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W-Rites of Representation: Speaking Some Truth Back to Power

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ملخص

سيكون من الخطأ الفادح أن نفترض أن المواجهة الاستعمارية حدثت في الماضي البعيد ولم يبق لها أي تأثير يذكر على الحاضر. لقد أدت تجربة انهاء الاستعمار إلى جرح وندب "النفس والثقافات واقتصاديات المستعمرين والمستعمر أيضاً، كما أدت إلى تحديد وجهة النظر التي يمكن من خلالها النظر الى هؤلاء "الآخرين". لقد هزت هجمات الحادي عشر من سبتمبر المدمرة والزلزالية على مركز التجارة العالمي العالم بأسره، مما أدى إلى تأليب الغرب ضد الإسلام وإدامة الخطاب القائل بأن الإسلام هو العدو اللدود للحضارة الغربية. لقد تم، على ضوء مثل هذا الحكم، إعادة تعبئة الخطاب المعادي للإسلام وتوجيهه إلى مستويات غير مسبقة حتى الآن. لقد أصبح الغربيون مهيبون، متجهمون، وعابسون، وصار يُعتقد أن الضحك أصبح شيئاً من الماضي وأن عالم ما بعد 11 سبتمبر أطلق عليه العصر المظلم للكوميديا. وفي رياح الظلام هاته، هب نسيم من الارتياح الكوميدي الذي أطلقه المسلمون، وأدخلته زارقا نواز لتنقية هذا الجو الضبابي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الطقوس، التمثيل، ما بعد الكولونيالية، الحقيقة

Résumé

Les attaques catalytiques et sismiques du 11 septembre contre le World Trade Center ont secoué le monde entier, opposant Occident à l'islam et perpétuant la rhétorique séculaire selon laquelle l'islam est l'ennemi juré de la civilisation occidentale. Au milieu d'un tel retour de bâton sur les choses musulmanes, le discours islamophobe a été ravitaillé et porté à des échelles jusqu'ici sans précédent. Les Occidentaux étaient devenus si sérieux et renfrognés que l'on pensait que le rire appartenait au passé, et le monde après le 11 septembre était qualifié d'ère sombre de la comédie. Dans les vents de l'obscurité, il y avait une brise de détente comique soulevée par les musulmans et introduite par Zarqa Nawaz pour éclaircir l'air brumeux. En parlant au nom des musulmans, Nawaz, à travers son sitcom largement acclamé Little Mosque on the Prairie, a créé un précédent, donnant aux musulmans la voix qui leur avait été jusqu'alors refusée de se représenter.

Mots clés: 9/11, Occident, Islam, rhétorique, contrecoup, rire, comédie, détente, représenter

Abstract

It would be a monumental error to assume that the colonial encounter happened in the remote past and has had little bearing on the present. The experience of [de]colonization did wound and scar “the psyches, the cultures and the economies of the colonized”¹ and the colonizer as well largely determining the lens through which these others come to be seen. The catalytic and seismic 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre shook the world at large pitting the West against Islam and perpetuating the rhetoric that Islam is the sworn enemy of Western civilization. Amidst such clouded judgement, the Islamophobic discourse was refueled and pitched up to heretofore unprecedented scales. So solemn, sullen and sulky Westerners had become it was thought that laughter was a thing of the past and the post 9/11 world was labeled the dark age of comedy. In the winds of darkness there blew a breeze of comic relief heaved by Muslims and ushered in by Zarqa Nawaz to clear up the misty air.

Key Words: W-Rites, Representation, Power, Post-colonialism, Postcolonialism, Truth.

Introduction

It would be a monumental error to assume that the colonial encounter happened in the remote past and has had little bearing on the present. The experience of [de]colonization did wound and scar “the psyches, the cultures and the economies of the colonized, and the colonizer as well largely determining the lens through which these others come to be seen. The catalytic and seismic 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre shook the world at large pitting the West against Islam and perpetuating the rhetoric that Islam is the sworn enemy of Western civilization. Amidst such clouded judgement, the Islamophobic discourse was refueled and pitched up to heretofore unprecedented scales. So solemn, sullen and sulky Westerners had become it was thought that laughter was a thing of the past and the post 9/11 world was labeled the dark age of comedy. In the winds of darkness there blew a breeze of comic relief heaved by Muslims and ushered in by Zarqa Nawaz to clear up the misty air. This article thus aims at highlighting the aforementioned discourse and clearing up its misty air.

1. Review of Literature

The concept of postcolonialism surfaced as an area of study indicating the many continuities/contiguities as well as the discontinuities that governed and overshadowed people’s lives everywhere they be. Postcolonialism, a catch phrase often resorted to in order to account for the

¹ Ali Rattansi, “Postcolonialism and Its Discontents”, p. 58. In George Ritzer and Zeynep Atalay, eds., *Readings in Globalization: Key Concepts and Major Debates*. Great Britain: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010.

power relations holding the North with the South, eschews neatly tailored definitions, and so to try to pin it down would be a futile pursuit. Ali Rattansi, having conceded to the difficulty, if not the impracticality, of mapping this thorny terrain of study, furnishes us with a provisional definition demarcating and delimiting the boundaries of postcolonialism, thus dusting off its ambiguous accoutrement. Time-wise, postcolonialism comes across as a compartmentalized “period in global time-space in which most of the former colonies gained formal independence.”¹ No longer wedded, the ex-colonizers and ex-colonized are, however, still betrothed in more ways than one could possibly envision. The use of the prefix ‘post’ signals that which comes right after, but it should in no way intimate the end of that which was. Regardless of the concept to which it is affixed, “the word ‘post’ offers a ‘misleading chronology’” with its linearity, the before and after which dismiss as irrelevant “the multidirectional, ruptured quality of time and space in which the ‘past’ may not yet be ‘post’.”² Theorists in the field make a lucid distinction between the term post-colonial and the concept ‘postcolonial.’ Whilst “the hyphenated term” spans the historical period following the retreat, but not necessarily the end, of colonization, “the unhyphenated word ‘postcolonial’” has come to be used in a much broader guise to disguise “a continuum of discourses, ideologies and intellectual formations which have emerged from cultures that experienced imperial encounters.”³ This should not suggest that the postcolonial applies exclusively to third worldist thinking and experiences in the South, but “it also refers to the “Third World” diasporic presence within “First World” metropolises,”⁴ a throbbing presence largely felt because of the downpour of immigrants who crossed borders invited/uninvited.

