Multi-faceted Representation of Muslims in “Ramy”

by

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ABSTRACT

Research on the representation of Muslims in the media has predominantly focused on stereotypes that misrepresent Muslims. Sutkutė's (2020) analysis on "The Kite Runner," and Morey and Yaqin's (2011) analysis on "Yasmin" both conclude that these narratives affirm the dominant discourse that represents Muslims as primarily violent and oppressive. This thesis examines the presence of more multi-faceted representations of Muslims through a narrative and discourse analysis of the Hulu series, "Ramy." Critical race theory is used to deconstruct the presence of racism within the series. It is concluded that racism is only present here when the narrative wants to make a commentary on how Muslim characters are dealing with certain social issues. The dominant discourse of Muslims as terrorists is seldom present in the series and, when it is present, it is only there to be addressed with alternative discourses, such as outlining how damaging anti-Muslim coverage on the news is to Muslim communities. While the series does not promote the representation of Muslims as violent, it also does not promote Muslims as "perfect." Rather, we get a nuanced representation that humanizes Muslims, illustrating their mistakes and their aspirations to be pious. There have been representations of Muslims in film and television that do not solely conform to negative stereotypes, but "Ramy" is unique in that it does not put the characters' Muslim identity in the background. Islam is a moral anchor for all Muslim characters featured in the series. The tensions between one's Muslim and American identity is a central theme. "Ramy" does not attempt to encompass an overarching representation that applies to all Muslims. Instead, it primarily focuses on its nuanced character arcs. Such a specific character-focused narrative provides us with more depth and specificity than is often seen from Muslim characters on television. I conclude by arguing that this is a step in the right direction for the future of Muslim representation.

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Chapter 1 | Introduction

Rationalization for Examining "Ramy"

I explore the multi-faceted representation of Muslims in the critically acclaimed Hulu series "Ramy." "Ramy" is a recent series that debuted in 2019, followed up with a second season in 2020, and a third season in 2022. The series is noteworthy because it not only tells a story from a Muslim's perspective, but it does so in a way that illustrates a multi-dimensionality to Muslim characters and focuses on issues dealing with Muslim identity in the West (Youssef, Katcher, and Welch 2019). Attaining mainstream recognition, the series creator and star, Ramy Youssef, won a Golden Globe award in 2019 for "best actor in a television series musical or comedy" (Hammond 2021). In 2020, Youssef was again nominated alongside two other Muslim actors for Golden Globe awards, making history for the most Muslims nominated for these awards within a given year (Hammond 2021). Muslim representation has become more widespread and diverse within mainstream media and it should not be ignored in the wake of all the research that focuses on negative representations of Muslims.

Muslim representation in "Ramy" stands out from other non-stereotypical representations that depict Muslims living in America. In Netflix's "Master of None," Aziz Ansari represents a Muslim-born character who rejects Islam later in life and goes out of his way to rebelliously eat pork in front of his Muslim parents (Ansari and Ansari 2017). In Amazon Studios' "The Big Sick," Kumail Nanjiani's character is shown going to the mosque only to make his parents happy, but does not pray, and instead just plays handheld videogames (Gordon and Nanjiani 2017). Both of these examples illustrate Muslim characters who are assimilated in Western culture and reject their Muslim heritage. While both of these examples show Muslims in a way

that is not stereotypical, the rejection of Islam and assimilation into the West feeds into the reductive narrative that one cannot be both Muslim and American simultaneously. “Ramy” goes out of its way to show Muslim characters who practice their religion, but it does not overstep and try to illustrate Muslims as “perfect” individuals. Rather, it humanizes Muslim characters in very specific ways. For example, a major theme is how Muslims balance their faith and their sexuality which is a strong narrative anchor for exploring how Muslims struggle with expressing their faith in the West. The series does not try to encompass a representation that speaks for all Muslims, but with the specificity and nuance of its character-focused narrative, it represents Muslims in a very humanized way, unlike any other mainstream series or film, which makes it worth analyzing.

Research Question

My research question is as follows: To what extent does the representation of Muslims in “Ramy” provide a representation that differs from the predominantly monolithic approach in mainstream media of representing Muslims stereotypically as oppressive and violent? This thesis conducts an analysis of “Ramy” to make a case for the presence of multi-faceted Muslim representation and the impact that shows like this can have on future producers. Most of the current research on Muslims in the media analyze negative and stereotypical representations. While pointing out these negative representations is certainly important, it is hard to come up with solutions to this problem or think optimistically about Muslim representation when only one-dimensional and stereotypical representations are examined. Non-stereotypical representations of Muslims in film and television are certainly out there, but few are as nuanced as “Ramy,” specifically with regard to the Muslim aspect of these characters. While it is true that a lot of the current representation of Muslims in the media is reductive and stereotypical, this

does not mean that we should ignore representations that are more multi-faceted. Perhaps, it is easier to ignore low budget films from independent studios that possess a nuanced representation of Muslims, but the fact that "Ramy" is not only featured on the major streaming service, Hulu, but also has received critical acclaim and recognition through the Golden Globes, establishes a series with Muslim representation that should not be ignored in relation to research in this field.

Reflexivity and Researcher Bias

I would like to express that this analysis is not free from bias, nor does it attempt to be. I am a practicing Muslim as well as a filmmaker with eight years of experience. Recently, I directed "Healthy Body, Broken Mind," which was awarded "Best Quarantine Film" in the Mosquers 2022 Film Festival, a Canadian film festival that aims to showcase diverse Muslim representation. Muslim representation in film is something I care deeply about, as both filmmaking and Islam are two very important aspects of my life. As such, I am not conducting my analysis as a neutral party. Islam shapes every aspect of who I am, spiritually, morally, and physically. While I try to be a good Muslim, I am not perfect. I do not believe anyone today is perfect. Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon Him, once said "All of the children of Adam are sinners, and the best sinners are those who repent" (Elias 2021). It is in our very nature to sin, but with the guidance and wisdom taught through Islam, we are always encouraged to better ourselves. I believe "Ramy" does a phenomenal job at representing Muslims who are not perfect but want to repent and better themselves. I find the series extremely relatable, especially as a Muslim born and raised in the West. This is the first time that there has been a representation of Muslims in the mainstream media in which characters have depth and nuance formed around a narrative that is anchored to their relationship to Islam. The essence of "Muslimness" for the main characters of this series does not take a backseat to other plot developments, as Muslim-

related narratives are central themes. As relatable as this series is to me, it is still, at the end of the day, a series made for the purpose of entertainment, and should be not looked at as if it is biographical.

Throughout my analysis, I do not use words such as “authentic” or “true” when evaluating the representation of Muslims in this series. The show is a work of fiction, and the characters are not real people. Even if these characters are based on real people, that would not mean that one can take the experiences of these Muslim characters and come to any generalization that these experiences are the same for all Muslims in the West. Muslims are a diverse group of people, and the point of this research is not to make a statement that this is finally an “authentic” representation of Muslims in the media. Rather, the point is to demonstrate that a more nuanced representation of Muslims in the media does indeed exist, and while nuanced representation through multi-faceted Muslim characters may be hard to find, there is some hope that the representation of Muslims is evolving to show more than just stereotypes or rejections of Islam on major television streaming services.

It is easy to draw pessimistic conclusions and it is easy to analyze reductive stereotypical representations of Muslims and claim how dire the situation is for Muslim representation in the media. But as a Muslim researcher familiar with this topic, I no longer wish to play the victim and explore the breadth of misrepresentation of Muslims to support conclusions that have already been made time, and time again. I find it far more interesting to look at the uniqueness of “Ramy” and explore what this means for the representation of Muslims going forward.

Thesis Outline

Chapter 1 outlines the significance of "Ramy" and why it is worth analyzing as a series that represents Muslims in a very nuanced and multi-faceted way; a way in which no mainstream representations of Muslims in entertainment media have done before, especially in regard to how the series pivots around Muslim characters and their relationship to Islam. The research question is posed: "**To what extent does the representation of Muslims in "Ramy" provide a representation that differs from the predominantly monolithic approach in mainstream media of representing Muslims stereotypically as oppressive and violent?**" Additionally, I outline my own biases as a Muslim filmmaker when analyzing Ramy; biases that I do not wish to push away in this analysis, as I believe they are important when analyzing a series that so heavily revolves around Muslim issues in the West.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on media representations and their impact on society. The media has the power to circulate and regulate dominant discourses on Muslims, and these representations are often rooted in stereotypes. But these stereotypes of Muslims as violent are as baseless and arbitrary as the cultural construction of a rose to symbolize romance. This chapter also examines the current research on Muslim representation in the media. What the current research suggests is that while there do exist some representations of Muslims that are not blatantly racist, they are problematic in other ways. The biggest offence here is that Muslim characters are not given much depth and nuance. The rare times that Muslim characters are not mere stereotypes, a sweeping generalization is attempted to be made, to speak for all Muslims, when that could never possibly be true given the diversity of the Muslim community. Majority of current research looks to affirm Muslim misrepresentations in the media.

Chapter 3 discusses the theoretical framework of critical race theory and how it informs my analysis of Muslim representation in a television series. The origins of this theory and its

application are discussed. Two notable writings that were formative to the movement of critical race theory are also discussed in regard to how they relate to media analysis. Critical race theory's capacity to point out taken for granted racism that is embedded within social structures is helpful when incorporated into a narrative and discourse analysis that examines the prevalence of stereotypes in "Ramy" and examines them in regard to their situational and narrative context to uncover the deeper meaning and commentary that is at play here.

Chapter 4 articulates how I implement my qualitative methodology employing both discourse and narrative analysis. I discuss several key questions that inform my analysis when examining "Ramy." Among the most important of these questions is the one concerned with the hierarchy of discourses prevalent throughout each episode. Is it important to understand the competing discourses at play throughout the series in order to recognize which discourses the series favours and why. The language of film is also analyzed, but only for scenes that are more cinematically involved. Because a majority of "Ramy" features more neutral language of film techniques, a large portion of my analysis looks into the narrative through dialogue and the way dialogue is expressed. I discuss my specific data collection techniques and also discuss how the television budget and genre of "Ramy" should be understood when employing my analysis.

Chapter 5 organizes my analysis into three major sections, "Competing Identities" "Challenging the Dominant Discourse," and "Limited Diversity in "Ramy."" "Competing Identities" looks at the ways in which Muslim characters within the series negotiate their Muslim and American identities. It consists of three interrelated subsections, "Sexuality and Muslim Identity," a theme that is largely present throughout the series; "Concealing Muslim Identity and Assimilation;" and "Using Loopholes to Negotiate Competing Identities." "Challenging the Dominant Discourse" consists of two subsections, "Stereotypes and the Use of Humour" and

"The Humanization of Muslim Characters." The case is made in this section that "Ramy" rejects the dominant discourse depicting Muslims monolithically as violent and oppressive by subverting stereotypes and representing Muslims as nuanced with an emphasis on imperfection, which humanizes these characters to levels of complexity so deep that they cannot be considered homogenous or reductive. "Limited Diversity in "Ramy"" acknowledges that while the characters within the series certainly express a nuanced and humanized representation of Muslims, the diversity of Muslim characters presented is nonetheless limited.

In chapter 6, I discuss my findings, outline the significance and contribution of this research to existing research on Muslim representation in the media and make a case for how Muslim representation is slowly changing. Lastly, I propose that future researchers challenge themselves and analyze Muslim representations that are more nuanced, which there are now increasing examples of.

Chapter 2 | Literature Review

Introduction

The first section of this literature review discusses the relation between representations in the media and society. Understanding the structures of how media representations interact with society is fundamental. The media is an institution that has the power to both circulate and regulate dominant discourses. Those discourses, with regard to the ever-growing Muslim population of the world, are extremely damaging. Muslims have long experienced one-dimensional representations in mainstream media that stereotype them to a level of dehumanization. It is important to understand how meaning is ascertained through the media. Meaning is not objective; it is culturally constructed. We apply meaning to symbols without any real discernible reason as to why, such as a rose indicating romance. The relationship between romance and a rose has no objective merit. But the symbol is now associated with this meaning, and it is hard to break this idea for those of us who are so used to it. The concept of "verisimilitude" is important for understanding how meaning is culturally constructed. It is also important to recognize how we, as viewers of film and television, consume these products, and how our social identities assist us in deciphering meaning. The way audiences watch television and identify with certain characters can even cause them to internalize certain characteristics they are exposed to, and even internalize certain ideologies. The dominance of a select few corporations having control over which film and television projects get greenlit is problematic, especially in regard to Muslim representation that does not conform to the dominant discourse. Harmful stereotypes are often regulated as the norm when it comes to Muslim representation.

