, including *Living in Patterns* and *Whatever You Do*. He has also worked on the Paula's Home Cooking, a cooking show based in Savannah, Georgia. (I interviewed Abou-Harb via phone on Friday, 09 November 2007 for ninety minutes).

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- <sup>13</sup> Scholars, like Edward Said, have successfully argued how difficult a feat this is in that historically Arabs and Muslims have been regarded as barbarians and not worthy of the privileged status of ‘(civilized) peoples’ that the Europeans have bestowed upon themselves.
- <sup>14</sup> Nabil Echchaibi, “From the Pulpit to the Studio: Islam’s Internal Battle.” Media Development 1 (2007): 2.
- <sup>15</sup> Nabil Echchaibi, “We Are French Too, But Different: Radio, Music and the Articulation of Difference Among Young North Africans in France.” International Communication Gazette 63 (2001): 297.
- <sup>16</sup> There are two references in *Arab in America* to the (Dutch and Swedish) cartoon affairs regarding Muhammad. One character, David Dasfuhrer, incites a conversation with the Arab main character by saying he is flummoxed as to the controversy regarding the (visual) depiction of the prophet. This character does this in attempts to prove that Osama, the Arab character, is Arab and Muslim. David says, “We have pictures of Jesus all over the place. No one cares over here.” Osama’s response is a theological one, which he quickly recognizes that he must attribute to knowing from viewing a television news network, CNN.
- <sup>17</sup> In “Love as Difference: The Politics of Love in the Thought of Malek Chebel,” Ruth Mas has argued that European scholars like de Rougemont and Stendahl have made arguments that love does exist in the East. Mas writes that de Rougemont’s discussion on the existence of passionate love within Islam and the East implies that passionate love did not exist before it was constructed in Europe and that it did not exist outside of Europe. Because love is normative, she continues, it allows the creation of positive and negative images of Europeans and non-Europeans, respectively (European Review of History 11.2 (Summer 2004): 273-301).
- <sup>18</sup> The *New York Times* has published such stories like the January 2007 Moroccan government suspension of the magazine, *Nichane*, for jokes that purportedly defamed Islam (“Arts, Briefly” 13 January 2007). Other examples include stories on the rise of Arab and Muslim-American comics in the United States since 9/11 (“Arab and Muslim Comics Turn Fear into Funny” 01 September 2002). The *Guardian* has published several stories, including one on the significant amount of Muslims who are against humor (“Holy joke” 10 January 2005).
- <sup>19</sup> Asef Bayat, “Islamism and the Politics of Fun.” Public Culture 19.3 (2007): 435.
- <sup>20</sup> Bayat, “Islamism and the Politics of Fun,” 435.
- <sup>21</sup> Bayat, “Islamism and the Politics of Fun,” 443.
- <sup>22</sup> Jacqueline Stewart, “Negroes Laughing at Themselves? Black Spectatorship and the Performance of Urban Modernity.” Critical Inquiry 29.4 (Summer 2003): 650.
- <sup>23</sup> Echchaibi, “We Are French Too, But Different,” 297.
- <sup>24</sup> Stuart Hall, “Ethnicity: Identity and Difference.” Radical America 23.4 (1989): 11.
- <sup>25</sup> Hall, “Ethnicity,” 16.
- <sup>26</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, (New York: Routledge, 1993), 171.
- <sup>27</sup> Osama Ahmed Abu-Bakr legally changes his name to Samuel Adam Baker, to which the blonde Anglo clerk says, “good call!” (The phrase, “good call,” is a reference to a Samuel Adam beer commercial, which is significant given that Islam prohibits the consumption of alcohol). The narrator, who is the voice of Osama’s character, follows this incident by proclaiming, “And with that, Osama was no more. He would get his driver’s license in a few weeks and it would be official.”
- <sup>28</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 170.
- <sup>29</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 169.
- <sup>30</sup> All the characters are introduced with on-screen titles. The David Dasfuhrer character’s caption reads, “100% American, Made in Taiwan.” It is interesting that the only character who questions Osama’s attempt at passing is one whose last name is conspicuously foreign and potentially politically problematic given the historical context to which Das Fuhrer refers.
- <sup>31</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 171.
- <sup>32</sup> Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 171.