To disambiguate postcolonialism and postcoloniality, Rattansi co-opted and concocted ways to confine the former to intellectual endeavors and the latter to index history.⁵ The discourse of postcolonialism is therefore “dedicated to investigating, analyzing and deconstructing structures of knowledge, ideologies, power relations, and social identities”.⁶ Postcolonialism centers on the constitutive axial/axiological themes of “colonizer and colonized, center and periphery, the metropolitan and the

¹ “Postcolonialism and Its Discontents”, p. 57.

² Stephanie Newell, *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading*, p. 179. USA: Oxford University Press Inc: New York, 2006.

³ *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading*, p. 3.

⁴ Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, p. 38. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

⁵ “Postcolonialism and Its Discontents”, pp. 57-58.

⁶ ShaobaoXie, “Postcolonialism”, 986-90. In Jan Aart Scholte and Roland Robertson, eds., *Encyclopedia of Globalization*. New York: MTM, 2007.

‘native’”,¹ which imbricates and implicates both dominant and dominated alike, but not quite similarly. Inherent in postcolonialism is the paradox that its epistemic foundations and formulations “perpetuate the selfsame epistemic foregrounding of coloniality”,² whence its relevance to the study of Self/Other relations. Thus, the accompanying ‘-ism’ in postcolonialism retraces the political, the intellectual as well as “the cultural responses to the colonial encounter”³ and, to some extent, even the postcolonial encounter by recording those voices emanating from within and from without. As long as there is contact or friction, and there will always be, between cultures, responses will multiply and many a voice will resound, echoes of which we will amplify. Arguably, then, while its beginnings may not be traceable, the end of postcolonialism is not that clear-cut, either. In fact, the postcolonial legacy is writ so large it continues to overshadow “without fully dominating” the lives of the ex-colonized⁴ now exiled, hence the currency of neo-colonialism. The neocolonial situation implies a rite of passage with emphasis laid on “a repetition with difference, a regeneration of colonialism through other means”.⁵ With the formal end of heavy-handed colonization was born a softer, yet no less insidious, form of exploitation baptized neocolonialism, with which postcolonialism is now occupied, after its forefather where “direct political and military control has given way to abstract, semi-indirect, largely economic forms of control”.⁶ The term neocolonialism “points up the many forms of continuity”⁷ or “structural continuities”⁸ rather than severance punctuating colonial and postcolonial encounters. Colonialism perpetually reinvented itself as imperialism by generating “knowledge about colonized cultures which endlessly produced a degenerate image”⁹ of an Orient to be consumed in the West. While territorial occupation may be history, velvet occupation, as the phrase goes, takes on many an amorphous and insidious form. Orientalism, as a system of unpacking thought and sifting it out “into Western consciousness”,¹⁰ as a discursive praxis, unveils the multifarious and nefarious ways in which

¹ “Postcolonialism and Its Discontents”, p. 58.

² Hamid Dabashi, *Postorientalism: Knowledge and Power in Time of Terror*, p. 159. USA and UK: Transaction Publishers, 2009.

³ *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading*, p. 3.

⁴ *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading*, p. 4.

⁵ *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, p. 40.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁷ “Postcolonialism and Its Discontents”, p. 64.

⁸ *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, p. 40.

⁹ John McLeod, *Beginning Postcolonialism*, p. 22. UK: Manchester University Press, 2000.

¹⁰ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 6. London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.

colonialism “still survives today in Western media reports” reinforcing the idea that its machinery “does not simply disappear as soon as the colonized become independent”.¹ Said concludes that “direct colonialism has largely ended,” but its superordinate, imperialism, lurks “where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in the specific political, ideological, economic and social practices”.² Towards the end of *Culture and Imperialism*, Said reiterates the point he made earlier that “imperialism did not end, did not suddenly become “past”, once decolonization had set in motion the dismantling of the classical empires”.³ The ideologies behind it still linger in the thoughts and practices that inform the ways with which immigrants are met today. The rupture, if there be such a thing, with colonialism has more to do with refocusing the epistemological and phantasmagorical lenses by which the Orient is viewed than with returning tracts of lands that were once raped.

Another milestone worth a stop is the Cold War,⁴ the end of which meant, among other things, new configurations of power accruing out of the “collapse of old certainties and the emergence of identity politics”, stimulating “a shift of emphasis”,⁵ a paradigmatic shift in focus with Islam becoming once again a subject for study and Muslims an object for yet more curiosity. “Since the middle 1980’s”, a time at which the US won a moral victory over its long-standing opponent, Said extrapolates, the production of knowledge about Islam sur-repetitively and perpetually revealed it to be a religion “of fundamentalism, terrorism and anti-modernism.”⁶ Alas, “Islam”, their Islam, has come to herald “‘news’ of a particularly unpleasant sort”.⁷ It is in the nature of Islam and, hence, Muslims to be belligerent and bellicose, the claim would go, yet the lustful nomads embodied “incompetence and easy defeat”.⁸ This is so much the case that the Islam being mediatized today is “defined negatively as that with which the West is radically at odds,”⁹ its

¹ *Beginning Postcolonialism*, p. 39.

² Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 9. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993.

³ *Culture and Imperialism*, p. 282.

⁴ In Huntington’s view, the Cold War was but a fleeting moment when compared to the ongoing antagonism between Islam and Christendom. In Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, p. 102. UK: Simon and Schuster, 1996.

⁵ Barbara Bush, *Imperialism and Postcolonialism*, p. 49. Great Britain: Pearson Education Limited, 2006.

⁶ Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, p. 149. USA: Vintage, 1997.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁸ *Orientalism*, p. 285.

⁹ *Covering Islam*, p. 163.

antithesis, “its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other”.¹ Unfortunately, the images being manufactured and churned out of a demonic Islam have found their way into the boxed confines of television, and instead of containing the so-called threat Islam has come to signify in print, television has been complicit in further demonizing and vilifying Muslims. As appears from Jack Shaheen’s anthology on films,² the Arabs as Muslims and Muslims as Arabs are laden and riddled with stereotypes making it appear as though treachery, lechery, dishonesty, insurgency, sadism and so on were innate “personal characteristics” of Muslims’ devious bedeviled nature.³

The turn of the twenty-first century, the new American century so to speak,⁴ was especially marked by the rise of Islam as the public enemy as exemplified by the proliferation of hate crimes labeled Islamophobic. While this neologism may seem new, the phenomenon it alludes to is as age-old as xenophobia itself.⁵ Differently put, “anti-Muslim and anti-Islamic expression and hostility were as much a distinctly pre-9/11 phenomenon as a post-9/11 phenomenon.”⁶ Though politicians sought to counteract the backlash and exempt Islam from involvement in the hideous and heinous attacks which somehow castrated the World Trade Center,⁷ injurious and biased reports saturated the media only to find an outlet in the behaviors of quite a few incensed individuals, who lashed out indiscriminately at their neighbors and fellow citizens for no reason other than that they happened to be wearing a beard, a turban or a veil, “visual identifiers” at which was directed “the venting

¹ *Orientalism*, p. 1.

² Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, a documentary one can watch on Youtube. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aKD3CnPJNOE>

³ *Orientalism*, pp. 286-287.

⁴ Initially coined by Henry R. Luce, this concept rests on the premise that America is called upon to assume its role as a world leader and to intervene where necessary to put things back into order, the American order.

⁵ Tomaž Mastnak, “Western Hostility toward Muslims: A History of the Present”, p. 29. In Andrew Shryock, ed., *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend*. USA: Indiana University Press, 2010.

⁶ Christopher Allen, “Justifying Islamophobia: A Post-9/11 Consideration of the European Union and British Contexts”, p. 2. In Katherine Bullock, ed., *New Orientalism and Islamophobia Post-9/11*. USA: American Journal of Social Sciences, 2004.

⁷ British and German Prime Ministers, Tony Blair and Gerhard Schroder, spoke firmly against confusing the perpetrators with the rest of Muslims. They foresaw a possible retaliation against innocent Muslims whose views did in no way tally with those extremists.

of rage, revenge, or any other denigrating sentiment or action”.¹ Even places such as mosques and schools came under attack for what they stood for. In fine, through fear mongering, the mediocracy pulls the strings as best fits the interests of certain privileged groups and to the detriment of the underdog.

It is only fair then to posit that “the central site of contestation over Islam and Muslims is the media”.² In a context fraught with fear, anxiety and retaliation, images have become so powerful they can trigger rage that soon exacerbates into violence once they find their way into mainstream media. One reason why images grow rampantly like leaves on trees is ascribed to the infinite possibilities the Internet/television collusively afford for their dissemination and circulation on a large scale. In this way, the pictorial representations of the prophet caused a huge ripple, echoes of which reverberate up till now. The characterization of Prophet Mohammed as a potential terrorist is sure to offend moderate Muslims and infuriate Muslim fundamentalists, but the controversy would have gone down unnoticed had the media not blown it out of proportion. It is precisely because the Danish cartoon controversy was internationalized that the debate heated up. “Cultural polarization began assuming irreconcilable proportions” insofar as the cartoonish drawings were “perceived by the majority in the Arab and Muslim world as an offence against symbols of religious belief, and by most in Europe as an instance of freedom of expression.”³ What unleashed so much fury is not the act of representation itself as did the message behind the cartoon explicitly showing Prophet Muhammed and his disciples to be innately blood-thirsty. Among the twelve drawings caricaturing the prophet, the one depicting Muhammad, “with a turban in the shape of a ticking bomb” standing at the gates of heaven imploring and pleading with would-be suicide bombers: “Stop, stop, we have run out of virgins,”⁴ spread like fire through the Internet not only because of its satirical content, but because it reduces Islam to being what it is not, a religion of the sword, as Lewis pictures it. What the cartoonists fail to realize, or perhaps realize thoroughly,

¹ “Justifying Islamophobia: A Post-9/11 Consideration of the European Union and British Contexts”, p. 4.

² KeremOktem, “Mutual Misunderstandings?”, p. 1. In KeremOktem and Reem Abou-El-Fadl, eds., *Mutual Misunderstandings? Muslims and Islam in the European Media*. European Studies Centre: St Antony’s College, University of Oxford, 2009.

³ HanaaEbeid, “Beyond Government Control: Divergent Views on Europe in the Egyptian Media”, p. 101. In Kerem Oktem and Reem Abou-El-Fadl, eds., *Mutual Misunderstandings? Muslims and Islam in the European Media*. European Studies Centre: St Antony’s College, University of Oxford, 2009.