The second section examines current research on Muslim representation in the media in order to assess what has already been researched regarding this topic. Not all representations of Muslims are absolute stereotypes, although many still are. The "othering" and justification of anti-Muslim propaganda is still prevalent in representations that do not entirely conform to stereotypes, as certain representations use tricks to get around such blatant racism while remaining completely racist in their overall narratives. Some of these representations attempt to conflate the experience of some Muslims to all Muslims, a comparable reductive counterpart to representing all Muslims stereotypically. These findings all provide negative conclusions that support the idea that Muslims are misrepresented in a handful of ways. "Ramy" makes it difficult for these kinds of conclusions from being drawn as it is a unique series that focuses on Muslims in a way that is more nuanced and multi-faceted.

Media Representations in Society

It is important to note that the goal of this research is not to definitively prove a sort of causal relationship between media and behaviour. Rather, this relationship should be understood as correlational and not causal; to isolate the media as the sole reason for racism and the disparagement of Muslims is completely irresponsible, sociologically speaking (Fleras and Kunz 2001:56). The media is just one institution in a world of many social institutions that utilize power to promote specific ideas. The dissemination of these ideas into the dominant discourses promoted in the media with reference to how Muslims are represented is the primary focus here.

Discerning representation may not be as straightforward as one might expect. Media consumers are constantly inundated with images involving representation in which meanings can be hidden beyond initial assumptions and require examination beyond what is literal (Sturken and Cartwright 2018:21-22). This is especially true with film analysis, in which meaning can be

shown beyond mere exposition and deeper within the language of film. Through film, television, and even video games, we are persistently subjected to various ideologies such as concepts of good versus evil and heteronormative romances; dominant ideologies are powerful in that they are masked as natural rather than interwoven as a belief system that a culture has adopted (Sturken and Cartwright 2018:38). As a result, what is predominantly represented within mainstream media is an important aspect of how meaning is produced and internalized within the culture of viewers (Hall, Stuart, Evans, and Nixon 2013:1).

Foucault put forward the notion that power always comes to play in the dissemination of knowledge, and the effectiveness of this power/knowledge duality and the mechanisms by which power is applied to knowledge are worth examining alongside the notion of "truth" that is represented (Hall et al. 2013:33). The mass media wields a power/knowledge duality that can distribute harmful discourses to a wide range of audiences. This has long been the case in the representation of Muslims in the media. This does not necessitate causality with hate crimes and the general mistreatment of Muslims in a post-9/11 world, however, these circulated discourses certainly have the potential to influence the way people think. As Sturken and Cartwright (2018:48) claim, our ability to decipher images is one of the ways in which we judge our cultures. This indicates that how we ideologically understand certain topics, people, places, or things can have profound influence on how we interact with those represented objects. For instance, a rose is inescapably tied to the concepts of romance and love, and it is in fact difficult to step outside of this understanding and realize that this is a cultural construct (Sturken and Cartwright 2018:33). Objectively, there is no reason to link a rose to ideas of love. However, we have internalized this ideology in which a rose is representative of romance. While no harm is

done in this example, it is a much different situation when our dominant media representations link Muslims to the ideas of violence and terrorism.

Post 9/11 media representations of Muslims regard Muslims as "naturally" violent and oppressive based on a gross generalization of some outlier terrorist activities. But such misrepresentations are not fixed. We as viewers are not mere passive consumers of media. We possess the power to interpret images, and consequently, have influence over their meanings (Sturken and Cartwright 2018:48). A viewer's context also has significant implication for the meaning one will derive. This consists of, but is not limited to, national location, period of time, setting, and the religious or cultural ideology one possesses (Sturken and Cartwright 2018:51). But the meaning that is ascertained through a viewer's interpretation is not final, rather interpretations are always met with subsequent interpretations that continue indefinitely (Hall et al. 2013:27). This does not necessarily mean that an interpretation of a film will change drastically over time from one perspective to another, but it does not mean that meaning is stagnant either. For instance, while stereotyping homosexuals in the past through unabashed use of derogatory terms was acceptable in mainstream media, it is now considered homophobic. An analysis of a comedy from the 90s that is guilty of this will be reinterpreted much differently now than it was at the time of release. This is in keeping with Foucault's notion of how humans understand meanings through culture and knowledge and how this understanding is formed differently in different periods (Hall et al. 2013:28).

Steve Neale's term "verisimilitude" indicates not what is true, but what our dominant culture determines to be true (Gledhill and Ball 2013:356). Neale's understanding of verisimilitude indicates what has been widely accepted as correct, whether it may be true or not; generic verisimilitude allows for certain tropes within films to exist (such as vampires being

weakened by garlic) while cultural verisimilitude refers to common sense notions of the social world that exists outside of fiction (Gledhill and Ball 2013:356). That is not to say that cultural verisimilitude has no effect on what is depicted in narrative fiction. Because cultural verisimilitude and the notions attached to it are constantly being negotiated, in accordance with fluctuating dominant discourses, soap operas, for example, are required to take part in this shift, otherwise they will be irrelevant and forgotten (Gledhill and Ball 2013:367).

The idea of truth, then, must be consistent with the time in which a fictional narrative is being presented. Therefore, what is predominant in most media representations is reflective of the dominant discourses of the time. The "truth" about Muslims according to cultural verisimilitude may shift in meaning between the time closer to September 11, 2001, and now. Anti-Muslim attitudes and coverage in the media were at such a high in a post-9/11 environment. For instance, Welch (2006:4) illustrates that in response to 9/11, Bush as well as other political leaders were vocal advocates of the need to find and punish the evildoers behind the attacks. These messages were widely circulated in the media even though the fear of terrorism was disproportionate to the actual risk, which resulted in irrational anti-Muslim discrimination targeted at those not even responsible for the attacks (Welch 2006:8). Unfortunately, anti-Muslim discrimination has not declined, and we are still seeing extremely horrific acts against Muslims today. As recent as the summer of 2021, a Muslim family was murdered through a premeditated attack, by a man intentionally hitting them with his truck, simply because of their religion (Faheid 2021). This family did not ask to be targeted. They were enjoying a nice walk on a pleasant summer day and were targeted because of the completely twisted understanding of what Islam is under the current cultural verisimilitude, made consistent under the dominant discourse. This is only reinforced through distorted depictions of Muslims in the media.

Similarly, Fiske coined the term “audiencing” to describe the process in which the meanings behind visual imagery are reinterpreted and negotiated by viewers consuming the media within certain circumstances (Rose 2016:38). The concept of audiencing now is not as simple as it may have been in a less technologically infused world. Consuming visual imagery on a computer screen may be done while simultaneously playing music, eating, and scrolling through one’s phone, however, in an art gallery or a movie theatre the norm is to stay quiet and be respectful (Rose 2016:38). Thus, the different circumstances in which we consume media are not just limited to variations within different periods of time but also within what is physically happening around us, external to the frame that a visual media is trapped within. To return to Sturken and Cartwright’s (2018:51) various examples of how meanings are ascertained through a variety of external and social factors, Rose (2016:44) agrees that the social identity of a viewer is integral to negotiating meaning. Additionally, viewers who are fans of specific films or TV series may even rework the imagery and create new visuals that possess their own meanings (Rose 2016:40). For instance, this can be seen in many compilations on YouTube, in which fans of specific imagery may show a character’s specific journey and edit it in a way that paints her as a hero, even if she is a villain. To make such videos, one must have connected with a certain character, regardless of that character being fictional.

Gledhill and Ball (2013:336-337) examine soap operas under the lens that they are experienced with an audience that has adopted them as part of their routine, and argue that the line between fiction and reality can be even further blurred in situations in which real life is reflected within fiction; this is the case in an episode of Coronation Street that aired in 2010 involving a man who was killed in a boating accident after trying to fake his death for a fraud

insurance claim, which was inspired by the case of John Darwin who was jailed for this crime in real life in 2008.

It is difficult to find a work of fiction that does not derive anything from a real-life inspiration, so of course it is natural for our world to be reflected in fictional media. However, how can we understand fictional media such as television drama to be affecting real life? Is it even necessary for something like a soap opera to be a part of one's "routine" for that individual to be impacted by what they see? Of course, one is more likely to connect with a character that one has a longer 'relationship' with. Identifying with characters in a narrative fiction allows one to empathize with that character's situation and see things from that character's perspective; this can even go so far as losing sense of one's own identity and taking on a character's traits as one's own (Gierzynski 2018:29). It is not necessarily a rule that an audience need to be exposed to a character for a long period of time before this can happen. Identification with a character can happen quickly depending on how one relates to the circumstances and potential familiarities of that character. Today, we are bombarded with all kinds of film and television accessible at our fingertips anytime we want. Waiting for a show to air week-to-week is quickly being phased out and replaced with entire television seasons being released for public consumption all at once, encouraging the culture of 'binge-watching.' The highly addictive nature of streaming apps like Netflix and Disney+ encourage viewers to keep watching, and commands much of their time and attention. It would be foolish to assume that this style of entertainment is not having an impact on the way one thinks. Fictional media can be easily dismissed as having no impact or influence on its viewers as it is simply a fiction that is designed to provide entertainment and nothing more. But we cannot be so quick to dismiss the notion that we may be internalizing these products of entertainment and the ideological messages they convey.

Specific ideologies resonate and have impact when they are circulated among a broad audience, thus implying the degree of power that the mass media possesses in establishing ideologies (O'Shaughnessy, Stadler, and Casey 2016:161). Althusser points to "unconscious consciousness" as ideologies that are accepted and acted upon without actively thinking about the motives behind these actions (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2016:161). Such actions can be as innocent as gifting roses to a significant other as a display of "love," or as deadly as committing violent acts against Muslims as an apparent display of "patriotism."

Within situational comedies, specifically, issues that are raised are traditionally related to family and gender relations, however, the resolution to these problems typically do not disrupt society and the dominant ideology is preserved (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2016:180). While "Ramy" is a situational comedy/drama that focuses mostly on Muslim identity, it too fails to provide a resolution that changes society within its fictional world. While this is certainly truer to reality, as social issues do not have simple solutions and resolutions, why is it that we need to reflect reality so blatantly? Why not take advantage of fictional worlds to illustrate ideal resolutions and how they might be implemented? Because these fantasy depictions of reality do not adhere to the ideologies that are dominating mainstream media. When a dominant group's ideologies are accepted and normalized by a subordinate group, this creates what Marx referred to as a "false consciousness" (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2016:161). Ideologies are so powerful that they can become internalized by individuals regardless of where they came from or whose ideologies they really were to begin with. However, the idea that ideology can be weaponized within the media to force all members of society to conform to its messages would be an oversimplification (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2016:184). An assumption of this weaponization of the media also

neglects the fact that there do exist filmmakers who are resistant to dominant ideologies (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2016:185). Such is the case for television shows like "Ramy."

A major difference between ideology and discourse is that, while both concepts serve to understand the social world, ideologies are more related to fixed modes of thought, while discourses are an accumulation of ideas and beliefs; dominant discourses can, thus, be challenged by new emerging discourses (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2016:159-160). The dominant discourse for representing Muslims in the media leeches onto ideas that associate Islam with violence and oppression. As such, representations of Muslims have been heavily stereotypical in accordance with these ideas. This discourse is dangerous because it blocks out representations of Muslims that do not conform to these ideas and severely narrows the range of diversity within the Muslim community that is represented. However, this dominant discourse is challenged in "Ramy," and Muslims are alternatively represented as much more diverse. However, it is not as simple as a full-on rejection of the dominant discourse that takes place in many alternative discourses. Rather, even in forms of media that aim to challenge the dominant discourse, the dominant discourse is often still addressed in some way.

It is helpful to understand these kinds of narratives as having "binary oppositions" in which opposing viewpoints need to address one another for any kind of meaningful refutation to occur (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2016:252). In this framework, dominant perspectives would need to be understood so that they can be addressed to allow for a meaningful social commentary to come out of it. Thus, we should not ignore the dominant negative representations of Muslims that have long prevailed when trying to portray Muslims in a more favourable manner. Binary oppositions are often concerned with two different value systems in which one is typically favoured over the other (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2016:253). Hall et al. (2013:225) refers to binary

oppositions as a very reductionist method for meaning making as it is often not so black and white, but rather there are shades of grey within every value system. In a binary opposition, the favoured value system is often illustrated as the "winner" in a film's conclusion. But in the world of television specifically, since these programs are ongoing, they do not require such perfect resolutions that films may have to use to tie the knot on a narrative that is being presented, rather, television is more reflective of real-life in that more open-ended questions and challenges continue to face these characters as these series' continue (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2016:236). The continuous proposition of questions and challenges that television characters are faced with encourages viewers to engage in the fictional world intellectually more than they would when watching a less traditional narrative such as an art film (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2016:238).