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- <sup>33</sup>Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 171.
- <sup>34</sup>Western stereotypes or tropes about Muslims are found in *Little Mosque on the Prairie*. For example, the *muhajaba* feminist character, Rayyan, says to imam Amaar when he prematurely decides to leave the small town of Mercy for Toronto, “I thought you’d drag us into the modern world...or at least the eleventh century.”
- <sup>35</sup>Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 169.
- <sup>36</sup>Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 183.
- <sup>37</sup>Osama’s employer re-hires him after posting bond for him. He tells Osama, “You should’ve told me you were an Arab [pronounced Ay-rab]. I probably wouldn’t have hired you, but you’re an okay fellow. You can have your job back. Just don’t go blowing anything up.” Osama’s response, “I’ll try not to.”
- <sup>38</sup>Osama’s employer asked Osama to purchase the fireworks for the barbecue, a job that the employer deems to be “the most important job there is.”
- <sup>39</sup>Williams’ caption reads, “Black Man/Victim of Circumstance.”
- <sup>40</sup>Asad, *Formations of the Secular*, 156.
- <sup>41</sup>Nabil Echchaibi, “From the Pulpit to the Studio: Islam’s Internal Battle,” 1.
- <sup>42</sup>Including a secular character like Yasir is substantial because Islam has been regarded as incompatible with secularism. In France, “Islam has typically been constructed in opposition to *laïcité*” (Ruth Mas, “Compelling the Muslim Subject: Memory as Post-Colonial Violence and the Performativity of ‘Secular and Cultural Islam.’” *The Muslim World* 96 (October 2006): 586). It can be argued, as Mas does in the same essay, that the secular Muslim subject is produced in response to the modern secular state. The “secular state identity [facilitates] in shaping the emergence of a particular type of Muslim subject that labels herself as both Muslim and secular” (586). A ‘secular Muslim’ would not exist without the modern state.
- <sup>43</sup>Fatima, when proposing goat for iftar meals during Ramadan, says, “Tradition always smells better.” She wants the barrier dividing men from women during prayer in the masjid. Finally, she provides Fred Tupper, the Rush Limbaugh-like character, traditional medicine for his back pain that proves successful over the doctor’s prescription and suggestions.
- <sup>44</sup>Ruth Mas, “Compelling the Muslim Subject,” 603.
- <sup>45</sup>Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 19.
- <sup>46</sup>Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 58.
- <sup>47</sup>Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 262.
- <sup>48</sup>Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 39.
- <sup>50</sup>Mas, “Compelling the Muslim Subject,” 602.
- <sup>51</sup>Hall, “Ethnicity,” 19.
- <sup>52</sup>Mas, “Compelling the Muslim Subject,” 602.
- <sup>53</sup>David Barsamian and Edward W. Said, *Culture and Resistance: Conversations with Edward W. Said*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: South End Press, 2003), 165-6.
- <sup>54</sup>Amaar tells Fatima that she must know a lot about Islam in Africa. She responds that yes, she can tell him about Islam in Africa from an African position, about which she is happy because narratives about Muslims in Africa are traditionally told from a “missionary position.”
- <sup>55</sup>Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), 319.
- <sup>56</sup>*Arab in America* also includes this type of moment of the male protagonist being accused of intending to commit an act of terrorism. At the outset, Osama is detained at his respective airport based simply on his Arab features. Once in the holding room, the security official asks Osama, “Going to Atlanta on a one-way ticket? Don’t plan on coming back?” This official, alluding to Osama’s automatic razor, continues, “What do you plan on using this for?” After Osama’s answer (“To shave”), he is released and told that his plane leaves in twenty minutes and that he (the official) hopes he is able to make his flight. The manner in which the official makes his concluding comments insinuate that Osama was held not because airport officials genuinely believed him to

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- be a suicide bomber, but simply to create inconveniences.
- <sup>57</sup> Barsamian and Said, *Culture and Resistance*, 121.
- <sup>58</sup> Hall, "Ethnicity," 11.
- <sup>59</sup> Hall, "Ethnicity," 11.
- <sup>60</sup> Hall, "Ethnicity," 11.
- <sup>61</sup> Mas, "Compelling the Muslim Subject," 603.
- <sup>62</sup> It is interesting to note that a militant Zionist group, the Stern Gang, carried out the first car bomb in January 1947.
- <sup>63</sup> According to Edward Said's *Orientalism*, "Books and articles are regularly published on Islam and the Arabs that represent absolutely no change over the virulent anti-Islamic polemics of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance" (287).
- <sup>64</sup> The first president of the Middle East Studies Association (MESA), Morroe Berger, said, "The modern Middle East and North Africa is not a center of great cultural achievement." He continues to argue that the Middle East cannot contribute anything of significance to modern culture, again insinuating that the 'East' and 'West' are discrete entities (Said, *Orientalism*, 288).
- <sup>65</sup> Rashid Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 92.
- <sup>66</sup> Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*, 92.
- <sup>67</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 289.
- <sup>68</sup> Robert Abelman and Stewart Hoover, eds., *Religious Television: Controversies and Conclusions*, (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1990), 237.
- <sup>69</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 284.
- <sup>70</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 286-7.
- <sup>71</sup> Elizabeth Perse, *Media Effects and Society*, (Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001), 176.
- <sup>72</sup> Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 105.
- <sup>73</sup> Echchaibi, "From the Pulpit to the Studio," 1.
- <sup>74</sup> This is happening in both what is considered and labeled the West and the East.
- <sup>75</sup> The inclusion of the statement, "Muslims must pray five times a day," evokes a normative understanding of Islam. It denies Shi'a prayer rituals, which dictate that Shi'as pray three times a day.
- <sup>76</sup> Gregory, *The Colonial Present*, 19.