

# Through the Looking Glass: Muslim Women on Television— An Analysis of *24*, *Lost*, and *Little Mosque on the Prairie*

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***Abstract:***

In the ten years that have passed since September 11, 2001, media discourses regarding Muslims have changed superficially while essentializing stereotypes have been reinforced for the general public. This is true of many forms of media, but this paper focuses on popular television entertainment, and the way in which this has framed the Muslim woman. Media have had a longstanding fascination with the Muslim woman but this appears to have grown during the war in Afghanistan. Despite greater attention to this subject, the overarching discourses do not seem to be more complex than they were during previous events, such as the 1979 Revolution in Iran. Indeed, portrayals of Muslim women on television are arguably more regressive now than on September 10, 2001. Admittedly, at that time, it would probably have been unthinkable to imagine a series such as *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, and this show does constitute a significant source of change. However, when looking at depictions of female Muslim characters on shows such as *Little Mosque* and other popular network shows from the last ten years, such as *24*, it is clear that television after 9/11 has not evolved in its depiction of the Muslim woman. Drawing upon existing literature regarding historical depictions, and utilizing a textual analysis of contemporary shows such as *24*, *Little Mosque on the Prairie* and *Lost*, this paper interrogates the role of entertainment media in advancing pluralist discourses, and investigates the limitations and possibilities of historical and contemporary depictions of Muslim women in such media.

***Keywords:*** Islam; Media Representation; Muslim Women; Television; Stereotyping

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**Résumé:**

Dans les dix ans qui ont passé depuis le 11 septembre 2001, les discours médiatiques concernant les musulmans ont changé de façons superficielles pendant que l'essentialisation des stéréotypes a été renforcée au public général. Ceci est vrai pour plusieurs formes de médias. Mais cet article se concentre sur la télévision de divertissement populaire et de la façon dont celle-ci a représenté la femme musulmane. Les médias ont une fascination de longue date avec la femme musulmane, mais ceci semble avoir augmenté pendant la guerre en Afghanistan. Au mépris de l'attention grandissante à ce sujet, le discours global ne semble pas être plus complexe que ceux d'événements précédents, tels que la révolution de 1979 en Iran. À vrai dire, les représentations des femmes musulmanes à la télévision sont sans doute plus régressives maintenant que le 10 septembre 2001. Certes, à ce moment-là, il aurait été probablement inconcevable d'imaginer une série telle que *La petite mosquée dans la prairie* (version française de *Little Mosque on the Prairie*), et cette émission constitue une source signifiante de changement. Cependant, quand nous regardons les représentations de personnages musulmanes féminines sur des émissions telles que *La petite mosquée* ainsi que d'autres émissions populaires des derniers dix ans, telles que l'émission *24*, nous constatons que la télévision après le 11 septembre n'a pas évolué dans ces représentations de la femme musulmane. En se basant sur la littérature existante en ce qui concerne la représentation historique et en utilisant une analyse textuelle d'émission contemporaine telle que *24*, *La petite mosquée dans la prairie* et *Perdu* (version française de *Lost*) cet article vérifie les limites ainsi que les possibilités des représentations historiques et contemporaines de la femme musulmane dans ces médias.

**Mots-clés:** Islam; Femme Musulmane; Représentation Médiatique; Stéréotype; Télévision

**And So It Begins: Images of Muslim Women Over Time**

As Karim H. Karim notes, “[m]isuse of the terms related to Islam is endemic in the transnational media” (2000: 10), and this statement rings especially true when examining depictions of Muslim women in the media. Such consistent misuse and negative imagery are embedded in longstanding Orientalist discourses, as outlined by Edward Said (1978) in his analysis of artwork, travellers’ diaries, and historical documents compiled by those who travelled through Muslim societies over centuries. Said suggests that the tendency to view the Muslim as Other is longstanding, stretching back as far as the Middle Ages. While many of the Orientalist imaginaries concern Muslim men as terrorists, sexists and barbarians, images of Muslim women as conspirators, victims or sexually available underpin these portrayals, even when they are suggested more by their absence than by their presence. For instance, with regard to the notion of the Muslim woman as perpetually oppressed, Karim comments on a 1990 article by the eminent

Orientalist scholar Bernard Lewis, who suggests that the Muslim man's undeniable rage can be explained, at least partly, by the newly found freedom of women and children, which challenges his masculinity and authority: "he had medieval sensibilities and hatreds: whereas his feelings of resentment at being defeated and colonized may be understandable, his perceived rage at the supposed emancipation of his women and children was not" (2000: 141). These same imaginaries can be found in media images today.