Vertical integration of film studios and media conglomerates, in which the same corporations own commercial TV networks and Hollywood production sites, are in place to protect from box office flops, promoting commercial success and high profit margins (McChesney 2004:180). These major powers in production of mainstream entertainment put up barriers for any independent film studio to find success (McChesney 2004:181). There is a danger in a select few corporations having a monopolistic control over which film and television projects gets produced and which do not. In a post-9/11 environment, Muslims are regarded as the guilty party that need to pay for the tragedy of the September 11th attacks (Welch 2006:4). As a result, Muslims are represented in the media as a monolithically violent and oppressive group which only serves to detract from the vast diversity among Muslim communities (Pennington and Kahn 2018:104-105). Since Muslims are regarded as the enemy, the entertainment industry has no issue capitalizing on this by depicting Muslims in villainous roles. For example, a terrorist character named Abu Nazir ordered suicide attacks and assassination attempts on US officials in

the first two seasons of the TV drama “Homeland” (Green 2015:149). Because of vertical integration, mainstream media is highly selective when depicting race, and frames many complicated issues in terms of binary oppositions: contrasting the “superior” Whites with minorities represented as “inferior,” which is achieved in part through stereotypes, racializing crimes, and eurocentrism (Fleras and Kunz 2001:43). Additionally, Mahtani (2001:100) claims that seldom do television series portray Canadian Blacks or South Asians outside of a deviant and otherized representation. Harrington (2021:872) suggests that this trend is changing for minorities in both film and television as there are now more stories being told that focus on the point of view of Black people, but he is cautious in his conclusion, stating that we have a long road ahead of us to overturn stereotypes.

Stereotypes are an unfortunate reality when representing minorities in the media. Stereotypes leech onto easily understood and memorable characteristics and reduces what could otherwise be a complex character into a vessel that exaggerates those simplistic characteristics and minimizes nuance (Hall et al. 2013:247). In fact, this simplicity behind stereotyping has gone so far that in popular cartoon illustrations, caricaturists throughout time have been able to convey ‘black types’ with very few simple pen strokes (Hall et al. 2013:237). While representations within the media, and in entertainment media specifically, are all constructed, the kinds of representation that minorities are subject to are often limited and reinforce stereotypes. This is very much the case with the representation of Muslims. A good example of one of the ways in which Muslims have become reduced to stereotypes in the media is with the circulation of Osama Bin Laden’s video message on television, in which he commended the terrorists behind the September 11th attacks while wearing an Afghani turban in addition to having a long beard (Stromer 2006:744). This very visual imagery along with his hateful message has reduced

the stereotypical idea of a Muslim to be more in line visually with Sikh men. Wearing a turban and maintaining a beard are important aspects of Sikh practices but this visualization is now conflated with "Islamic extremists," regardless of the accuracy of either one of these two terms. Thus, it is now not just Muslims who are targets of anti-Muslim discrimination, but it is anyone who conforms to the idea of what a Muslim looks like. Stereotyping is not concerned with accuracy or truthfulness, rather it encompasses a large and diverse range of people and sorts them into the same umbrella category.

Current Research on Muslim Representation

A study by Hirji (2011) sought to examine how three television series – "24," "Lost," and "Little Mosque on the Prairie" – aimed to provide an answer to the lack of representation of Muslims in the world of entertainment media. The study concluded that while the motive was admirable, these shows fell victim to reinforcing the same negative misrepresentation of Muslims that have come before (Hirji 2011:44**).** In "Lost" and "24," Muslims are situated alongside terrorism and oppression which reinforces the dominant discourse (Hirji 2011:44). And although "Little Mosque on the Prairie" educationally outlines the different accommodations that Muslims require, Muslims are presented as problematic and incompatible with Canadian norms (Hirji 2011:44). At the time of these shows, this was as far as representation of Muslims would go that differed from pure stereotypes.

The influence of entertainment media to shape people's behaviours is more likely achieved when specific messages are repeated and presented through various forms of media and other institutions (Kazemipur 2014:92). While this thesis does not take the perspective that people are easily influenced and change their behaviour in accordance with media messages, it is worth nothing Kazemipur's perspective that these behaviours can be acquired when the messages

are repeated. However, it is not as simple as one being exposed to a media message and internalizing it, but it is about the repeated presentation of dominant discourses that are prevalent in the media and how that may have an effect on a society's general views. It is, therefore, easy to see how misrepresentations of Muslims become so ingrained into society when even images that aim for an inclusive and more honest representation fail. Kazemipur (2014:93) claims that while the misrepresentation of Muslims in entertainment is not something that viewers necessarily agree with, it is certainly an attitude that the producers possess. For this reason, there is some optimism to be had with the fact that "Ramy" is written and directed by practicing Muslim, Ramy Youssef. It is certainly much harder to capture any true nuance of Muslim representation if no Muslims are working on a film project behind the scenes. Kazemipur (2014:93) is also critical of the quality in which specific images are presented, with the example of the anti-Muslim film "The Innocence of Muslims" that caused anger and protests in the Muslim world; but the point here is that this hate film would not have received any attention if not for the passionate response it received, since it was otherwise a very poor-quality film.

Not every fictional narrative is so simplistic and one-dimensional that they portray Muslims as terrorists and nothing else (although a portion of them certainly do). Alsultany (2013:162) refers to "simplified complex representations" as a form of representation that attempts to balance a negative with a positive; this is used to give the appearance of a complex representation, but it is still very simplistic. To illustrate, there are fictional narratives in which Arab Americans are victimized as a result of post-9/11 discrimination, but these narratives conclude that this is an "unfortunate" but necessary reality that Muslims must deal with this due to the "national security crisis" (Alsultany 2013:164). This serves to justify any negative representation of Muslims that may be depicted. Alsultany (2013:164) explains that positive

representations of Muslims, in this simplified-complex dichotomy, are limited and shallow, simply depicting Muslims as either patriotic or victimized. Another strategy used to avoid blatant stereotyping is to "flip the enemy," which is done when a fictional narrative either reveals that the Muslim terrorists were only pawns used by European terrorists or the country of a terrorist is ambiguous and unnamed (Alsultany 2013:164). Even if a fiction uses these strategies, does this make the use of the stereotype any less damaging? Sure, a narrative can hide behind plot twists that show the real enemy is not Muslim to justify stereotypes, but that does not mean that the imagery of a Muslim terrorist that was presented gets erased. Additionally, what good does it do to make the country of a terrorist ambiguous if they are still wearing Afghani turbans and are dressed as stereotypical Muslim terrorists? Alsultany (2013:165) acknowledges that there has been a cultural change in the representation of Muslims as blatant stereotypes from a soon after post-9/11 era but claims that Muslims are still primarily represented alongside terrorism. Alsultany's notes on this were written in 2013. With the popularity of shows like "Ramy" alongside a handful of others that showcase nuanced Muslim representation in recent years, we are slowly moving away from the primary representation of Muslims as terrorists.

A large proportion of the current research on Muslim representation in fictional media aims to analyze the films and television shows that are guilty of simplistic and stereotypical representation, consistent with dominant discourses of Muslims in the media. Morey and Yaqin (2011:114) conducted an analysis on the film "Yasmin," a film that focuses on the perspective of a British Asian Muslim woman and her identity in the aftermath of 9/11, and the BBC drama "White Girl," that focuses on a lost teenager finding comfort in an Islamic community. "Yasmin" takes on conventions of representation in which Muslims are situated as 'other' and in conflict with the "War on Terror," as Yasmin's brother becomes radicalized just outside of a mosque

(Morey and Yaqin 2011:118). The film introduces a simplistic binary in which, after Yasmin's home is raided by police, she must choose between either her Muslim identity or her British identity (Morey and Yaqin 2011:121). This is further illustrated in Yasmin's marital relationship in which she keeps her boyfriend, John, a secret and plans to divorce her husband, Faisal, as soon as he leaves Britain (Morey and Yaqin 2011:122). As the authors of this analysis imply, Islam is represented here as an oppressive force that is forcing Yasmin into a miserable marriage. But accepting one identity or another is not so simple of a trade off as the film presents, and as such, this opposition cannot be simply resolved (Morey and Yaqin 2011:121). Independent of the fact that Islam is negatively represented as an oppressive force in Yasmin's life, even if one is faced with such a situation, one cannot just trade one identity for another. Growing up with Islam would have shaped Yasmin's life in a way that she cannot just shrug off and pretend it does not exist in the pursuit of an assimilated life in Britain. Additionally, Faisal is depicted as having ties to a terrorist organization and is captured by police to inform on this terrorist group (Morey and Yaqin 2011:122). Thus, the film is deeply rooted in stereotypical representations of Muslims as multiple main characters are connected to extremism.

The other film subject to Morey and Yaqin's (2011:125) analysis, "White Girl" flips the tired narrative of Muslims as terrorists and represents Muslims as background characters who guide the main White characters in a direction of goodness, but the analysis concludes that this sort of representation comes off as inauthentic and puts into jeopardy the credibility of Muslims by showing an extreme of kindness without much character depth. The film focuses on a dysfunctional White family relocating to a predominantly Muslim neighbourhood in which protagonist Leah's interest in Islam grows while comparatively looking down at her flawed way of living (Morey and Yaqin 2011:126). The Muslims that Leah comes across are nothing more

than voices for social responsibility and good family values that Leah has apparently been ignorant to (Morey and Yaqin 2011:128). But these Muslim characters are not given identities of their own, rather, they only serve to support and help remedy the messy lives of the White family that is new in town (Morey and Yaqin 2011:130). Thus, Islam and Muslims are second in this narrative and serve as plot vehicles for a White family to learn to be kind to one another. While positive representation of this sort is certainly a welcome shift from the typical post-9/11 representation of Muslims as violent and oppressive, this analysis has proven that even positive representations can be shallow and simplistic, lacking any sort of character depth or nuance, much like their stereotypical counterparts.

Sutkutė (2020) conducted a discourse and comparative analysis on the 2004 short film "Submission" and the 2007 film "The Kite Runner" in order to examine the expression of stereotypes interlinked to Muslims. The director of the film "Submission" was killed in November of 2004, in which a letter was thrown on his body, disparaging the film for approaching Islam in a negative attitude; this assassination shifted the focus away from the film's message, centered around issues faced by Muslim women, to simply a violent crime that occurred because of the film's existence (Sutkutė 2020:31). Sutkutė (2020) reiterates this claim several times; that because of the act of violence, no meaning was able to be derived from the film's actual message. Ironically, Sutkutė plays into this narrative by failing to comprehensively discuss the film and instead stressing that violence has caused there to be no room for discussion. Sutkutė (2020:35) does claim that "Submission" represents Muslim women very simplistically as oppressed and conflates experiences of some Muslim women in specific circumstances to the experiences of Muslim women in general, as is illustrated with the merging of four separate characters and their experiences as Muslim women. In The Kite Runner, Muslims are

stereotypically represented as violent, as the 1998 Hazara massacre is falsely depicted as an act carried out in accordance with Islamic values (Sutkutė 2020:33). In the second act of this film, Muslims are represented as violent extremists in which images are shown of horrific acts of violence, which only serves to strengthen the Western audience's wrongful but preconceived notion that Islam is linked to violence (Sutkutė 2020:34).

As is illustrated above, a large portion of the existing literature on the representation of Muslims in film draw pessimistic conclusions (Mahtani 2001:109). Often, research on the representation of minorities in the media in general point to under-representation or misrepresentation, however, these studies neglect to discuss solutions but merely point out the problems (Mahtani 2001:110). Additionally, it has been purported that a more honest and nuanced representation of minorities within mass media cannot be achieved since these efforts are costly and nobody wants to fund and take risks on such projects that may not yield favourable returns (Mahtani 2001:111). "Ramy" is transformative in this regard. While remaining critical in my analysis, I look for what "Ramy" may have done differently regarding Muslim representation, and determine if there may be a more positive conclusion to this research, in which value is derived from seeing how Muslim representation may be achieved in a more multi-faceted and nuanced way. Additionally, it is important to not draw hasty conclusions that make claims of "true" Muslim representation, as the Muslim identity present in "Ramy" is not applicable to all Muslims. Mahtani (2001:120) states that representing minorities as homogenous ignores the fact that people who identify with a specific minority group are not identical. While the above studies have demonstrated that Muslims are simplistically represented in entertainment, "Ramy" is unique in that it represents Muslim identity with actual depth and nuance.