⁴ Michael Kimmelman, “A Startling New Lesson in the Power of Imagery”. New York Times, February 8, 2006. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/02/08/arts/design/08imag.html>

is that in “painting Islam and every Muslim in the conclusive colors of absolute darkness,” they were only fueling hatreds and sowing fear. No matter what they say to justify their end, “no culture or people can accept such representation”.¹

There is no denying that Muslim sensitivities were deeply touched by such a depiction, but there is no excusing the overreaction of some Muslims who exceeded extreme lengths in demonstrating their disapprobation. One may argue plausibly that protesting is also an act of free speech, but the violence and death threats made loud and clear on Arab and Western media during such protests only reconfirm what the cartoons were meant to express. As a matter of fact, it is such outrage that prompted many newspaper editors across Europe and North America, but not all,² to republish the cartoons in support of what they call “freedom of speech” and in solidarity with the Danish paper. For Sardar, one thing that is crystal clear is that “this is not an issue of freedom of expression. It is about power, domination and demonization”.³ Flemming Rose, the editor of the paper in question, believes that “as a nonbeliever” if a Muslim beseeches him to “observe his taboos in the public domain, he is not asking for my respect, but for my submission,”⁴ a statement worthy of note because it clearly exposes the whole matter as an exercise of power rather than “a journalistic exercise”, as Rose insists it is.⁵ Sardar goes on to add that Islam is no way opposed to the ideals of free speech as Rose and his like-minded like to think, but the truth is that “the Danish cartoons are part of a common rhetoric of deliberate misconstruction of Islam”.⁶

To discuss Islam in relation to humor when times have become so sober and solemn is to run the risk of blasphemy, but it is our firm belief that humor, when taken seriously, can pave the way to squarely facing up to divisions pulling us/them asunder. “There is only one way left to escape the alienation of present-day society: to retreat ahead of it” by interrupting the sameness and seamlessness of discourse as it stands today and inventing in

¹ “A ‘freedom’ whose home is the jungle”.

² Some American papers voiced their disagreement with the publication of such offensive cartoons and hiding under the blanket of free speech. For more on their views, read Edward Drachman and Robert Langran, *You Decide: Controversial Cases in American Politics*, pp. 88-92. USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008.

³ “A ‘freedom’ whose home is the jungle”.

⁴ Sebastian kim, *Theology in the Public Sphere*, p. 197. UK: SCM Press, 2011.

⁵ Flemming Rose, “Why I published cartoons of Muhammed and don’t regret it”. *The WorldPost*, 19 February, 2015. Retrieved from http://www.huffingtonpost.com/flemming-rose/why-i-published-cartoons-of-muhammad_b_6709650.html

⁶ Ziauddin Sardar, “Freedom of speech is Islamic, too”. *NewStatesman*, 13 February, 2006. Retrieved from <http://www.newstatesman.com/node/152545>

its stead a new discourse of difference, of resistance and humor.¹ The kernel of humor, we should concede, resides mainly “in its practices of violation ... [of] expectations and rules”,² in its seizing upon immediate circumstances to make its point. Those who are liable to take offence, and many will, at the humor the sitcom is redolent of should be reminded that in the world of comedy, the forbidden is trampled, and it is within the confines of such a reversal that the “the pleasure of the text”³ develops. As Dudden notes, humor can “be barbed, disconcerting, intimidating and even downright vicious”,⁴ serving simultaneously as a benign and acrimonious corrective.⁵ As long as touchy topics are draped in the comic attire, boundaries can be constantly tested, fixed representations persistently contested, and threats safely blunted. As a matter of humor, it is that which appears “to be fixed and oppressive ... that should be mocked and ridiculed”.⁶ As such, “laughter often allows something that is routinely disallowed to be seen or spoken of”.⁷ In his exploration of the mechanics and dynamics of humor, Westwood comes to the conclusion that albeit offensive, “unsettling and even subversive”, humor can also contain “subversion within the safe confines of the merely comic”.⁸ Located at such a disjunction, the comedic effect is best attained by feeding on tension, without which there can be no laughter,⁹ to attenuate and, better still we hope, to relieve the neurosis at work.¹⁰

¹ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, pp. 40-42. Trans. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.

² Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, “Humour and the Study of Organizations”, p. 6. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organization*. USA: Routledge, 2007.

³ *The Pleasure of the Text*, p. 26.

⁴ Arthur Power Dudden, ed., *American Humor*, p. xv. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

⁶ Simon Critchley, “Humour as practically enacted theory, or, why critics should tell more jokes”, p. 18. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organization*. USA: Routledge, 2007.

⁷ Damian P. O’Doherty, Heidegger’s unfunny and the academic text: Organization analysis on the blink”, p. 184. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organization*. USA: Routledge, 2007.

⁸ Robert Westwood, “Theory as Joke: A hysterical perturbation”, p. 68. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organization*. USA: Routledge, 2007.

⁹ Leon Rappoport, *Punchlines: The Case for Racial, Ethnic, and Gender Humor*, p.19. USA: Praeger Publishers, 2005.

¹⁰ In our approach to dealing with humour, we find Freud’s psychoanalytical tools of much use. For Mary Douglas, humour is seen both as a rite expressive of collective values and an anti-rite questioning those values.

By inviting on the screen and elevating to the center stage the marginalities whose views go unheard, humor represents the unrepresentable,¹ carrying within the antidote necessary to unthinking staunchly held prejudices, undermining dogmas all the while subverting stereotypes on both ends of the spectrum, that is, the minority's and majority's side. Though or, perhaps more correctly so, through being subversive, humor "offers the chance to have a new outlook on the world".² As unexpected as this invitation is, it still makes perfect sense once one takes account of Critchley's miniature strategies of humor.³ An efficient and effective strategy in this regard is defamiliarization, a reference to that state where "common sense is disrupted, the unexpected is evoked, familiar subjects are situated in unfamiliar, even shocking contexts in order to make the audience or readership conscious of their own cultural assumptions".⁴ Humor attends to defamiliarization as a miniaturist strategy for it to exercise/exorcise the aforementioned effect and much more. In "defamiliarizing the familiar, demythologizing the exotic and inverting the world of common sense," humor introduces us to the world "as if we had just landed from another planet".⁵ At its best, humor can beset the familiar and even construct "an alternate world, one at odds with our normal way of viewing things".⁶ In Critchley's appraisal, humor tickles the mind "by producing a consciousness of contingency",⁷ thus changing the status quo, and critiquing the social [dis]order.