Over the years, Muslim women have constituted a source of fascination in the media, representing both victimization and incomprehensible difference. This is particularly true in times of conflict, such as the Iranian Islamic Revolution (e.g., Sreberny-Mohammadi & Mohammadi, 1994), the Gulf War of 1991, and the ongoing "war on terror". The latter was often described by journalists as a way to liberate Afghan women oppressed by Taliban rule (e.g., Wentz, 2001; Why the Taliban had to be fought, 2001). Muslim men, of course, also drew their share of media attention, but the figure of the Muslim woman became intensely fetishized in the period following September 11, 2001 (9/11), serving as a symbolic justification for the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan. The Muslim woman who veils or covers herself became particularly noteworthy. As Karim comments, the "Northern mass media have the tendency to declare manifestations of Muslim belief such as the call for decency in films, wearing the hijab, or even performing the Muslim prayer as certain signs of 'Islamic fundamentalism'" (2000: 182). While the glare of the media may be most intense in the arena of news, dramatic and comedic programs also began to incorporate images of the Muslim woman after 9/11. Although they did this in different ways, the overall results tend towards a simplistic rendering of what it means to be Muslim, and of the Muslim woman as an inescapably exotic figure. The events of 9/11 are undeniably shocking and tragic. However, in the aftermath, opportunities for reflection and commemoration are especially valuable. The period after 9/11 provided an opportunity to educate non-Muslims by expanding the range of discourses available about Muslims and Muslim women: instead, the most significant outcome is a hardening of the stereotypes and misperceptions that have been promoted so often in the media.

As a number of scholars have noted (Jiwani, 2009; Karim, 1997; 2000; Razack, 2004), mediated depictions of Muslim women tend to display certain consistencies, many of which fit into the categories identified by Fleras and Kunz in their description of media images of minorities: "invisible", "problem people", "stereotype", and "adornment" (2001: ix). While the specific stereotypes may differ on points of detail, they have a common historical lineage. In the Oriental travelogues of the past, or in works of art (e.g., Kabbani, 1986; Said, 1978), Muslim women were depicted in limited ways, sometimes as the victims of repression at the hands of Muslim men. As Frantz Fanon (1959) has pointed out, abuses visited upon Muslim women by colonizing forces, including the forcible removal of veils, are rarely seen as fitting into this typology of victimization. Instead, Western men, with the West standing in at that time as a broad term representing white, developed (or civilized, in Orientalist terminology) nations, are usually the rescuers when they enter these portrayals. Repression may take many forms, ranging from the disempowerment associated with having to wear highly concealing clothing, to suggestions of abuse at the hands of the violent Muslim man. Another category of depiction was the sexualized, exoticized Muslim woman. While some observers might have seen harems and polygamy as the signs of women suffering from oppression, others saw these as indicative of the sexual availability of the Muslim woman (e.g., Kabbani, 1986). In this case, the lustful, hypersexualized Muslim man would have a partner who possessed all the same qualities.

Although these categories may seem far removed from one another, they are connected by their investment in the belief that the Muslim woman is different in profound ways from the Western woman. In all of the portrayals that existed then, and that exist now, there appears to be an undercurrent that suggests that Muslim women are essentially different from a Western-defined norm, ignoring the reality that the “Western legacy of androcentrism and misogyny, though differing in its specificities, is nevertheless, generally speaking, no better than that of other cultures, including the Islamic” (Ahmed, 1982: 128). In the Orientalist literature of the past, however, the suggestion prevails not only of difference, but of the Muslim woman’s inferiority.

As the following analysis demonstrates, these tropes continue to manifest themselves in contemporary media. As the war in Afghanistan was launched, and then persisted, turning into a conflict with no apparent end and with heavy casualties, the liberation of Afghan Muslim women became one of the markers of the war’s success. In the fall of 2001, writers for papers as varied as *The Guardian* (e.g., Toynbee, 2002), *The New York Times* (Rohde, 2001; Waldman, 2001), and *The Globe and Mail* (Gee, 2001; Lives of Afghan women, 2001; Wentz, 2001) spoke of the war as a worthwhile cause if only Afghan women could remove their burqas. Ready or not, Afghan Muslim women entered the global stage—to a point. They did not always have an opportunity to speak for themselves, but silent, still images of them, fully clad in blue burqas, were interpreted by Western media as signs that they needed rescue (Jiwani, 2009).