Conclusion

We should remember that what is widely circulated in mainstream media can have profound impacts on how meaning is negotiated and internalized. But this production of meaning is culturally constructed. Just as a rose has no objective equivalence to romance, Muslims have no objective equivalence to violence. These cultural constructions can become so ingrained that even subordinate groups may develop a false consciousness, in which Muslim misrepresentation, may encourage Muslims themselves to reject other Muslims or reject their own faith altogether to appease the dominant discourse. This is certainly the case in film and television programs that represent Muslims stereotypically with no real character depth.

The repeated misrepresentation of Muslims has a negative effect on society and its attitude toward Muslims, and this impacts how they continue to be represented in entertainment media. “Yasmin” and “The Kite Runner” are examples of Muslim representation rooted purely in stereotypes, linking Islam and violence. While simplified-complex representations take alternative measures to absolute stereotyping, these narratives still uphold and attempt to justify the misrepresentation of Muslims in their messaging. “Submission” and “White Girl” should not be applauded for their efforts to represent Muslims non-stereotypically, as they are both guilty of representing Muslims without any nuance, conflating all Muslims to be the same, regardless of the vast diversity within the Muslim population. The current research mostly draws negative conclusions, which makes sense since most of this research aims to point out how Muslims are damagingly misrepresented in the media, which they most certainly are. My research aims to provide a more positive conclusion by focusing on the unique series, “Ramy,” that represents

Muslim characters with depth and nuance in a way that does not try to make a statement about all Muslims or conflate Muslims as a homogenous group.

Chapter 3 | Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory

Introduction

Critical race theory provides an important theoretical background to utilize when analyzing "Ramy" as it pairs well with a discourse analysis that considers alternatives to the dominant discourse of how Muslims are represented in the media. Additionally, it is used it to dismantle the narrative structure of the series and understand aspects of "racism" within the show that, when examined more contextually along with the broader narrative, turn out to be non-racist, simply utilizing race-relations to make statements about the way Muslims are treated. This chapter explores the foundations of critical race theory and its key scholars. I explain how critical race theory, one that originates from a legal school of thought, is an appropriate framework for understanding race-relations in television series. I then discuss real world applications of critical race theory in relation to the media, particularly how negative media representations of Muslims affect Muslims' comfortability with associating with the majority group. I discuss two pivotal writings on critical race theory, including a discussion of Metro Broadcasting Inc. V. FCC (Federal Communications Commission), by Williams, and the perpetrator vs. the victim perspective by Freeman. I discuss how both of these formative writings relate to and inform a media analysis regarding Muslims representation. Finally, I discuss the limitations of critical race theory within the scope of my research.

Origin, Definition, and Application

Critical race theory aims to expose that racism is intimately embedded within social structures that organize society which are commonplace and hard to concretely point out (Bakali 2016:18). The first part of this definition of critical race theory lends itself to discourse analysis as it sheds

light on how the structures in which racism is embedded are controlled through "social forces" which can more clearly be understood to be forces of power. For instance, it is observable that police brutality disproportionately targets Black people. While this racism is clear, it is also certainly within the structure of power behind the police. This power structure extends itself to the courts where police are again favoured over the Black people that they victimize unjustly. It is obvious that police brutality has been historically racist. The second part of this definition of critical race theory highlights the fact that racism within our social structures can be hard to point out.

Key scholars behind the formation of critical race theory include Derrick Bell, Allen Freeman, Charles Lawrence, Richard Delgado, Lani Guinier, and Kimberle Crenshaw, all of whom have legal academic backgrounds (Bakali 2016:19). Many scholars consider the fundamental goal of critical race theory to be the deconstruction of structural racial inequalities by examining the dominant discourses on race (Bakali 2016:19). Why should we apply what was formed as a theory to address the legal system to address a television series? Because the social institution of the media is just as guilty at promoting structural racism through its taken-for-granted approach to addressing the nuances of racialized characters and the tendency to promote dominant discourses. Critical race theory in a narrative and discourse analysis is helpful to examine "Ramy" in reference to those dominant discourses on race, specifically, the dominant discourse in understanding Muslims in the media. One could argue that this theory may only serve to point out the tendency of mainstream media to depict Muslims stereotypically and simplistically. However, because critical race theory advocates for the deconstruction and dismantling of the dominant discourses, I believe it is a good theory to analyze how "Ramy" may be rejecting the dominant discourses on Muslims in the media while additionally remaining

skeptical of some aspects of the show that might conform to the dominant discourse and promote stereotypes.

A narrative analysis that asks questions about hierarchies of discourse may help highlight taken-for-granted behaviours that are inherently racist but accepted and commonplace in the world of "Ramy." Even though "Ramy" is created by a Muslim director, it is still possible for taken-for-granted racism to show itself within the narrative, whether it is intentional or unintentional. And a structural narrative analysis exposes these intentions by evaluating the relationships that take place among the characters and how Muslim and non-Muslim characters are shown to display separate discourses.

Harsh stereotypes are apparent in "Ramy," but whether that makes the show racist or not depends on how these stereotypes are displayed and what sort of ideology is to be discerned from the broader narrative. Stereotypes can be used to provide a commentary on how one is dealing with a certain racial issue without the mere presence of a stereotype making a narrative racist in and of itself. However, even if "Ramy" is successful at rejecting common stereotypes regarding Muslims, it does not necessarily mean that new stereotypes will not manifest as a result. Hall et al. (2013:261) explains that reversing racial stereotypes does not always get rid of stereotypes altogether. For instance, gangster films reversed the stereotype that Black people were poor and subservient and projected them to another stereotype in which they are seen as obsessing over money, talking down to White people and committing violent crimes (Hall et al. 2013:261). "Ramy" might reject the commonplace stereotypes attached to Muslims today, in which Muslims are seen as terrorists, but with its mass popularity it could easily manifest other stereotypes that people may simplistically apply to all Muslims. For instance, Ramy Hassan's obsession with pornography and sex in the show might be naively applied to all Muslims being labeled "sex-

addicts." Such a conclusion does not compare to Hall's example as he was discussing a trend of Black representation in films rather than in one film or television show specifically. However, it should not be forgotten that "Ramy" is one of very few programs in popular entertainment that does not strictly conform to stereotypical portrayals of Muslims.

Critical race theory's core tenants include: the deconstruction of how racism is ingrained in society; the manner in which racism persists in society; the criticism of liberalism's notion of the individual; interest convergence (the notion that racialized groups are only favoured when it benefits the dominant group); storytelling as a form of hearing minority voices; and, most importantly, the goal of deconstructing racism (Bakali 2016:19). By framing minorities as individuals, in accordance with liberalism, we deny any possible disadvantages that minorities are made to deal with, such as the fact that Muslims are not provided accommodations at work for their daily prayers and that inclusive policies are not normalized. Interest convergence can be seen with the commercial and critical success of "Ramy." Because this series is successful, this form of Muslim representation aligns with the dominant group's interest, as it is able to earn money. This is the reason that we are seeing Ramy Youssef appear on mainstream media outlets to promote his series. It is not because this series represents a unique and nuanced Muslim perspective, but rather, it is that the series is a commercial success and everyone from GQ to Kimmel wants to profit from its popularity. The fact that critical race theory considers the storytelling of minorities makes it useful for analyzing this series. Even though the series is fictionalized, it is still useful in understanding how Youssef illustrates his point of view through his narrative.

Saleem, Prot, Anderson, and Lemieux (2010:11) found a significant link between those who support restrictions against Muslim Americans and those who are exposed to news

depicting Muslims as terrorists. While an analysis of news media is out of the scope of this thesis, it is still worth mentioning that those who are exposed to a distorted representation of Muslims are more likely to act on it than those who are not. A more recent study looks at how Muslims themselves are affected by a negative representation in the media. While research has already proven that media representations of minority groups influence behaviours of the dominant group members, Saleem and Ramasubramanian (2019:385) illustrate the Muslim American students in their study who were shown negative media representations of Islam, were inclined to avoid majority group members and were not as likely to reach out for acceptance by others as were the Muslim American students who were shown a control video instead. This is a very interesting finding as it is common to assume the effect that distorted representations of Islam may have on non-Muslims, but these representations can even make Muslims themselves less inclined to interact with the majority group. This is also a good illustration of critical race theory in action as this kind of taken-for-granted racism that is so widespread through the media is having negative effects, not just on Muslims as victims of racism, but on Muslim identity itself. Being shown distorted representations of Islam is unlikely to make Muslims question their faith or even believe what the media is telling them. But it very well has the capacity to influence Muslims to have their guard up more as it is clear to them that they are targets of hatred from the majority group. Anti-Muslim discourse is so prevalent in the media that the dominant group does not even question its existence while Muslims are disadvantaged by it.

Formative Writings and their Relation to a Media Analysis

One of the key writings on critical race theory by Freeman (1995:29) points out the difference between the perpetrator perspective and the victim perspective when analyzing antidiscrimination law. The perpetrator perspective chooses to view racism as individual actions

a perpetrator makes against their victim (Freeman 1995:29). Whereas the victim perspective views racism as an issue interlinked with broader social conditions (Freeman 1995:29). The conclusion here is that anti-discrimination law mostly looks at issues from the perpetrator perspective (Freeman 1995:29). If we apply the perpetrator perspective to the world of film, we can easily draw the conclusion that it is up to the individual filmmakers themselves to represent Muslims how they want to. But this neglects the fact that the conditions in TV and film production have consistently and predominately represented Muslims in accordance with dominant discourses in which Muslims are featured, stereotypically, as terrorists.

Another notable writing for critical race theory is Williams' writing on Metro Broadcasting Inc. V. FCC in 1990. The supreme court decision in this case "upheld limited preference programs to increase the number of minority owners of broadcast stations;" congressional and FCC findings strongly suggested that this increase in minority owners would increase diversity in programming (Williams 1995:191). However, dissenters argued that unless there was a guarantee that an increase in minority owners would increase diversity in programming, the FCC's usage of race in factors related to licensing decisions could not be considered to "meet the declared interest in diversity" (Williams 1995:191). Metro Broadcasting majority observed that "in 1986, minorities owned just 2.1 percent of the more than 11,000 radio and television stations in the United States" (Williams 1995:193). Of this small percentage, they often owned less valuable stations, thus serving limited markets (Williams 1995:193). Williams (1995:194) is critical of the capacity of station owners to remain neutral when making programming decisions since there are always financial motivations involved. Clearly, neutrality cannot be achieved when financial stakes are present**.** Additionally, Williams (1995:194) argues against the idea of a universal culture as this "disguises our overlapping variety and locates

nonwhites as separate cultures." Thus, it is misrepresentative of all parties involved to try to consolidate, for example, something as broad as the idea of being Western, into an umbrella culture.

Williams (1995:195) claims that individuals are more likely to humanize a representation of their own race than to use insulting imagery. Since "Ramy" was created by a Muslim, Ramy Youssef, that influence has obviously been made prevalent in the series. One of the greatest strengths of the series is the humanization of Muslim characters and the illustration of the overlap of Muslim and American culture. An important takeaway from this notable writing on critical race theory is the dissenter's argument that suggests that an increase in minority media owners does not guarantee diversity in programming. The position of power which a minority owner may hold to greenlight certain programs, does not necessarily have to conform with their personal preferences, as the bottom line for decision making revolves around having a marketable show to be viewed by as many people as possible. This is the reality of showbusiness. However, the idea of programming that has too small a "niche" to be marketable cannot apply to programming that presents Muslim representation. Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world and Muslims are certainly not a "niche" population. Having said that, Muslims are a diverse group and certain nuanced representations of Muslims may be relatable to only some Muslims. "Ramy" mostly takes the perspective of young adult Muslim men in America struggling to balance their faith with their Western lifestyles. While this certainly caters to a specific demographic within the Muslim population, and it does not speak for all of those within that demographic, it provides enough of a social commentary of Muslims today to be enjoyed by those who are not specifically tied to that demographic.