2. Little Mosque on the Prairie: A Case Study

One way to counter the tide of torrential criticism panning Muslims is to have Muslims speak on behalf of Muslims. Oftentimes, those self-appointed themselves spokespersons for Muslims only do so with their own interest in mind to the detriment of others who may and do incur the

¹ Allanah Johnson et al, "Representing the unrepresentable: gender, humour and organization", pp. 113-139. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organisation*. USA: Routledge, 2007.

² Michael Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, p. 34. Trans. H. Iwolsky. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1965.

³ "Humour as practically enacted theory, or, why critics should tell more jokes", p. 28.

⁴ Henk Driessen, "Humour, Laughter and the Field: reflections from anthropology", p. 227. In J. Bremmer and H. Roodenburg, eds., *A Cultural History of Humour*. Malden, MA: Polity Press, 1997.

⁵ Simon Critchley, *On Humour*, pp. 65-66. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.

⁶ Robert Westwood, "Theory as Joke: A hysterical perturbation", p. 49. In Robert Westwood and Carl Rhodes, eds., *Humour, Work and Organisation*. USA: Routledge, 2007.

⁷ "Humour as practically enacted theory, or, why critics should tell more jokes", p. 24.

consequences of such misrepresentation. Zarqa Nawaz, a Muslim of Pakistani origins, directs a sitcom on her brethren and sisters in such an ingenious way as to redirect the gaze of the viewership to what it feels like to be at the receiving end of all the demeaning and demonizing assaults and clichés on things Muslim. In so doing, she also inculcates new and subtle ways of weathering the storm of criticism, of dispelling allegations and subverting stereotypes. The slashed dichotomy of Self/Other is thus overturned and dashed as Self-Other in what seems like an act of bridging the hitherto schism separating the twain. In Lacanian thinking, the identity of an individual or a group of people is mainly “shaped or misshaped by the recognition or non-recognition [they] receive from others,” namely from police officers and journalists, among others, who mirror an amorphous reflection of these threatening/threatened Others within our borders. This being the case, a community “of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves”.¹ The apprehension of the new Imam Amaar upon his arrival at the airport on his way to Mercy town speaks volumes about the hardships Muslims face while in transit. Border crossing, as we have previously put forth, has become a nightmare for Muslims, and this is “most acutely felt at the long delays at border points”.² In a reversal of the legal register, Muslims are thought guilty until they prove themselves innocent. While many Muslims chafe and choke under racial profiling, Amaar, an ex-lawyer, evinces composure, an unparalleled sense of humor and an intelligence that stand in stark contrast with the anxiety, edginess and gullibility the two policemen exude. Humor is his *modus operandi*. His only charge, as he ironically puts it, is “flying while Muslim”.³ Every utterance he makes to account for every single voyage he has undertaken whether to Pakistan or Egypt together with every decision he has made is farcically misconstrued. Even the smallest move he makes to reach out for his wallet to produce evidence in support of his words is suspected, misjudged and mistrusted, thrusting the officer behind to frantically pull out his gun. Jalal Al-Azm’s understanding of Orientalism as an enterprise that is “shot through and through with racist assumptions...

¹ Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition”, p. 25. In Amy Gutmann, ed., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994.

² Howard Adelman, “Canadian Borders and Immigration Post 9/11”, p. 5. Retrieved from: <http://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10315/9730/AdelmanCanadian.borders.911.pdf?sequence=1>

³ This was the title of a documentary produced in 2007 showcasing racial profiling in its most outrageous forms. For more on the documentary, log on to <http://cutv.ws/documentary/watch-online/play/2034>

reductionistic explanations and anti-human prejudices”¹ very much permeates this scene. This is so much the case that Amaar’s “true calling” is, according to the interrogating officer, “explosives.” As Amaar jokingly answers in the positive, the officer pens his ‘yea’ down. In a hilarious exchange, Amaar urges the cross-examining officer to call the Masjid he will be working in to check his side of the story out, all the while vowing to pay the price of deportation to Syria if he is found guilty. The officer is too stern to get the punch-line, adding to the humor of the scene, but he gives Amaar the benefit of the doubt. As though the officer had only heard the last part of what Amaar has said and assuming him to be guilty as charged, the officer storms out: “You do not get to choose which country you’ll be deported to.” Much to the delight of the officer, that message on the answering machine “about blowing people away” leads him to the foregone conclusion that Amaar is guilt-ridden. While this may sound satirical, the incident Amaar faces reminds us of the fate many Muslims were subjected to upon being suspected and maligned simply for being Muslim.² Caught in a whirlwind, Amaar feels slighted and slandered, but, fortunately for him, he contains his emotions and maintains his equanimity. Through her rendering Amaar as a well-composed and self-restrained character, the director provides the viewers, notably those at the receiving end, with stratagems and tactics to resist oppression and vilification. The policeman should not be blamed for carrying out to the letter the provisions of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act, which arrogates to him the right “to identify suspected terrorists without the higher evidentiary standards required under criminal law”.³ In an encroachment on the basic right of freedom, a suspect could be kept under surveillance and even held in custody, if need be, for as long as it takes the police to interrogate them and could eventually be deported if that same policeman decides on it.⁴ Such empowering of the police force not

¹ Sadik Jalal Al-Azm, “Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse”, p. 55. In George Ritzer and Zeynep Atalay, eds., *Readings in Globalization: Key Concepts and Major Debates*. Great Britain: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2010.