As news media engaged in intensive coverage of Afghan women, other forms of media began to enter the fray, but in different ways. In the years since 9/11, Muslim women, not just Afghan women, have been intensely scrutinized by various forms of media, otherwise known as “systems of persuasion” (Fleras & Kunz, 2001: 50). Assumptions of gender inequality within Islam have been cited to explain why symbols of Islam are problematic or even prohibited in some countries. Battles over Sharia law erupted in Ontario and Quebec from 2003-2005, even though there was no proposal to implement any kind of Islamic tribunal in Quebec. In a pre-emptive gesture, the Quebec National Assembly passed a motion prohibiting Sharia, in part due to a belief that any form of Islamic law was inherently sexist. In the years following 9/11, both Ontario and Quebec have seen controversies over the wearing of hijab in certain places, such as the classroom, soccer field and the workplace. More recently, in 2010, France moved to ban the wearing of burqas in public, arguing that the burqa symbolized oppression and inequality. Although, unlike the news media, it did not often wade into these waters, television entertainment managed to address the Muslim woman in its own way.

### **Here’s Looking at You: The Faces of Television**

The notion that North American television is insufficiently diverse is hardly new. Critics such as Fleras and Kunz (2001) and Jiwani (1993) have suggested that television, which is dominated by white, middle-class characters, does not reflect the demographic reality of most urban centres in North America. As in the news media (e.g., Henry & Tator, 2002), representations of race and religion may be problematic in a number of respects, ranging from issues of underrepresentation to stereotyping and bias. As Henry and Tator note, this is significant because “media are one of the most powerful institutions in a democratic society because they help transmit its central cultural images, ideas, and symbols, as well as a nation’s narratives and myths” (2002: 4).

The depiction of Muslim women suffers from some of the same problems noted above, although interestingly, underrepresentation appears, at least from 2001 onwards, to become less

of an issue. Indeed, the sudden appearance of Muslim women on television merits an examination in itself, especially in the context of Fleras and Kunz's assertion that "television representations of minority women and men operate primarily within the boundaries of a racialized discourse about the unmarked superiority of whiteness as natural and normal" (2001: 89). Some might suggest, of course, that television dramas and comedies are intended for entertainment only, and hence do not merit serious examination. This paper, however, demonstrates a special interest in television programming, given the enormous power of television.

Despite the increased importance of online content, hit shows such as *Lost* and *24* continued to attract viewers in the period following 9/11 and to generate considerable conversation. Indeed, in the case of *24*, there have been suggestions that the show's content influenced real life. When Barack Obama competed for the opportunity to become the Democratic presidential candidate, *24*'s fans and even one cast member argued that the American public was more ready for a black president than it would otherwise have been, given that the show had already prepared viewers by depicting such a scenario (Bayard, 2008). If these comments seem improbable, consider the astonishment of West Point instructors and legal experts who found that students and even a U.S. Supreme Court Justice cited scenes from *24* when explaining why torture was acceptable (Buncombe, 2007; Macklin, 2008). It is no exaggeration, perhaps, when Fleras and Kunz state that "[m]edia construct realities by 'naturalizing' our perception of the world as normal rather than conventional and constructed, while stereotyping other world views as invisible or problematic" (2001: 53).

It has been argued that media depictions of minority groups can affect audiences (Greenberg, Mastro & Brand, 2002). In this case, the effect would be especially profound if the fictional entertainment ties into a larger discourse around the categorization of Muslim women, helping to validate pre-existing stereotypes. As Henry and Tator argue, biased representations in media discourse "are difficult to overturn. They provide a deep reservoir of familiar myths, unexamined assumptions, and reassuring stereotypes" (2002: 16). On a related note, Fleras and Kunz point out that television has been particularly influential when exposing viewers to images and ideas that might otherwise be outside of their everyday reality: "Television's greatest impact was on those whose physical location in society had restricted their social experiences" (2001: 93).

While the average viewer may be able to distinguish between fact and fiction, this becomes increasingly difficult if a variety of media come together to create a consistent picture. Henry and Tator cite media analysts who suggest "that people require discipline and active, self-critical awareness in order to counteract their schematic tendencies and stereotypic thinking. Most people—audience members—have neither the motivation nor the skills to challenge aspects of their own deeply engrained thought processes" (2002: 29). This is difficult not only for non-Muslims who have a limited base of knowledge to draw upon and may instead look to the media for information about a group of people; misrepresentations can also negatively affect Muslim viewers who have to see themselves depicted as the enemy of the state. And indeed, in the programs that I analyze here, there are suggestions—though admittedly inconsistent—that the Muslim woman *is* an enemy, or at the very least, inherently problematic through her insistent difference from the norm.