Limitations

Critical race theory is great for examining the race relations within the series and how Muslims are systematically disadvantaged in the West. However, it is unable to provide us with a meaningful distinction between the ways in which men and women are represented within the series. There are entire episodes that focus on the female perspective, but because critical race theory is not a feminist theory, it is unable to deconstruct the disparity between the representation of Muslim men and women. Indeed, "Ramy" predominantly focuses on the male perspective as it largely follows the story of the main character, Ramy Hassan. While female characters are certainly present, their stories are not nearly as expansive as that of the main character. Still, there are notable issues presented that impact women, such as the double standard for men and women regarding the stigma of losing one's virginity. While this issue is discussed in the narrative analysis, the theoretical framework of critical race theory does not assist in this examination.

Critical race theory values storytelling in a manner in which it prioritizes hearing from the voices of the marginalized group. Critical race theory scholar, Derrick Bell, indicates that minority storytelling is useful as it illustrates experiences of those who often do not have a platform to speak (Bakali 2016:22). Yet, stories are not objective; there is no situation in which one can understand a story as fact, especially in a fictional narrative. Moreover, one cannot understand Muslim representation in "Ramy" to be the one true representation of Muslims. Even with the show's specificity and nuanced view of its multi-faceted characters, it is not an objective representation of all Muslims. However, the series is not trying to make a statement about all Muslims. Even though this series features nuanced representation of Muslim characters, it should not be forgotten that this is simply a version of the truth, rather than the objective truth. This is

where discourse analysis is helpful in unpacking "Ramy." As Rose (2016:215) states, discourse analysis is concerned with exposing a persuasion of truthfulness rather than the objective truth itself. Because the narrative is so specific, the struggle of the main character cannot be extended to apply to all Egyptian-American Muslims. This is a singular representation, not one that should be used to encompass all Muslims, even in similar circumstances. We need more nuanced stories of Muslims in the media and we cannot rely on or expect a single series to capture the broad diversity within the Muslim community.

Conclusion

A combination of critical race theory and discourse analysis is important for dismantling the alternative discourses prevalent throughout "Ramy." Taken-for-granted racism is also important to keep note of, not only to examine racism that may be hard to see but to do the reverse and deconstruct scenes that may be ignorantly understood as racist without accounting for the narrative context that may be making a larger statement. The major takeaway from both of the above-mentioned formative writings on critical race theory is the idea of broader social structures impacting racism. The victim perspective challenges the perpetrator perspective in a manner in which racial issues are looked at more broadly as patterns of behaviour rather than on an individual or a case-by-case basis. While the ownership of a media station by a minority does not guarantee diversity in programming, as these decisions are motivated by financial interests, minorities owning such a small percentage certainly does not aide in the quest for diversity in programming. Critical race theory is useful in understanding both how Muslims are impacted by structural racism within the fictional narrative of "Ramy," as well as it is useful in understanding that the series is only successful because it aligns with the interest of the dominant group in that it is financially successful and therefore, marketable. However, critical race theory is limited in

its ability to evaluate the gender disparities at play in “Ramy.” While the objectivity of storytelling is a valid critique of critical race theory, discourse analysis tempers research findings to only find a degree of truthfulness rather than the full objective truth. Thus, the Muslims represented in “Ramy” should be understood as a singular perspective into this diverse community.

Chapter 4 | Methodology

Introduction

I utilize a qualitative methodology in accordance with both narrative and discourse analysis in order to examine "Ramy." Narrative analysis is conducted with a focus on the way Muslim identities are represented in the show. Discourse analysis considers the historical and situational context regarding how meaning is produced. I use a language of film analysis in order to understand how the narrative is told through an examination of film techniques. There are a lot of scenes in "Ramy" that rely more on dialogue than film techniques to tell the story, so I pair my language of film analysis with a dialogue transcription in order to fully comprehend the meaning that is being produced. I outline the difference between TV and film and discuss genre in order to understand which conventions "Ramy" subscribes to while noting that it does not strictly conform to one convention. I outline in more detail how I put my methodology into action, describing how I organize my findings document, the justification of opting for analytical memos over more formal coding procedures, and what precisely I look for when analyzing Muslim identity in order to focus my examination and not record too much unnecessary detail. Finally, I discuss the limitations of conducting my research in this manner.

Discourse Analysis

Discourse analysis takes into consideration the ramifications of certain modes of representation (such as that of an Egyptian-Muslim) and how a certain discourse is connected to power and establishes specific identities; this considers the historical context of how certain meanings are captured (such as how one's culture informs ones relationship to Islam) with reference to specific

times and places (Hall et al. 2013:XXII). This historical and situational context is useful for analyzing "Ramy." It is important to consider that this show made its debut on the streaming service Hulu and the time in which the seasons were released. Season one made its debut in 2019, season two in 2020, and season three in 2022. While most of this show focuses on a Muslim community in contemporary New Jersey, it should not be assumed that the experience is the same for all Muslim communities in urban centers. Additionally, there is an episode that flashes back to September 11th, 2001, which captures young Ramy's school experience within that context and explores how Ramy and his family are impacted by the increase of anti-Muslim discrimination during that time.

Discourse analysis cannot ascertain absolute truths, rather its aim is to demonstrate a persuasion of truthfulness (Rose 2016:215). Some may argue that this is a flaw of discourse analysis, however, a methodology that aims to expose only a degree of truthfulness is entirely appropriate for a television series analysis in which research questions are answered through interpretation and explanation based on a historical and situational context rather than providing calculated and scientific answers to research questions. But the idea of "truthfulness" is not actually a reflection of what is authentically the Muslim experience in accordance with the narrative of "Ramy." There is nothing "authentic" about a TV show or film. In addition, discourse analysis is not easily repeated and replicated as different researchers may take different analytical approaches to answering questions. For this reason, no sweeping generalizations should be made with a discourse analysis. Instead, Rose (2016:215) suggests, we need to maintain "a certain modesty in our analytical claims." Within a visual medium, discourse analysis looks for social difference through imagery and evaluates the effects of this difference (Rose 2016:218). Social differences can be very visual, such as the difference in body language

between a Black individual and a White individual when being approached by a police officer in which the White individual may appear more relaxed regarding his privilege. This discourse analysis of the visual pairs well with a narrative analysis in which the language of film is examined.

Narrative Analysis

Narrative analysis takes a structuralist position in the sense that a narrative is contained within the structure and confines of a television series. My narrative analysis asks specific questions to discern meaning and understand the dominant discourses prevalent. I follow O'Shaughnessy et al. (2016:238-239) who suggest asking questions such as who or what is responsible for moving the narrative, whose point of view is the focus, what order are is the audience seeing things in, what is everyone's role (structurally), what dominant discourse is being promoted and over what other discourses, in what ways are women and men positioned differently, and what does the ending conclude about the film's ideology.

The first two questions here are somewhat related as within "Ramy" the character who is moving the narrative forward is the same character whose perspective the audience is focused on. For most episodes, this character is Ramy Hassan, however, there are some episodes in which the story is told from another character's perspective, and then that character is responsible for moving the narrative forward. The question of what order the audience is seeing things in could be simply answered for most of the episodes as "linear." However, I answer this question in more detail by listing out the events of the plot and the order in which it unfolds in summarized notes. In a few cases there are flashbacks, however, I list these flashbacks in the order that they appear in the episodes rather than rearranging my list to appear chronological.

Doing so would require me to take flashbacks from some episodes and insert them into previous episodes, making for a messier document at the expense of what are few flashbacks.

I identify each character's role in terms of how they affect the narrative and central themes of each episode. For some minor characters this is brief, and for main characters there is much more detail. The question regarding dominant discourses is crucial for my analysis. It examines the position the series takes on the representation of Muslims contrasted with dominant discourses. Even though the show does not promote the dominant discourse on Muslims in the media as violent and oppressive, this discourse is certainly addressed. But it is addressed at odds with alternative discourses that present Muslims as more nuanced and humanized. When examining the different portrayal between men and women, it is clear that the experiences of Muslim men and women are very different. However, there are few instances of female representation here as the show's primary focus is on male characters. Nonetheless, no generalizations are made about Muslim men and Muslim women altogether because the audience is only shown a few complex and multi-faceted representations. Since this is an ongoing series and not a complete film, I analyze the ending of each episode, one at a time, to see what conclusions can be drawn about each episode's ideology. Often, I find that the episode's ideology is interlinked with the dominant discourses that are promoted within that episode.

The Language of Film

I also analyze in more detail the "language of film" regarding scenes that are related to Muslim identity. O'Shaughnessy et al. (2016:223) explain that there are four major elements integral to deciphering the language of film: mise en scene (everything within the frame of a single shot), cinematography, editing and sound. Mise en scene reminds us that it is important to remember that nothing in a single frame of film is there without a purpose. Thus, it is important to not only

focus on the main subjects of a film but also to take note of what is in the background. For instance, if a character has a messy room, this may illustrate, visually, the messiness that the character is going through within the narrative. This example is displayed as the audience can observe that Ramy's room is clean when he is trying to be a better Muslim and it is messy when he falls into his bad habits, such as his pornography addiction (S02E02).

Cinematography is important to take note of, as a lot can be said through camera placement, lighting and movement. A birdseye shot from an overhead perspective can depict subjects as being swallowed by the background and places less emphasis on the subject; in general, high angles render subjects as less important (Gianetti and Leach 2005:73). For instance, a birdseye angle could be used to imply how one is being swallowed up by the world around them with very little power of their own. Conversely, a low angle does the opposite. It highlights a subject and minimizes the background; a character captured from a low angle conveys that character as one who is seen with respect or fear (Gianetti and Leach 2005:73). While it is important to remember these more dramatic angles, it is also important to understand that most scenes within "Ramy" are shot at eye-level. An eye-level shot is a neutral angle that does not imply a specific perspective or tone, rather it is a shot that conveys an idea of "normal" and is much more widely used in a realist type of narrative, one that tries to depict the world as it is (Gianetti and Leach 2005:71-72). To discern a specific genre or mood, lighting plays a major role. While comedies are evenly and brightly lit, dramas usually have a lot more contrast and blackness (Gianetti and Leach 2005:76). "Ramy," as a comedy/drama, is mostly shot in even lighting, even in the more dramatic moments. However, there are still a few instances in which the lighting contrasts more harshly such as in Ramy's childhood nightmare sequence (S01E04). Darkness is often used to illustrate fear while light implies virtue (Gianetti and Leach 2005:76).

Panning shots in which a camera on a tripod smoothly shifts horizontally are often used to imply solidarity when used to capture multiple characters (Gianetti and Leach 2005:155).

The editing style of a film or television series also has significant implications for analysis. The duration of a given shot, or a sequence of shots causes a film to have a different feeling. O'Shaughnessy et al. (2016:228) refer to "rhythmic editing" as editing that takes into account the duration of each shot; shorter duration shots increase suspense for important scenes and are much more commonly used in modern films than those of older films, which comparatively feel much slower paced. Intellectual editing is a useful tool for cutting from one scene to another and implying a link between two separate images (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2016:229). Another similar editing style is referred to as "graphic editing" in which two shots are linked together through a similar framing of the subject and this could either imply a similarity or contrast between the two subjects (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2016:229).

Sound is also an extremely important story telling device in which it not only serves to accompany the visuals but also produces significant emotional resonance by itself. Sounds of higher pitch are often used to evoke tension and suspense while lower pitch sounds are often used for scenes without much tension and depict dignity but can gradually increase in pitch as a scene progresses to climax (Gianetti and Leach 2005:214). Loud sounds are forceful while quiet sounds are delicate and the faster the tempo of a sound, the more tension is produced (Gianetti and Leach 2005:215). Notably, this emotion of sound is not limited to music, the same emotions can be produced through sound effects that follow these conventions such as an increasing tempo and decibel level of a thumping heartbeat. Sound can also be very effective in its absence. For instance, a total absence of sound, including even ambient noises, can be a useful tool to symbolize death (Gianetti and Leach 2005:219). Music can be quite effective at setting the stage

and creating a specific mood. The opening of a film or even the opening credits of a film can hint at a film's spirit through its use of music (Gianetti and Leach 2005:220).

As suggested in O'Shaughnessy et al. (2016:224) the opening scene of a narrative is extremely important for world building and setting up the characters in a way that maintains an audience's intrigue. The stage is being set for future events and should give the audience an awareness of the tone that is to follow. Additionally, it is at the beginning of a film in which the audience is first situated in what relationship they will have with the film, strategically utilizing angles. Rose (2016:70) notes that perspective plays an important role in the relationship between a picture and its viewer as, for instance, if we are to literally look down at an image, we are in a position of power while if we are literally made to look up at an image, the roles are reversed; additionally, if the viewer is at an equal level to the picture, this suggests an equal relationship. As observed in "Ramy," the audience is often met with eye-level angles that imply this equal relationship. This is similar to the above discussion of cinematography and angles, but it provides useful insights into an audience's relationship to a film and not just the relationships and emotions that exist within a film independently. While the opening scenes in films are certainly worth analyzing as the beginning of the narrative, television shows are different in that the opening scenes for episodes within a serialized television show are not introductions to the overall narrative, as the true beginning is only captured within the pilot episode. Subsequent episodes require an understanding of the continuity of the narrative and how the previous episode impacts the next. This does not mean that the opening scenes of each episode do not set the stage for the story within that given episode. For instance, in episodes that change perspectives and focus on other characters aside from Ramy, the stage is set that our focus has changed, and a

different kind of story will be told, however, the show is heavily serialized and even in these perspective shifts, the continuity of the narrative remains.