² For more on similar stories, read Darcy Zabel, ed, *Arabs the Americas: Interdisciplinary Essays on the Arab Diaspora*. Mr. Arar is a case in point. He is an example of a Canadian-Syrian citizen who was unjustly repatriated to Syria while he was in America trying to reach his family in Canada. There was nothing against him except his Arab name and identity. The rest of it was forgotten in the haste to have him cast away. What is even more injurious is that his family the American authorities did not take any pains to inform his family as they should of his forced disappearance into air space on his way to Syria. We would say he was guilty by association.

³ Estella Muyinda, ed., *Racial Discrimination in Canada*, p. 13. Toronto: National Anti-Racism Council of Canada, 2007.

⁴ For more facts on the scale of racial profiling Muslims endured, read *Presumption of Guilt: A National Survey on Security Visitations of Canadian Muslims* archived by CairCan: Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations. Retrieved from www.caircan.ca.

only disempowers the citizenry, but it also puts them at the mercy of abusive state apparatuses. Upon his release, Amaar realizes, much to his dismay, that being a Canadian Muslim does not only cause one to be detained, but it may also cause one to be stranded, prejudiced against and listed as undesirable. Amaar, like any other Muslim trapped in what has become “the wild West” post 9/11, cannot book a flight ticket the way an ordinary citizen would without him being required to wait unduly, and the employee having to call their supervisor as episode one illustrates. The freedom Fred boasts of on his radio show is not a delicacy that comes the easy way for Muslims.

Upon his arrival to the village, Amaar, having miraculously worked his way out of the frying-pan, falls headlong into the fire. Only this time, a journalist who can scantily differentiate between journalism and detective work keeps ‘shooting’ him with his camera and bombarding him with questions of this sort:

What is your relationship with this mosque?

What is your comment on the scandal?

What do you have to say about the terrorist allegations?

Suffice it for Amaar to mention a word or two for the journalist to make his own rash misinterpretation, pestering the newly arrived Imam with yet more outrageous questions no one would take. The litany of questions being thrown at Amaar tells much about this journalist and betrays the essence of journalism in general. It seems as though the journalist has the outline of his story prepared beforehand and is only digging up for ways to flesh it out. The situation exacerbates when Yasir and Amaar, unaware of the implications of their words, discuss that message on the answering message about “blowing people away.” The inquisitive and intrusive journalist barges in with an accusatory tone inquiring if Yasir and his family are “part of a sleeper cell”. Yasir’s imprudence encourages the journalist to take his impudence to a higher level with his provocative accusations: What is your connection to Al Qaeda? Raayn takes it on herself to stall him by answering this one in this way: What is your connection to journalism? Undaunted, the journalist will not stop there. He wants to know if Amaar is from Saudi Arabia as if people from Saudi Arabia were all terrorists. We expect him to be disappointed when it turns out that Amaar is from Toronto, but this only adds to his ecstasy. “This story is huge,” the journalist is already thinking of an appropriate headline for his too short an inquiry to be worth publishing, but all that seems to matter is that this is a story that will definitely sell well

and sit well with the readership.¹ Muslims, it seems, are high on the news agenda. The next thing we see is a black and white photograph of Amaar occupying much of the space of the front page. As he gets off his taxi, Amaar has his fist raised up as if bracing himself for the next punch, and we, the readers, feel exposed and so have to put up our arms to prevent the blow to our face. The headline “Holy Terror” not only captures our attention, but also raises our eyebrows the way Amaar’s are, as it summons our worst demons. The caption “Transplanted Toronto Cleric “Lands” in Hot Water” further disorients our reading of the photo, confirming the fear the word terror has set in motion. This accords well with the Islamophobic and public discourse that has been on the rise since 9/11 constituting the core to “a politically and socially constructed process by which governments and the media present threats to national or state security in a highly dramatized and persuasive form of public discourse”.²

In this respect, radios fare no better than newspapers. No wonder because air time is entrusted to people like Fred Tupper who, instead of spreading mutual understanding, disseminate fear and terror little aware of the damage accruing out of their ill-founded over-sweeping generalizations. Nothing could rival or even equal Baber’s sickening thoughts about the community he lives in but Fred. We may hate Baber for thinking of others as little more than “infidels,” “heathens,” “crusaders” and so on, but his epithets mean naught in his entourage where he becomes harmless. In his addressing a bigger audience, Fred, the pesticide, dresses his morbid thoughts with that magic that pierces the ear and hence proves more detrimental and consequential. In a battle of wits, he questions Amaar or rather stalks Amaar with his constant and incessant blunt accusations. As he sounds the bell, Fred calls upon the people of Mercy to wake up to the impending peril:

Fred: Are you a terrorist?

¹ This story reminds us of another almost similar story that engrossed us while we were still university students and has stayed with us ever since. Here is a summary of the story: A dog pounced on a kid in a park in New York while a man happened to be passing by. The man jumped at the dog and saved the kid. A journalist who has seen it all went to the man. “Congratulations, you are an American hero”, said the journalist. The man said “I am not American”. The journalist smiled at him saying “you must be a European, then”, but our hero said “I am an Arab”. The next day the papers were full of images of the man, and his story read “Arab terrorist attacks and kills dog”.

² Christopher Murphy, “‘Securitizing’ Canadian Policing: A New Policing Paradigm For the Post 9/11 Security State?”, p. 3. Retrieved from www.metropolis.net/pdfs/CMurphy%20security%20policing%20article.pdf

Amaar: No, I'm...

Fred: You object to the term?

Amaar: Of course I do.