Some of these programs may utilize stereotypical imagery frequently and rather openly, especially in the case of programs that are heavily invested in narratives of terror and enemy infiltration, as with the dramatic series *24*. Others, however, may be more well-intentioned, as in

the case of the light-hearted comedic series *Little Mosque on the Prairie* and yet even *Little Mosque*, touted as an enlightening and successful comedy that can challenge dominant discourses (Mahtani, 2008), does very little to change essentializing images of Muslim women. Other shows, such as *Lost*, depict images that are presumably intended to be neutral, yet still convey difference and victimhood. Stereotypical portrayals of Muslim women often do fall into paradigms of victimhood and oppression, usually at the hands of Muslim men, with this oppression expressed in a host of ways, ranging from compulsion to veil, to inability to assert oneself, to fear of violence. However, as Orientalist travelogues of the past demonstrated, there are also recurring depictions of Muslim women as exotic, sexualized objects, while more contemporary portrayals address the notion of the Muslim woman herself as a threat, whether as a terrorist or in some other sense that demonstrates an inevitable link between Islam and violence. These three images, moreover, may not be mutually exclusive, and are often woven together by a clear reminder of the Muslim woman's essential difference from the mainstream or the norm.

### Analysis

This paper provides an analysis of Muslim female characters on *24*, *Lost*, and *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, drawing upon notions of gender and performativity, and suggesting that the Muslim femininity performed on these shows is linked in significant ways to the perceptions of Muslim women detailed in Orientalist writings, as discussed in the work of Leila Ahmed (1982; 1999), Rana Kabbani (1986), Karim H. Karim (2001), and Edward Said (1978). On the one hand, these shows take up the challenge of portraying minorities referred to by Fleras and Kunz (2001), who note that in 1999, none of the major U.S. networks featured minority main characters. While there are some departures from conventional stereotypes, and indeed, moments of considerable triumph in the portrayal of Muslim women on television, I argue that these moments remain far more limited than they should be, given the increased number of Muslim characters to be found on contemporary television, and given the significant opportunities to provide alternative discourses after 9/11. Moreover, while there are departures from stereotypes in some of these examples, they are not complete departures from an assumed Muslim norm, which means that some Muslim women continue to be underrepresented on North American television.

Having said that, if it is true that some minorities find affirmation in seeing themselves reflected in the mass media, there were undoubtedly more opportunities for Muslim women to see some version of themselves over the last 10 years. *24*, *Lost* and *Little Mosque on the Prairie* are selected here as texts for analysis given their popularity as well as their consistent inclusion of Muslim women in their storylines. Admittedly, the three shows are not equivalent: *Little Mosque* is a Canadian comedy, while the other two are American dramas. *Little Mosque's* audience is smaller and the show, which is still ongoing, has been on the air for fewer years than *24* and *Lost*, neither of which is currently on the air. Even the serial dramas *24* and *Lost* have notable differences: *24* was an action-packed drama about terrorism, while *Lost* had elements of fantasy and the supernatural. All three shows, however, give space to Muslim characters and indicate their awareness of anti-Islam sentiment after 9/11.

At the same time, "the appearance of diversity is one thing, the implementation of meaningful diversity is another" (Fleras & Kunz, 2001: 99). In order to determine whether or not these shows help implement such diversity in a post-9/11 environment, I examined each of these series in their totality, seeking to ascertain whether or not Orientalist stereotypes of Muslim

women were present, or whether new discourses could be unearthed. In the case of *Lost*, this involved the study of one character only, but for the other two shows, multiple characters were analyzed. In particular, if there is one show whose depiction of Muslims attracted considerable attention over an extended period of time, it is the now-defunct *24*, which wrapped up in 2010 after eight action-packed seasons in which the hero, American counterterrorist agent Jack Bauer, battled shadowy groups intent on destroying the United States. From season to season, the villains have changed, ranging from Russians to Chinese to corrupt American politicians and arms manufacturers. One popular trope, however, has been that of sinister Muslim antagonists, as well as characters whose religion is not defined but whose ethnicity appears to be Middle Eastern or South Asian, making it possible to associate them with Islam.

Interestingly, when Muslim women make their first appearance on *24*, it could be argued that they subvert conventional images of oppression, victimization and voicelessness. At the same time, the women who are portrayed are far from positive. In Season 2, when an Islamist terrorist cell has taken up residence in Los Angeles, the woman who provides valuable assistance to Bauer's team is not a Muslim, but a white Californian, Kate, who is knowledgeable about Arabic and Middle Eastern customs due to a sojourn in Saudi Arabia. She offers to infiltrate a mosque, wearing hijab, in order to obtain intelligence for Bauer's team. The actual Muslim women in the mosque are never important or depicted as individual personalities; if they are considered at all, they can be seen as silent and voiceless, or more darkly, as worshippers in a place that represents a danger to the state. There is a plot twist in that Kate's sister Marie, who appears to be a flighty young heiress, is one of the most dangerous characters in the show—while Kate initially suspects Marie's Middle Eastern fiancé Reza of being a terrorist, it is revealed that Marie is the real danger, while Reza is completely innocent.