Differences Between Film and Television Production

While there do exist a lot of similarities between the way in which film and television programs are produced, it is worth noting the difference. Conventionally, television productions capture three different kinds of shots, closeups, wide shots, and medium shots (Bignell 2012:162). But often for efficiency and budgetary reasons, in studio production, three cameras are utilized in order to capture each of these three types of shots simultaneously (Bignell 2012:162). This maximizes coverage potential and gives the director more options to decide from when working with the editor. While this convention is certainly used in studio productions such as sitcoms, this is not necessarily the case for all television productions. While certain scenes in "Ramy" use multiple camera angles at once, there are also more cinematic moments in which only a single camera is involved. Using multiple camera angles at once has its disadvantages. For instance, the cameras need to be strategically positioned to achieve the differential types of shots while also avoiding any undesirable framing. Conversely, a single camera setup has the advantage of getting a specific shot exactly right without worrying about other simultaneous angles, a quality over quantity approach. Using a single camera setup does not mean that multiple angles cannot be used, rather that each angle needs to be setup and dismantled, and the same scene needs to be run through multiple times, as this is often the case for dramas (Bignell 2012:162).

It is important to consider the budgetary reasons for a multi-camera setup for specific scenes when analyzing "Ramy" as to not get too in-depth in analyzing the language of film where a scene is alternating between a shot-reverse-shot setup that is simply cutting between two different camera angles (Bignell 2012:162). While it is not so important to analyze shot-reverse-

shot sequences in depth, the positioning of characters in these less complex multi-camera shots are still worth analyzing. For instance, the physical space between two speakers and how close each of them is to the camera may indicate the closeness or tension between them (Bignell 2012:163). But the physical space between two characters is also largely influenced by culture, which is important for directors to consider. Specific locations such as doorways or windows can either be indicative of entrapment or even give the feeling of distance from the audience to a character (Bignell 2012:163). In the Pilot episode of "Ramy" (S01E01), these visual representations can be seen right from the beginning as the scene where Ramy is sitting with his friends closely in the mosque illustrates his close relationship to them, while in a subsequent scene he is talking to his White girlfriend about his Islamic beliefs while being physically separated (he is in the bathroom, and she is standing near the doorway of the bathroom) illustrative of the distance in their relationship.

Genre: Comedy/Drama

It is difficult to classify "Ramy" as one definitive genre. If it were plainly a studio sitcom, it would be easily understood through the lens of a conventional multi-camera setup while also keeping in mind the presence of a live studio audience and the effects that that may have on the performance. "Ramy" is a comedy, but it also recurringly has some very dramatic moments which makes it a hybrid of comedy and drama. But "Ramy" not having one definitive genre does not mean that it does not fall into some of the conventions of both comedy and drama. While "Ramy" is certainly unique in that it represents Muslims in a more multi-faceted way than audiences used to seeing, it would be an overstatement to say that this uniqueness subverts or escapes the notion genre. Sikov (2020:145) states that if there is an artistic expression that is unique in the purest sense, we likely will fail to comprehend it. The comedy roots in "Ramy" are

certainly there, as series creator, Ramy Youssef, himself is a comedian. However, the primary narrative that moves the story of the show along is more in accordance with the conventions of a drama, one in which a Muslim in the West is struggling to balance his Western life with his Islamic beliefs. Unfortunately, drama is not an easy genre to define as it is said to be among the broadest in that it contains elements of both mystery and film noir, but it does not strictly need to conform to either (Sikov 2020:144-145). Thus, when analyzing "Ramy," I do not just keep in mind a specific template of what dramas do to convey emotion in the same way that a horror movie conveys fear, panic, and anxiety with loud sound effects and jump scares.

The way emotion is conveyed in a drama is the same way that emotion is conveyed in the language of any film, and these are uncovered by analyzing the sound, editing, cinematography, context, and tone of the performers. It is important to conduct a language of film analysis when analyzing the dramatic moments within "Ramy," especially those that are related to issues of Muslim identity. That is not to say that I exclude from my analysis scenes that are not specifically related to Muslim identity. Just because a character is not actively engaging in dialogue about Islam or is not situationally in an Islamic setting, does not mean that there is no meaning to be drawn out in seemingly mundane or unrelated actions. That is why a narrative analysis that accounts for the positioning of characters and their actions within the dominant discourses of the show is essential.

Employing the Methodology

I do not transcribe every scene verbatim to try to find meaning in every moment. The important moments that are worth analyzing in-depth, with the intricacies of the language of film or important dialogue that needs to be transcribed, are the moments in which issues of Muslim identity are prevalent. I understand that sounds like a broad topic to cover, especially when the

notion of Muslim identity is essentially the basis of the show. The criteria of plainly "Muslim identity" is too vague as almost every single character on the show exhibits some form of Muslim identity. Because majority of the series takes place in New Jersey, I primarily examine how cultural norms in America have an impact on Muslim identity. I value scenes of this nature because my research question is concerned with how Muslim representation in "Ramy" differs from how Muslims are predominantly represented in the mainstream (Western) media. By situating Muslim characters in New Jersey, the audience is given insight into the way in which one's Muslim and American identities interact. The main character, Ramy, constantly struggles to balance his life as a devout Muslim and his life as an American who wants to meet women and party. There are many moments within the series in which he addresses these issues through dialogue exposition and those moments are perfect for analysis. Since Ramy is the main character, the focus of this analysis is primarily on his character arc and how he manages his Muslim and American identity. Still, there are notable side stories showcasing other characters with their own independent nuances that are analyzed as well, such as his sister, Dena, dealing with judgements cast upon her for being a Muslim woman, and his Uncle Naseem, struggling with his life as an unmarried Muslim man who is also a repressed homosexual.

In Saldana's (2016:70) coding manual, he states that some forms of research do not utilize coding techniques but rather "rely on extensive analytic memos about the data." Comprehensively coding my data does not serve me well in this project since it is unnecessary to neatly transcribe everything from the show and then formally code it. Answering questions involving the narrative structure and organizing these findings with analytic memos is much more useful for dismantling the narrative. To differentiate between the transcription/description of the scene and my analytical memos, I write these memos in blue text while the

transcription/description are recorded in standard black text. Also, while I do not employ a comprehensive first cycle coding method, I utilize a form of magnitude coding after my first pass through of analysis. This is done to evaluate the frequency of recurring themes within the show, when organizing my discussion. It is not used to measure the recurrence of stereotypes since I do not want to make a quantitative statement about the number of stereotypes without explaining qualitatively how a stereotype is used, whether it is used ironically or to make a point about the harm of stereotypes within the context of the narrative.

As I conduct my analysis, I watch each episode twice. The first viewing I take notes regarding each episode's narrative structure and the second viewing I pay careful attention to specific scenes that relate to Muslim identity and diligently take note of the language of film, and important dialogue being presented within these scenes. Two watch throughs do not seem like a lot. But on my second viewing, I rewatch the specific scenes regarding Muslim identity several times to record all that is involved in the language of film, as well as any dialogue transcriptions. I conduct my analysis on my computer using dual screen monitors; one screen with “Ramy” playing, and the other screen with an open document for taking notes. I organize the document by dividing each episode into its own heading, listing out the episode number in a format that follows “S00E00” as well as the episode title. The number after the “S” indicates which season the episode is from and the number after the “E” indicates which episode is being analyzed. For instance, the pilot episode is listed as “S01E01 - Between the Toes.” The episodes, then, each have subheadings to organize my narrative analysis questions. The subheadings are listed as follows:

1) Who/what is responsible for moving the narrative forward/whose point of view are we focused on? And in what order are we seeing things in?

2) What is everyone's role?

3) What dominant discourse is being promoted and over what other discourses?

4) In what ways are women and men positioned differently?

5) What does the ending conclude about the episode's ideology?

After these questions I have a final subheading for each episode's language of film analysis/important dialogue regarding Muslim identity. The beginning of each scene here is marked with a timestamp and a brief description of the situational context of what led up to the scene. Then, I organize each scene by putting in square brackets the camera angle, camera distance, motion, and a description of the actions taking place in each specific shot. If the language of film is more involved, I record more detail after the square brackets describing what else the scene is illustrating such as sound, music, lighting, etc. But in cases in which the analysis revolves more around a dialogue transcription, I maintain square brackets describing the shot and then describe who is saying what and how they might be speaking. In many shot-reverse-shot sequences, the transcription is as simple as: [Closeup on X character] X character says angrily, "Dialogue." A clearer picture of this can be seen in my appendices, in which I show a sample of my analysis for the pilot episode of the series.

I do not specifically note when there are eye-level camera angles, since those are the majority of the angles within the series. I always take note of the distance of the camera from the actor as either a medium, a wide, or a closeup. I only note down the specific angle when it is not a neutral eye-level shot. The same goes for even lighting and natural background ambience. There is no point in recording every natural "car drives by" or "bird chirps" sound effect when dialogue is happening outside. Nor is there a need to specify the neutrality/evenness of a scene's

lighting. When these are unspecified, they are neutral, and the intent of the filmmaker is to make it unnoticeable and natural. This intent of illustrating situations as natural is evident a lot throughout the series especially in scenes where important issues affecting Muslims are being discussed. It is as if these issues are so important to the producers of the series that they did not want to take away from this important dialogue with flashy camera work or overtly dramatic sound design and lighting. The simplicity in some of these scenes, in itself, is worth noting as a way in which we as an audience are told to just slow down and listen without the need to pay attention to anything too extravagant in terms of cinematography.

Limitations

While using discourse analysis to understand historical and situational contexts is certainly useful when examining scenes within the narrative of "Ramy," the fact that "Ramy" is a fictional narrative makes it so that the historical context is not always helpful in deconstructing the series. For instance, with the COVID-19 pandemic, there was a stark increase in anti-Muslim discrimination with an increase in hatred circulated through the media, mosques being vandalized, and violent crimes against Muslims (Al-Qazzaz 2020). The first two seasons of "Ramy" were produced before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the third season was produced and takes place after the pandemic. While season three does refer to the pandemic, it does not do so in any meaningful way, especially not in regard to the increase in racism against Muslims during this time. Understanding the historical significance of September 11th, 2001, certainly helps in examining the flashback episode that centers around Ramy's childhood experience at a time in which racism against Muslims was exacerbated. Additionally, understanding that season one and two take place during Trump's presidency is helpful in examining how Muslims were impacted

by his anti-Muslim campaign. But a lot of the series exists within its own world as it focuses primarily on individual character interactions within that world.

Narrative analysis analyzes a story from the point of view of the main character who is largely responsible for moving the narrative forward. Because of this, the focus is almost entirely on the character of Ramy Hassan. There are a handful of episodes within the series in which Ramy is not the featured character driving the narrative, but the central plot of the series largely follows Ramy. As such, other side characters do not receive as much analysis. The narrative analysis question regarding each character's role within a given episode certainly helps to shed light on the character dynamics at play here. But it does little to expand an analysis on characters who get little screen time. While for majority of my research this is not a problem, as the main characters featured have a considerable amount of nuance in regard to their Muslim identities in America, this is an issue for some smaller characters, especially those that express a different cultural background than the largely Egyptian-American cast. These side characters are still considered in regard to the language of film analysis in order to fully examine the diversity within the series.

Because I am only focusing on the language of film and conducting a dialogue transcription on scenes that directly address my research question, I inevitably miss out on deconstructing every aspect of the series in such a comprehensive manner. For instance, there is an episode in season one that focuses on Maysa, which captures her feelings of loneliness (S01E07). Her adult children often have their own evening plans and do not eat her dinner, and her husband seems more interested in watching television than spending quality time with her. Because this episode is not situated in regard to Muslim identity, I do not analyze the gendered, generational themes conveyed in-depth. This is also the case for other episodes in the series

where characters are struggling with issues that are not directly tied to their Muslim identity, such as Farouk's unemployment in season two and three. Inevitably, conducting my analysis in this manner results in a selective examination of thematic elements.