Fred: Well, you prefer, uh...Mujahideen?

Amaar: Yes...No! I mean, look, Fred... I came here to clear the air. You're not

letting me get a word in.

Fred: That's the privilege of living in a country with freedom.

Amaar: Freedom? to do what, to fan the flames of hatred.

Fred: Oh-ho-ho, isn't it Muslim preachers like yourself who do that? Huh? I got

news for you Johnny jihad. That's...folks around here will not sit back and let that happen. You can bet your falafel on that.

Fred's questioning of Amaar, his continued interrogation, lays bare the prejudicial, antagonistic and hostile discourse with which the Muslim minority has had to grapple post 9/11. Despite accounts to the contrary, Muslims were presented as the sworn enemies of the public good, "the alien, the fanatical other[s]", the newcomers who are "unaccustomed to the freedoms and tolerance of Western civilization".¹ The all-domineering voice of Fred overshadows the presence of Amaar on the show. On a straight radio talk show, the host is supposed to ask questions and wait for answers, but this is a twisted case where the guest-speaker is bereft of his right of speech in a country that prides itself on the freedoms it showers its citizens with, not all of them though. The voice of subalternity is drowned in the noise, the humdrum, the likes of Fred create and diffuse so only their voice will be discerned.² Yet, upon further scrutiny, the few utterances Amaar makes deny Fred the all-authoritative presence he would have enjoyed had Amaar not invited himself to the show. The "incongruities ...uncertainties and ambivalences"³ Amaar's "No" causes upset the seemingly seamless narrative Fred is spinning. His echoing the words Fred has used is a sign of

¹ T. Y. Ismael and J. Measor, "Racism and the North American Media Following 11 September: The Canadian Setting", p. 116. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 25, 1/2 Winter/Spring, 2003. Retrieved from <http://caoshea.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/racism-and-the-north-american-media-following-11-sept-canada.pdf>

² This is a reminder of Spivak's controversial essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?"

³ Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique*, p. 25. London: Routledge, 2004.

spectacular resistance Bhabha would describe as the mimic moment, the moment newer and subtler meanings are being produced punctuating and puncturing Fred's all too familiar clichéd discourse. Mimicry, in Newell's interpretation, is defined as being "ambivalent, continually producing splitting, excess, and difference," which empowers it to subvert "the authority of the very discourse that is mimicked",¹ Fred's in our case.

His appellation "Johnny jihad" alludes to the double identity Muslims are thought to have and the allegiance they are thought to be lacking. In pointing out that Fred is "fanning the flames of hatred", Amaar points to and sums up the nefarious intentions of the journalist all too well. Nawaz immediately captures the reaction of one of the auditors who happens to be within earshot of the radio talk show as exclaiming: If he hates it so much here, why doesn't he go back to Toronto? Words that are thrown into the air may have more collateral damage than Fred can possibly weigh. Inherent in his declamation, "folks around here will not sit back and let that happen. You can bet your falafel on that", is an audible declaration of war of all against some, an onslaught that poisons at first the airwaves and henceforth the thoughts of those precarious souls who cannot tell a horse from a pony. Fred's miscalculated shootout only serves to fuel hatred and instigate violence, both verbal and physical, which will eventually fire back with Muslims riposting either through seclusion or, worse still, through recourse to the same ways and means, a tit for a tat, as Fred advocates. Luckily for Amaar and the Muslim community, the people of Mercy give no heed to Fred's hallucinations. This coordinated attack on Amaar is so fierce the only fiercer campaign would be the US-led war on terror. This being said, other Christians are little thwarted by the rumors being circulated, and know better than to judge others on the basis of allegations Fred spins out. For that matter, Reverend Magee changes the terms of his commercial lease contract in a way that would allow for Muslims to utilize the parish hall as they see fit. Unlike Baber and Fred, both Amaar and Magee have in them what it takes to be good ambassadors of their religions. Episode three ends with the two chattering and poking fun at the passers-by. Humor can elevate souls to such heights and purge them of petty squabbles that mar our co-existence. More often than not, Amaar, a novice to the *métier*, asks the experienced priest for spiritual guidance. This is evidenced when Amaar tries to meditate but cannot because of Baber's and Rayyan's untimely and impromptu visits. He finds solace in the insight the Reverend lavishly offers him. It is all part of his spiritual duty as an Imam. These same words he reiterates in the presence of the heart-broken Rayyan to soothe her in her troubles. What

¹ Stephanie Newell, *West African Literatures: Ways of Reading*, p. 52. USA: Oxford University Press Inc: New York, 2006.

Nawaz is trying to communicate through these affable characters is that religious differences may be set aside for community life to thrive. After all, the two religions may not be that different. Even when they are, these differences should be seen as healthy.

Amaar has an ingenious, though untimely, idea of bringing the people of Mercy together to polish the blemished image of Islam and Muslims by inviting the townsfolk to the mosque to see and judge for themselves. As the people gather together in the mosque, we cannot help but chuckle as people from both communities collide. The only serene voices are those of Reverend Magee and Amaar who observe from a distance as people meet up. Misunderstandings ensue when Rayyan tries to teach a local about the scarf.

Local: If you're a feminist, why do you cover your hair?

Rayyan: Well, it's about modesty. Hair is part of your sexuality so you'd only

Show it to other women.

Local: so you're gay?

Rayyan: No! I'd show it to my husband.

Local: Okay, so you're married!

Rayyan: No...Not yet.

Local: So you can show it to your boyfriend?