Lest one think that this removes the Muslim threat, Marie makes clear her religious motivation. An apparent convert to Islam—although the circumstances of her conversion remain obscure—Marie precedes one act of terrorism with the phrase “Alhamdulillah [all praise is due to Allah]”. Once she is unmasked as a Muslim, Marie is depicted as a ruthless murderer, possibly a sociopath, who appears incapable of feeling any affection towards others and who cannot articulate a comprehensible reason for her actions. She provides a rendering of Islamic femininity that takes the Orientalist stereotypes to their most extreme conclusion: she is deceptive, murderous, illogical, completely lacking in compassion, and willing to employ her sexuality to attain the results she seeks. Moreover, although she cannot explain her motivation, she shows unquestioning loyalty to the male Muslim terrorist who is the chief antagonist in this storyline. Hence, while she is no victim, she has no real importance in herself: she is merely a tool employed by the dangerous Muslim man.

Similarly, in Season 4, the character of Dina is another ruthless killer, dedicated to her cause, willing to make almost any sacrifice. Again, as with Marie, it is clear that Dina and her husband are loyal to a dangerous Islamist group, but there is no real cause that is articulated and explained. Being Middle Eastern or Muslim seems to be explanation enough for the various murders committed by Dina and her family members. Unlike Marie, Dina does redeem herself to a certain extent—when her son is placed in danger, Dina agrees to help Jack Bauer and the Counterterrorist Unit, but after acting as a double agent, she meets an untimely end. Here, the fanatical Muslim woman is duplicitous and dangerous, but not quite dangerous enough. She ends up, like the Muslim women depicted in classical Orientalist imaginaries, silenced completely, her death barely referred to.

24's consistent depiction of Muslims as terrorists has attracted considerable attention, not least from the Council on American Islamic Relations (Jasser, 2007). Such criticisms did result in Fox airing a 2005 disclaimer about the show's content, which suggested that a seemingly ordinary Muslim family could be part of a terrorist sleeper cell. Additionally, the show has also tacked on the occasional Muslim character who is trustworthy, in an apparent attempt to balance the scales. Of these attempts, one of the most promising involved the inclusion of a Muslim counterterrorist agent, Nadia Yassir, in an entire season of 24.

Unlike some of the other Muslim women on this show, Nadia is an honest, dedicated patriot. However, her character undergoes minimal development and actually becomes less appealing over time, as she moves from ultra-competent to uncertain, confused and even cowardly. Facing danger, Nadia hesitates to put herself in the line of fire, and is saved by a brave white man, who is killed in her defence. Her character becomes increasingly peripheral to the plot, disappearing entirely from the series after one season. This places her in stark contrast to some of the show's white female characters, such as Kim, Kate, Audrey, Renee and Chloe. There are certainly problematic elements in terms of the series' treatment of these women but it must be said that their characters demonstrate growth over time. In contrast, Nadia simply fades away, as does the opportunity to expand the spectrum of representation in a meaningful way.

Although their characters are different, Dalia and Kayla Hassan, from the final season of 24, also fade into the background in some respects. Dalia is presented as someone who was once an important advisor to her husband, Omar Hassan, President of the fictional Islamic Republic of Kamistan, but it is only in the final episodes that she is depicted positively. Initially, she is shown mainly as a cold wife jealous of Hassan's infidelity with an attractive, independent Western woman, and has to be calmed down several times by Omar and by the all-American hero Jack Bauer when she appears shrill and angry over their daughter Kayla's kidnapping. Jack silences her with a stern reminder that it is her family that has introduced a threat into his country, which he is now working to address as best as he can. Unlike Nadia, Dalia, who covers her hair and is unimpressed by American power, is presented as someone who is clearly different from the white American female norm shown on 24. Later, Dalia assumes her husband's presidential mantle, but only by virtue of her family's power and her assassinated husband's legacy.