Conclusion

The discourse analysis for analyzing "Ramy" is guided by a narrative analysis that structures and organizes my findings. By answering key questions regarding the show's narrative, I dismantle the dominant and alternative discourses, arranging these findings in order of the hierarchy of discourses prevalent within each episode. The language of film is certainly examined for the more cinematic scenes, but because majority of scenes in "Ramy" are filmed in a more neutral manner, along with some of the conventions of television production, majority of the analysis is on the narrative itself as unfolded through dialogue and character interaction. It is important for my data to be organized in accordance with key narrative questions. The differential color coding that makes memos stand out from the analysis is important, especially in terms of finding recurring themes throughout the series. Focusing on Muslim identity in the West and how characters struggle to negotiate both of their identities enables my analysis to uncover interpersonal character nuances that illustrate their depth and multi-faceted arcs. Because many scenes are more neutral regarding the language of film, this allows a focus to be put on the words characters are saying and the emotion behind how they are saying them, to parse out meaning for how specific issues are affecting Muslim characters without too much cinematic distraction. My methodology is limited in that a discourse analysis that looks into historical contexts is not always helpful when analyzing a fictional universe that largely exists within its own world. Narrative analysis is unable to fully examine the roles of lesser side characters who do not have a central impact on the narrative. And reserving Muslim identity issues for a more comprehensive

analysis inevitably neglects other scenes in the series, however, these scenes are still accounted for in the narrative analysis.

Chapter 5 | Analysis

Introduction

"Ramy" is a character-focused narrative and, as the title suggests, the character of focus is that of Ramy Hassan, portrayed by comedian/actor/writer, Ramy Youssef. Within this character driven narrative, the audience is shown a very nuanced representation of Muslims that significantly differs from the monolithic representations common in mainstream entertainment media. Ramy Hassan is an American-born Muslim of Egyptian immigrant parents residing in New Jersey. A major theme prevalent throughout the series is the negotiation between one's Muslim and American identities. But rather than the series making a statement about how these two identities are incompatible, it shows us the often contradictory ways in which characters address tensions between them, while at the same time providing us with the cultural context that shapes this behaviour. First, the way Muslim characters cope with their sexual desires and how they balance that with their faith, one that prohibits sex outside of marriage (the sin known as "zina") plays a major role throughout the series. The character of Ramy Hassan struggles to strike a balance between being a devout Muslim and being an American in his late twenties who wants to party and meet women. The balance between his sexuality and his Muslim identity is central to his character arc. Second, the negotiation between Muslim and American identities extends itself to a further discussion in which Muslim characters are shown to conceal their Muslim identities out of fear of being alienated. But it is not just the conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims that cause difficulty for characters within the show. A third aspect thus involves the internal conflict that takes place, in which characters themselves use loopholes in an attempt to smooth over competing identities. The first section of this chapter analyzes these interrelated themes by examining key examples from the series. This analysis also acknowledges the fact that gender

and culture play vital roles in the construction of one's identity as a Muslim, illustrating that there are many factors at play that impact the how various Muslims practice Islam.

Since "Ramy" depicts Muslims in a manner that is alternative to the mainstream discourse, the second section highlights examples of this alternative discourse regarding Muslim representation and all the complexities and race-relations that are at stake. This section is organized by first presenting material on the ways in which the series addresses Muslim stereotypes and misunderstandings of Islam, rejecting and providing alternatives to the dominant discourse. In some cases, this is done with the use of humour in order to educate the audience in a manner that is fun and inviting rather than antagonistic. Secondly, I focus on how this series humanizes Muslims with an emphasis on imperfection in order to illustrate how the series stands out. It stands out from the dominant discourse that represents Muslims as violent and oppressive. But it also stands out from other simplistic representations that homogenize Muslims as voices for social responsibility and pure kindness with no character depth or nuance, as is the case in Morey and Yaqin's (2011) analysis of "White Girl." The humanization of Muslim characters extends itself to a discussion on the way in which the series illustrates diversity within the Muslim population and the various ways Muslims, even within the same community, engage in their commitment to Islam.

The final section of this chapter examines the limited diversity within the series, as the audience is largely seeing the story unravel from a young adult male Egyptian-American Sufi Muslim's perspective. While diversity is certainly present within the series in terms of how characters interact with Islam (for example, as more or less devout), ethnic diversity is limited. Other races and ethnicities are featured, such as Black-American Muslims, White-American Muslim converts, and non-American Egyptian Muslims. However, Muslims belonging to these

other racial groups are largely side characters with not as much depth as the main Egyptian-American Muslim characters. Furthermore, while Dena does get a considerable amount of screen time as a Muslim woman, her story is not nearly as expansive as Ramy's. Because Dena does not regularly wear the hijab, the audience is denied insight into the perspective of hijab-wearing Muslim women. Additionally, the series does not make clear distinctions between Sufi and other sects of Islam. While there are examples in which other characters within the series are clearly not Sufi, the series does not fully explore other Islamic sects since majority of the series focuses on Ramy's perspective.

Competing Identities

This section identifies and analyzes the various ways in which Muslim characters negotiate their competing identities. A large amount of screen time is dedicated to how Muslim characters deal with their sexuality. Majority of the series focuses on Ramy's struggle, showcasing his attempts to be a devout Muslim while trying not to give into his sex and pornography addictions. However, the audience is also given insight into several other side characters and their unique struggles as well, including Ramy's sister, Dena, who has a very different struggle with her sexuality as a woman, and Ramy's Uncle Naseem dealing with his repressed homosexuality. Conflicts with Muslim identity are also illustrated in which characters sometimes feel the need to conceal parts of their Muslim identity in order to fit in and not be alienated. Some characters are shown to assimilate more than others. But we often see that most of the characters featured in the series are morally anchored to Islamic values. The times that some of them do stray from Islamic practices, they use loopholes to attempt to justify why certain sins they are committing may be okay, when they most likely know they are wrong. In this manner, they are trying to reduce tensions between their Muslim and American identities, which results in compromising some of

their beliefs in the process. The ongoing negotiation of identities by Muslims has been written about by Peek (2005:229), who found that Muslim identities are renegotiated as children get older. For instance, Peek (2005:229) found that second generation Pakistani immigrant, Ariana, taught herself a lot about Islam and realized that her mother often conflated Islam and Pakistani culture, in which she would teach things, such as not being allowed to drink milk after eating fish. This teaching is very widespread in Pakistan, but it is based in superstition and has no Islamic merit. Although the teachings of Islam are straightforward, it is easy for some to be influenced by competing cultural norms. The characters in "Ramy" are often influenced by Western culture in ways that are much more at odds with their religion. These identity conflicts are often motivated by the normalization of drugs, alcohol and nonmarital sex in mainstream American culture.

Sexuality and Muslim Identity

The romantic relationships that the character of Ramy engage in throughout the series often leaves him internally conflicted between his desires and his faith. He battles his urges to engage in zina and attempts to be a devout Muslim but often regresses back into his old habits, exponentially sinning at levels more severe than he ever has before. He has a crippling addiction to pornography, which goes so far that he suffers erectile dysfunction when trying to have sex. He has multiple affairs and even experiments with prostitution. While the character arc of Ramy Hassan seems very exaggerated for the purpose of entertainment, it stands to provide a perspective on a Muslim character who is trying to be true to his faith while battling his temptations. Additionally, there is also the representation of other characters' struggles with negotiating their Muslim and sexual identities. For instance, the series features characters from a female perspective, a homosexual perspective, and there is even discussion on polygamy. The

wide range of different approaches to sexuality featured here illustrate Muslim characters as very nuanced which rejects the dominant discourse that homogenizes Muslims as all the same.

Ramy's identity conflict is apparent from the very first episode. In S01E01, Ramy is criticized by his Muslim friends for dating a White woman, and they encourage him to be with someone he would have more in common with, such as a Muslim woman. Ramy's friends are loosely using the word "White" to imply "non-Muslim," which then leads to a sort of dichotomy between White people and Muslims in which there is no overlap. However, the series later features White-Muslim characters, so the dichotomy is not upheld throughout. Still, the differences between Ramy and his White girlfriend, Chloe, are apparent in the scene in which Chloe catches Ramy in the bathroom, meticulously inspecting the condom they just used for holes. Ramy and Chloe are in different worlds here as is illustrated in the framing of this scene where Chloe steps back from him and is much closer to the door. The placement of these characters in the way the scene is framed is indicative of their relationship growing apart (Bignell 2012:163). Ramy implies it is wrong, Islamically, to have children outside of marriage, which is why he is so concerned about the condom working. Ramy appears to be okay with engaging in zina, yet he is determined to not get Chloe pregnant. Chloe is caught off guard by Ramy's eventual admission that he is a practicing Muslim, as he previously led her to believe that he was not very religious.

This scene is followed by a lonely montage of Ramy heading back home accompanied by melancholy music. Ramy is shown in a car, leaning against the door and looking up out of the window. Shortly after this, Ramy is shown lying awake in bed, unable to sleep. He gets up and performs wudu, an Islamic cleansing ritual typically completed before prayer. He then sets his prayer mat down as the camera shows him in a medium shot tilting up to reveal his face. Ramy is

standing there looking extremely conflicted with his two identities as the camera eases closer and closer to his face. He then begins his prayer, and the montage ends, cutting to black. This sets the tone for the series as a young man's struggle to try to balance his sexual desires with his faith. But as the end of this scene implies, he is choosing his faith over his desires at this point. Chloe is not featured again for the rest of the series, so it can be assumed that they broke up after this confrontation.

Later in this episode, Ramy asks his parents to set him up with a Muslim woman as he wants to go about a new relationship the Islamic way and get married. Arrangements are made for Ramy to go on a date with an Egyptian-American Muslim woman named Nour, who also was born and raised in New Jersey, and thus from a similar cultural background. They go on a date in which they seemed to have a good time together. As Ramy walks Nour back to her car, they both smile at each other before Ramy awkwardly leans in and pats her on the arm while saying, "Get home safe, okay?" Nour asks, "What, I don't get a good-night kiss?" The scene escalates to the point in which Ramy and Nour are getting very sexual inside of her car, but Ramy puts an end to it, not wanting to commit zina again. Nour confronts Ramy for his hypocrisy in that he has had sex with other women but does not want to shatter the image of Nour as his wife or the mother of his children. Ramy is turned off by how sexual Nour is, as he seems to just want to marry a virgin. This provides a commentary for the double standard between men and women in the Muslim community, where the men who engage in zina expect to marry women who have not.

The double standard issue is more explicitly outlined in S01E06, in which Ramy's sister, Dena, is hanging out with her friends Fatima and Sahar. Dena is shocked at the revelation that Fatima is no longer a virgin. When Dena asks if the guy Fatima had sex with is Muslim, Fatima replies, "No, of course not. Come on. You know Muslim guys don't do anything with Muslim

women." Dena agrees, "That's true." This reinforces Ramy's attitude toward Nour in S01E01. It should be noted that Fatima is a practicing Muslim as she goes out of her way to put on her hijab when she sees on her phone that their food delivery driver, "Antonio," has arrived at her home. This illustrates that Fatima abides by the Islamic teaching for women to cover their hair and be modest in the presence of men, yet she still engages in zina which contradicts the whole point of being modest in the first place. She still wears the hijab in front of the delivery driver though, which suggests that despite having sex, she does not let this completely take her away from Islam. She is still trying to follow Islam while simultaneously indulging in her un-Islamic desires. Ramy follows a similar pattern, as he continues to commit zina while also trying to be a devout Muslim. As such, this struggle is illustrated to be common amongst American born Muslims, influenced by Western cultural norms. But inevitably, there is a difference here in how gender impacts one's decisions. Fatima admits to having had sex once but is ashamed to tell Dena due to the stigma of being judged, while Ramy freely is having sex and telling his friends openly. While Ramy later regrets his actions, he is not illustrated to have the same reservations of telling his friends about his actions as Fatima does, since there is considerably more pressure for women to stay virgins.

In S01E05, the contradictions between Ramy's competing identities are worsened. The episode begins with Ramy presented as a devout Muslim but descends into chaos when he loses himself to his desires. At Mo's diner, Ramy tells his friends that he is going to be serious about Ramadan this year in that he will not be getting involved with any women and will not even watch any pornography for the entirety of Ramadan. The capacity of Ramy here to aim to be a "Ramadan Muslim" outlines how much he has lost himself to American norms that are forbidden

in Islam. Rather than being a devout Muslim all the time, he is trying to repent for his sins and be a devout Muslim only during Ramadan.