The misunderstandings this exchange captures can go on forever, bringing into the fore the confusion people on either side of the fence live in. This is yet another barrier Muslims and Christians ought to dismantle if co-habitation in peace and harmony is ever to follow up. Not much is known, it seems, about Muslim life and so opening up to others the way the new Imam has been doing is sure to clear up the air and create trust in conformity with his mission as a modern Imam. Things do not go according to plan because of an electrical problem Yasir fails to fix in good time for the "Open House" to open its doors. The air Amaar wants to clear up fills up with smoke sullyng relations between the two communities. Yasir has proven himself more committed to promoting his own business relations than to keeping his promise of doing charitable work for the mosque which will not fill his pocket. It is reckless people like Yasir that stand in the way of kindhearted people like Amaar.

Far from the happy ending we all crave for, Fred rings the bell with his promises never to give up and his vulture-like posture as he seeks every opportunity that presents itself to stir black water and steer the audience in the paths of hatred. So paranoid and hateful is Fred he alone sees in the flickering lights of the mosque "some kind of signal" being sent to 'God

knows whom' and tirelessly warns the people of Mercy to "keep your eyes open." Just as Fred worries to death about the safety of his people, Baber, a fanatic on the Muslim side, is dead worried about his safety, too. Only people with no light on their brains seem to entertain such portending thoughts. It is no coincidence then that episode three is just about lights coming on and going out.¹ It is as if it is not just the light that needs fixing, but these people's brains too need repair and rewiring.

Without taking the pain to investigate the cause of the incident, Fred, as most journalists did after 9/11, hops to the conclusion that luckily the bomb "this ragtag bunch of jihad-orists" were trying to make did not detonate as was planned. The bottom line, he confidently says, is that while "you try to act neighborly, they try to blow you up." His words, "those infidels," recall the words of Baber. In speaking the same tongue, both turn out to have more in common than meets the eye. In fine, the incident is blown out of proportion by Fred, a spokesperson for the media. Fred leans on the rampant fear of the other compounded by the threat of terrorism to manipulate media consumers and to frame Islam as a faith where heinous and hideous atrocities are licensed, a religion to which horrendous acts of terror are endemic,² but having been fed in on all the details, the viewership is in no position to be deluded. The bedeviling discourse audiences used to consume unaware is now taken with a grain of salt.

If one forgets awhile the huge chasm separating East and West and calls into question post-colonialism itself, one would come to the sad conclusion that there is no such thing as post-colonialism "because in reality oppositions and restraints continue to govern people's lives"³ everywhere they go irrespective of gender, class or religion. Postcolonialism, however, comes in to account for the situation the underdogs find themselves in, offering them a way out. This situation can only be overturned if all people take matters into their own hands the way Zarqa has done to rewrite a corrective history from their own perspective where every human being is both a participant and a spectator. Much of the popularity and momentum the sitcom has gained is to be primarily attributed to the fact that Nawaz steps out of the bubble, as it were, and breaks free from conventionally

¹ Across cultures, light has come to be synonymous with knowledge whereas its absence signals ignorance.

² T. Y. Ismael and J. Measor, "Racism and the North American Media Following 11 September: The Canadian Setting", p. 124. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 25, 1/2 Winter/Spring, 2003. Retrieved from <http://caoshea.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/racism-and-the-north-american-media-following-11-sept-canada.pdf>

³ David Huddart, *HOMI K. BHABHA*, p. 102. London: Routledge, 2006.

coded modes of representation that pin Muslims down to being little more than walking bombs, portraying them in lieu of this as only human with flaws and imperfections to speak of. These Muslims are endowed with the capacity to appeal for the universal values they embody and for their humanity that supersedes their race, gender or even religion. Were these same characters to weep and whimper, they would not appeal to us as much.

Conclusion

Nawaz humanises Muslims by humourously demystifying the myths woven into their mundane lives, thus taming the paranormal and turning the extraterrestrials into lay people with problems akin to ours, people with a heightened sense of humour who can laugh and make us explode with laughter as it is, people whose itinerary in life reveals their normalcy, unveils their ordinariness and ‘humourousness’, hence setting ablaze many a stereotype. The irresistible power of laughter, Nawaz’s weapon of choice, blunts “the threats implicit in differences”¹ by highlighting the human and humorous side of our existence. According to Goodman, the sitcom may be considered as a counter-narrative to mainstream discourse showing “Muslims to be utterly normal...They’re not terrorists, they’re not religious freaks. There’s nothing odd or menacing about the Muslim characters on *Little Mosque on the Prairie* - they’re just like any other Canadian citizens.”²

Nawaz has fallen back on and recuperated what may seem for some to be common and mundane individual immigrant experiences converting them into collective metaphors that epitomize the many and arduous trials Muslims in Canada and elsewhere are exposed to. In acting out situations likely to be reminiscent of the reality on the ground, the characters on the show allude to “implied others who need to be taken into account if the interaction is to be contexted and understood”.³ *Little Mosque on the Prairie* thus “reveals the real tragedies of human existence”⁴ without it becoming a tragedy. The very “comic reality” the characters stage and viewers wallow in happens to be the “real reality”,⁵ “a second reality” according to Bakhtin,⁶ of

¹ Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson, “Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival” p. 97. In Arthur PowerDudden, ed., *American Humor*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987.

² Brooke Anderson, “A little mosque grows” in Washington DC on 03 Oct 2007. Retrieved from <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/americas/2007/10/2008525184824276376.html>

³ Sky Marsen, *Communication Studies*, p. 7. New York : Palgrave Macmillan, 2006

⁴ Antonio Savorelli, *Beyond Sitcom: New Directions in American Television Comedy*, p. 6. USA: Mcfarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2010.

⁵ John Vorhaus, *The Comic Toolbox: How to be funny even if you’re not*, p. 19. Los Angeles: Sliman-James Press, 1994.

⁶ Pam Morris ed., *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov*, p. 194. Great Britain: Glossary Edward Arnold Ltd, 1994.

the Muslim community in Canada in the few years post 9/11 and for yet some time to come.

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