While Dalia takes on this obligation with dignity and apparent integrity, there is no mistaking the fact that her ascension to power is facilitated by the American President, Alison Taylor, who then uses Dalia in order to advance her own interests. Likewise, Kayla, Dalia and Omar's daughter, is rarely an active participant in most proceedings, but is primarily Omar's devoted, dutiful daughter. In an interesting departure from her demure public image but a rather clichéd alignment with notions of the sensual Muslim woman, she does defy her parents' wishes by engaging in a secret affair with her father's head of security, Tarin. Tarin later turns out to be a terrorist who almost succeeds in killing Kayla. Her rescue is not due to her own ingenuity, but to the protection provided by the Counterterrorist Unit, which is almost decimated when Kayla unwittingly drives a rigged car into its headquarters. While Kayla is no villain, she is involved with a Muslim extremist and fails to exercise her own agency.

Even when Kayla discovers that Alison Taylor has been lying to Dalia, mother and daughter remain powerless. Only a crisis of conscience on Taylor's part offers a positive resolution. After eight years of depicting a variety of Muslim characters, however, 24 does offer some of its most positive portrayals in its final season, with the Hassan family. Although Dalia is unsympathetic early on, she later emerges as an ethical leader, one who is reluctant to place her family in further danger but who does so to honour the work of her martyred husband. All the



same, Dalia is put in her place multiple times, most significantly by Jack, who reminds her of her family's foreign status. Ultimately, while the Hassans may be appealing characters for a Muslim audience, particularly in light of the limited alternatives, they are still marginalized.

A similar silencing occurs on the popular serial *Lost* (2004-2010), whose characters move through the past, present, and a mysterious afterlife. The character of Nadia in this show is simultaneously peripheral and consistently significant in the plot. Although she is not one of the main characters, she is at the heart of a tragedy that motivates the central character of Sayid in all of his actions. Sayid himself attracts racism and unwelcome attention from another character, who sees any Iraqi as suspect. These suspicions are proven correct: throughout the series, Sayid indicates that he is a dangerous man, one who is willing to sacrifice others to save his lost love Nadia. Sayid is initially haunted by the fact that he encountered Nadia in his former existence as an Iraqi interrogator, and was on the verge of killing her when she refused to cooperate. Instead, he saved her, but is nonetheless tormented repeatedly by scenarios from the past and from the afterlife, where he is not capable of giving her the life she deserves. Indeed, rather bizarrely, while Sayid is driven to seek out Nadia repeatedly throughout the series, the resolution provided to him by the finale is one that reconciles him with another woman, with whom he briefly had an affair.

In every scenario, Nadia is beautiful, exotic and enigmatic, like the mysterious women described in Orientalist travelogues. As an Iraqi, she, like Sayid, is automatically tied to terrorism, crime, and violence, although she is frequently a victim who rarely has an opportunity to act on her own. She is a means to an end, used by the CIA in order to compel Sayid's cooperation in a terrorist plot. Later, Sayid's brother manipulates him into committing a crime, suggesting that it is necessary in order to save Nadia from the threat of violence. Sayid alternates between being Nadia's saviour and the man who lets her down. In either case, she is not so far removed from the women in Orientalist tropes: she is defined exclusively in relation to a Muslim man, one who is characterized by his physical power relative to her own powerlessness. She is in need of salvation, and unlikely to receive it.

One might argue that something very different occurs in *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, which features Muslim women (and men) in everyday life, rather than incorporating Muslim characters in dangerous situations. Indeed, the show serves as a counterpoint to Fleras and Kunz's observation that "[b]oth the news and entertainment media foster disparaging images of Muslims as backward or fanatic. Muslim women are portrayed as the antithesis of the progressive and liberated Canadian mainstream woman" (2001: 145). Unlike *24* or *Lost*, *Little Mosque*'s entire reason for existence is the depiction of Muslims. The entire premise of the show, whose uniqueness and timeliness garnered international headlines upon its debut in 2007, is a kind of fish-out-of-water scenario: a Muslim community lives in a Canadian prairie town and constantly baffles the white locals. Here, the ignorance of those who live with the Muslims is the source of entertainment, although there are certainly opportunities to laugh at some of the Muslim characters as well. While a few of the white townspeople are openly racist, some of the Muslim characters are conservative to the point of near-fanaticism. Other characters, however, are much more nuanced. Indeed, in *Little Mosque*, the Muslim characters are rounded people, albeit within comedic parameters, and thus the show carries far more promise for a balanced depiction of Muslim women than either *24* or *Lost*.

Having set up such a premise, though, and serving as the first show in North America to offer a cast with so many central Muslim characters, *Little Mosque* has a considerable task to fulfil. It certainly makes great strides in this direction, yet I argue here that even *Little Mosque*

falls short of providing a depiction of the Muslim woman that is complete and balanced. Before embarking on an analysis, it should be noted that *Little Mosque* walks a different artistic tightrope than either *24* or *Lost*. Those two shows depict some form of reality, however bizarre, and attempt to generate dramatic tension. As large-scale Hollywood productions, *24* and *Lost* offer suspenseful, action-packed entertainment populated by well-known actors and attracting large audiences. *Little Mosque*, an innovative product of Canada's public broadcaster, must mine the comedic element from everyday life in the Prairies, a very different task. As Fleras and Kunz observe, a "playing them for laughs' angle has the effect of de-politicizing minority contributions to society while neutering differences to minimize their political potency" (2001: 101). In fairness, *Little Mosque* does not entirely neuter difference, but there is certainly an element of de-politicization and glossing over difference.

In *Little Mosque*, perhaps even more than in *24*, there is a singular vision of the Muslim woman, best exemplified through the character of Rayyan. She is bright, independent and articulate, and usually prepared to speak on behalf of women's rights. As a physician, she commands a certain amount of respect in town, and she appears to have some standing in the Muslim community as well. Undoubtedly, this is a more positive depiction than many others available through the media. However, encouraging though this may be, the depiction of Rayyan is not accompanied by sufficient displays of diversity to really highlight the broad spectrum of Muslim womanhood. Other Muslim women on the show tend to be similar to Rayyan in significant ways, and when they are not, their religiosity may be called into question.

With the exception of a teenage Muslim woman, Layla, and one woman, Sarah, who is a convert, devout Muslim women on *Little Mosque* usually wear a head covering and adhere to one interpretation of Islam, as though no other existed. For instance, when Rayyan explains why she does not date, this is presented as an activity that no devout Muslim woman would participate in, rather than an activity that some Muslims would consider off-limits. Similarly, Rayyan's decision to ask her parents to arrange her marriage is presented as the only appropriate option, which is certainly not the case for all Muslim women living in North America. Whenever there is some questioning of these norms, it usually comes from non-Muslims or from Rayyan's mother, the convert Sarah. A white woman, Sarah seems to fulfil the role of "inauthentic" Muslim. She likes to purchase lottery tickets, despite Rayyan's admonitions against gambling (Season 2, Episode 204), does not cover herself—although her dress is certainly not immodest—and complains mildly about having to fast during Ramadan. On the one hand, Sarah, as a white Canadian who has had to learn about Islam, could be seen as a conduit for broadening the understanding of Islam on this show. However, I would argue that this is not the case. Sarah can explain Islamic practices but does not appear to support all of them. Instead, Rayyan appears to fulfil the role of good, authentic, middle-ground Muslim, alongside her friend and imam, Amaar. When Yassir and Sarah act in ways that Rayyan deems inappropriate, either she or Amaar indicates that the two are stepping outside of the boundaries of true Islamic practice.

Obviously there are some narrative benefits to this, outside of the humour that is generated by Yassir and Sarah's attempts to tiptoe around their daughter's sensibilities. Rayyan's assertiveness, and her centrality to the storyline, means that she is able to explain Islamic practices to the townspeople and to those in the audience who may desire clarification. Juxtaposed against Sarah and Yassir's rather lax practices, and the quasi-fanatical, conservative Baber, Rayyan is one of the two characters with whom the audience would naturally identify, and in this role, she becomes an Islamic spokesperson. Certainly Rayyan's explanation of Islamic tenets is logical and reasonable, and may indeed provide clarity. For instance, in Season

1, Episode 104, Rayyan and Fatima attempt to explain that Muslim women cannot swim in a co-ed pool, as this would violate Islamic rules about female modesty before men. Similarly, when Rayyan does date (e.g., Season 2, Episode 218), she indicates that Islam requires them to have a chaperone present. I would argue, however, that Rayyan's comments in such episodes are grounded in a notion that there is only one Islam to explain, rather than various interpretations. This may seem like a minor caveat: after all, at least the show seeks to explain Islam to others. Moreover, in comparison to *Lost* and *24*, which incorporate Muslim women into scenarios involving conflict and violence, *Little Mosque* seems like a benign example of representation. Indeed, it may almost be seen as a harbinger of positive intercultural communication, seeking to build bridges and understanding after 9/11.

Yet, given the various misunderstandings circulating within North American media and political circles about Islam, exemplified by the wave of anti-mosque sentiment that became even more pervasive in the United States during the summer of 2010, I would suggest that the show has an obligation to present Islam as a religion that is characterized by extraordinary diversity. Instead, the decision to depict the characters' acts as inspired by Islam, not by their own interpretation of Islam, seals off the boundaries of any discursive space and renders other interpretations irrelevant.

The appearance of other women fails to break up this monolithic representation of Islam. The character of Fatima, who appears regularly, also covers her head and appears to share many of the same beliefs as Rayyan. Layla's refusal to cover her head, despite Baber's urging, seems to stem more from a desire to fit in at school than to debate the necessity of veiling. Such consistency may suggest that Muslim women generally fall into a few stereotypical categories. While the show appears to work diligently to address and counter notions of oppressed Muslim women, its portrayals do not leave space for the many Muslim women who practise differently from the female characters on this show.

This is not intended as a sweeping criticism of the show, which has undoubtedly made strides in offering rounded, entertaining Muslim characters, including a strong and appealing female at the core of the series. To a degree, it has expanded the range of discourses available around the figure of the Muslim woman. *Little Mosque* has helped to change the face of television, and in a limited sense, perhaps *24* and *Lost* have contributed to this as well. *Little Mosque*, in particular, provides some alternatives and much-needed humour when compared to news images of oppressed Muslim women. The terrorist characters on *24* certainly did not expand the repertoire of discourses available, but to a small extent, the two Nadia characters may have done so. Exploding some stereotypes of how Muslim women should look, for instance, the characters do not necessarily dress much differently than other North American women: neither veils, and neither is connected to terrorism despite a few hints that this possibility is always present. *24* and *Lost* now belong to the past, however, while *Little Mosque* has, hopefully, more seasons to contribute, and undoubtedly, I think, given the educational aspirations expressed by creator Zarqa Nawaz and executive producer Mary Darling (cited in McGinn, 2007), it has more messages to contribute and bridges to build, not only between Muslim and non-Muslim audiences, but within Muslim communities. As Dakroury (2008) notes, *Little Mosque* is also distinctive because it is produced by the national public broadcaster, which has a mandate to reflect the country's identity and to act, where possible, as a kind of public sphere (also see Eid & Khan, 2011, for a related discussion). This being the case, *Little Mosque* has a heavier responsibility than shows driven strictly by Hollywood economics. Rather than seeking to

entertain and attract advertising at any cost, the show must work to depict diversity in a responsible way.

### **Prime Time: Opportunities, Past and Present**

Ultimately, *Little Mosque*'s attempts to educate viewers about Muslims separate it significantly from the dramas under discussion, which have no other apparent mandate than to entertain their viewers. However, it seems that all of these shows have significant shortcomings in terms of their ability to expand the spectrum of existing discourses about Muslim women. Rather than truly interrogating what it means to be a Muslim woman, all three shows offer limited or monolithic understandings. Without question, positive strides have been made, but a careful analysis of *24*, *Lost*, and *Little Mosque on the Prairie* demonstrates that Muslim women are still underrepresented and stereotyped when they do appear on North American television. In the case of *24* and *Lost*, depicting Muslim women more frequently may have served to reinforce misunderstanding about Islam and gender, rather than challenging it. Admittedly, these shows aim for entertainment first, education second—if at all. However, the potential outcome is significant enough that their approaches must be examined and challenged.

As Fleras and Kunz observe, misrepresentation of minorities signals more than a single injustice or an artistic oversight when “the ‘real’ world is filtered through a prism of prevailing messages, symbols, and representations”. They add that misrepresentations of women of colour “are not simply a mistake in perception, but rather a system of social control” (2001: 179). In the world after 9/11, when citizens make decisions about the building of mosques or the veiling of women on the basis of information provided by media, such a system has potentially ruinous consequences. Portrayals of Islam as monolithic in its treatment of gender merely reinforce stereotypes about lack of diversity in Islam, about gendered interactions and about individual rights. For instance, while Dakroury (2008) notes that *Little Mosque* spans positions ranging from liberal to conservative, she does not comment on the fact that the show's spectrum still covers one particular kind of Islam only. For instance, all of Mercy's Muslims seem to practise the same way—if there are Sunnis and Shias, who would differ in their understanding of how an imam is appointed, or in the specifics of their prayers, this is not made apparent. Suggestions that Muslims are significantly different from the rest of the population, requiring numerous accommodations, have some educational value yet they also reinforce the idea that Muslims are problematic.

While television may appear to have been changed superficially by the events of 9/11, most references to diversity, Islam and gender continue to be insufficient and some are highly negative. At the very least, they represent a missed opportunity to contribute meaningfully to public education. At the most, they represent the strengthening of a longstanding negative discourse that threatens to persist for many years to come, with its shadow looming over debates about veiling, mosques, and immigration. In the wake of 9/11, one would hope that greater strides had been made. Instead, the struggle—and the stereotypes—continue.

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