Later in the episode, Ahmed's cousin, Farida, is in town looking for a marriage partner and Ahmed persuades Ramy to meet with her. Ramy confesses to Farida that he has made a lot of mistakes and that he regrets having sex explaining how happy he was before he did it. Farida is impressed with Ramy for owning up to his mistakes but is completely turned off by him when she learns that he does not know how to read Arabic. In this scene, Farida serves as a vehicle for Ramy to talk to the audience and explain his regrets and that he does not stand by his un-Islamic behaviour. He is trying to be a better person during Ramadan and is owning up to his sins in an attempt to better himself.

Towards the end of the episode, however, Ramy finds a distressed woman named Salma in the mosque trying to find the person responsible for blocking her car because she needs to get home to give her son his insulin while her husband is busy with work. Ramy carries Salma's son home for her as they walk to her home together. Salma is very thankful to Ramy when they reach her home and gives him some food since he had not been able to properly open his fast on time at the mosque as he was planning. After they exchange a few laughs, the audience witnesses a jump cut to the two of them having sex. Gianetti and Leach (2005:182) refer to jump cuts as violations in the continuity of the edit, which are often used in order to surprise or disorient the viewer. The jump cut is used exceptionally well here as it is truly shocking to see Ramy suddenly betray his Islamic values, especially since he has been so devout this Ramadan. Ramy and Salma are committing a major Islamic sin with one another. Not only are they engaging in zina, but they are committing adultery as Salma is currently married. Ramy not only failed in his task of being a better Muslim this Ramadan, but he committed a sin far greater than any he has

committed before. Yet, due to the cultural differences in America that extend to the legal system, he does not fear the legal repercussions of committing such a sin as he would in a country like Egypt, in which individuals are subject to penalties for committing such acts (Sultan 2015).

Throughout the show, Ramy's friends and family remind him of his moral responsibilities and Muslim values. The majority of those who Ramy surrounds himself with are Muslim, and many times they call him out for his immoral choices and try to guide him toward Islam. This is even sometimes the case with non-Muslim characters when they present opportunities for Ramy to do good. What, exactly, "good" means to Ramy, however, is not always obvious to him. He even does things that he knows are wrong in the service of attempting to do good. In S01E08, Ramy tells Mo about his experience with Salma. Mo tells Ramy, "You're breaking up a marriage. This is real. It's against all the rules. It's a huge fucking sin." Mo eventually encourages him, "You need to go feed the homeless, visit the sick, cleanse yourself." Mo is Ramy's moral compass here. He is not letting Ramy hide behind any excuses and rejects Ramy's thin argument that he is not to blame because he's "not the one who is married" by telling him point blank that "it's a huge fucking sin" and "you're breaking up a marriage."

Rather than ending his relationship with Salma, Ramy distracts himself by hanging out with his non-Muslim White friend Steve, who has muscular dystrophy. Steve calls Ramy out for only hanging out with him when he is feeling guilty about something. Ramy feels tremendous guilt over his affair with Salma, but rather than doing anything about it, he distracts himself with Steve as he seems to believe that doing favours for Steve will somehow absolve him of his sins. Ramy takes Steve to meet someone named Mikaela, whom Steve met online, and he buys alcohol for her. When they arrive at Mikaela's house, Ramy learns she is a minor. He feels guilty that Steve does not have many opportunities with women, and he decides to chaperone the date,

which ends abruptly with Mikaela being rushed to the hospital after drinking an excessive amount of alcohol. Ramy knowingly supplied alcohol to a minor all in the service of doing something "good" for Steve. Thus, his attempt to cleanse himself of the affair resulted in even more immoral behaviour.

The affair is ended by Salma herself. Ramy comes home from his night with Steve to find his dad, Farouk, is up waiting for him. Farouk tells Ramy that he was notified by Salma's husband about Ramy's relationship with his wife as Salma confessed everything. Farouk cuts off Ramy's meandering explanation and asks. "How could you do this to a married woman?" Farouk then tells Ramy that when he left Egypt to come to America, he would communicate to his family by mailing cassette tapes. He got one sent back from his father who was cursing at him for leaving. Farouk tells Ramy that he came here so that his children could have a better future. But Farouk's father warned him that he was wrong. Ramy looks remorsefully as his father talks. Eventually, Ramy finds the tapes Farouk was referring to. Ramy is listening to a tape with his eyes down, focused on what he is hearing. The scene is accompanied by somber ambient music. The recording is audible in Arabic, translated as follows. "Your kids, Farouk, think of your kids. They'll grow up confused. They won't know who they are, because they won't know their land! They need to know their roots." The scene cuts to black as tape continues. "They need to grow up learning Islam, or they won't be on the right path!" The cassette tape is then audibly turned off. As the credits appear, the somber music is accompanied with a hopeful melody. In addition to the music, the lighting illustrates the mood of this scene well too. While Ramy is having the confrontation with his father, the contrast is high with lots of black and darkness around the characters. But as Ramy listens to the tape, a lamp is illuminating the scene so that it is much brighter. Gianetti & Leach (2005:76) explain that filmmakers often use high contrast darkness to

imply fear and evil while brighter light is used to imply virtue and truth. When confronted with his sins, Ramy is shrouded in darkness. But in an attempt to seek out his grandfather's tape in which he stresses the importance of growing up with Islam, Ramy's world becomes much brighter.

At this point, Ramy is no longer hiding from his sins. He stops trying to explain things and has nothing to distract himself with. His father's confrontation appears to have made Ramy deeply remorseful of his actions. The tape serves as an incentive for Ramy to get closer to Islam and reject his sexually driven, sinful lifestyle in America. The implication of the tape is that Ramy would not have committed such a major sin like adultery if he grew up in Egypt and around more Muslims. The tape thus reinforces how conflicted and confused Ramy is as he tries to negotiate his American and Muslim identity. In his current experience, these identities are at extreme odds with one another. While such extreme contrasts in identity are certainly not the case for all American-Muslims, the series is using a bit of hyperbole here in order to drive forward the narrative. This works as a plot device to get Ramy to reevaluate his decisions leading him to the next episode where he wants to embrace his Egyptian heritage.

In S01E09, Ramy takes an impromptu trip to Egypt in order to get some clarity by surrounding himself with Muslims and freeing himself of all his temptations to sin that are widely present and normalized in America. Although he rejects his cousin, Shadi, who seems to be Westernized from American pop culture that has made its way to Cairo, he is determined to meet his grandfather and learn from him so that he can understand what it truly means to be Muslim. Ramy meets his grandfather in S01E10, yet his grandfather dies soon after they meet. At the funeral, Ramy's cousin Amani tells him that they should hang out. In a café with Ramy, Amani tells him that she was married but now divorced and that it is hard to date at this point as

she explains, “Yeah, guys here either want to marry a virgin or have sex on the first date.” This is the same way Ramy has acted with women. He either sees them as sex objects, or in the case of Nour, strictly a potential wife and he rejects her when he realizes she is sexually active (S01E01). Ramy tells Amani,

> “Yeah, I’ve dated Muslim women, and… I feel like the problem’s really that I just don’t know what kind of Muslim I am. Like, there’s Friday prayers, and then there’s Friday night, and – and – and I’m, like, at both, (Amani laughs) you know, like, I wanna pray, I wanna go to the party, and I’m breaking some rules, I’m following others, and I thought coming here would give me some clarity and– and help me figure it out, just being in this country, seeing Grandpa… But I don’t know, obviously that hasn’t really… worked.”

Amani then takes Ramy to a Sufi circle in which prayers are recited musically to the beat of a drum. Their night ends with the two of them standing on a bridge together facing the river, they slowly hold hands but quickly stop, acknowledging they are cousins. Ramy then makes a case that since they understand one another so well, it should not matter that they are cousins. Eventually they kiss. Ramy likes Amani because she understands that he came to Egypt because he wanted clarity on what it means to be Muslim. He is thankful to her that she took him to the Sufi Circle. Unfortunately, he cannot separate gratitude from feelings of lust. He may think that he will not make the same mistakes with Amani that he has with other women because she understands him so well.

Ramy’s identity conflict so far has been rooted in the struggle between his desire to be a devout Muslim while also being sexually active. Season two illustrates how Ramy deeply struggles with a crippling addiction to pornography, demonstrating how detrimental this is to his life. This reflects the social issue of how damaging the addiction to pornography can be for men,

and it frames this issue in context with how it negatively impacts one's identity as a Muslim. In S02E01, Ramy meets with an Imam and he confesses that he has sex and watches pornography. The Imam advises Ramy to maintain his wudu throughout the day and fast to keep his urges under control. Ramy is dismissive of this advice as he believes it will not work given how he still ended up having sex with a married woman on the previous year's Ramadan. Ramy rants about this experience in S03E09 in a meeting for sex addicts. He talks about how when he would tell his problem to people at the mosque, they would look at him like he is insane. This is the case in S02E01, as the Imam seems a bit disturbed with what Ramy confesses, cuts him off, and advises him without fully listening or understanding his circumstances. This provides a commentary for how in some mosques, discussions of sex and pornography are taboo and men who come to Imam's with these kinds of problems, speaking in graphic terms, are either ignored or ridiculed. Mukhtar (2022) addressed this widespread tendency in a Khutbah in the Winnipeg Grand Mosque, urging us to be compassionate to those who come to the mosque to seek advice regarding sexual desire, as advising these individuals with a gentle and loving hand, without judgement or disdain, was the way of the Prophet, peace be upon Him.

Although Ramy is a wallowing mess of self-indulgence in his destructive habits, he is actively looking for resolutions to his problems, rather than just resigning himself to accept his status as a pornography and sex addict. He is determined to find a teacher who can help him. When White-Muslim convert, Michael, enthusiastically recommends Sheikh Malik, Ramy accepts. Ramy meets with Sheikh Malik at a Sufi Center to bond with him in accordance with the bay'ah, a Sufi Islamic oath that bonds a teacher and his student. Based on this scene and the one mentioned above, of the Sufi Circle that Ramy attended in Egypt, it is clear that this series is focusing on the Sufi sect of Islam. While there are many other sects of Islam out there, it is

important to understand that this series is primarily representing this specific sect. Ramy confesses all of his recent sins, including his addiction to pornography and sex, the fact that he had sex with a married woman during Ramadan, and additionally, he reveals that he had sex with his cousin in Egypt. Sheikh Malik does not judge Ramy for his sins. Instead, he tells him to consider the "the plight of the performers, their pain" referring to the adult actresses he watches. Malik educates Ramy in this way by encouraging Ramy to look outside of himself and focus on the feelings of others. This lesson can be extended to the audience who may struggle with similar addictions. Even just applying this lesson to the events in the show so far, it is easy to imagine how severely Ramy's actions may have damaged Salma's family life when thinking about the affair from her point of view.

Ramy eventually pursues a relationship in which he approaches it in accordance with Islamic values, keeping his distance until marriage. But even in this instance, when he is aiming to live a more Islamic lifestyle, he continues to experience significant tensions between his competing identities. S02E07 begins with a montage of Ramy and Malik's daughter, Zainab, engaging in a halal relationship in which they FaceTime and avoid being alone together. Ramy begins telling Zainab that he watches pornography and has had sex, but Zainab tells him not to go into detail and she accepts it. Shortly after the montage, Ramy's friends, Steve, Mo, and Ahmed, entice him to celebrate an impromptu bachelor party. When Ramy tells them that he is not even engaged yet Mo replies,

> "That's why it's the right time. I don't like how White people do their bachelor parties. It's really weird, man. They do them right before the wedding. They're already committed. That's disgusting."

Mo implies here that the Western way of having a bachelor party is wrong because the kinds of events that take place in bachelor parties suggest unfaithfulness and it is wrong to do that when one is committing about to commit to a marriage. Since Ramy is currently not committed to Zainab through engagement, but likely will be soon, Mo believes that now is the perfect time to have a bachelor's party. Ramy has been a better Muslim since he committed to a serious relationship with Zainab, as Mo explains that he has even been leading the prayer at the Sufi Center. Ramy most likely does not want to go with his friends to celebrate his bachelor party at Atlantic City, but he does not want to ruin his friends plan so he hesitantly agrees to go.

Ramy's friends eventually take him to a strip club, in which he receives a lap dance. The stripper playfully takes Ramy's prayer beads off his neck and puts it around hers. Ramy gets upset, demands her to give the beads back to him, and storms off to the bathroom. This is representative of a lack of understanding of Islam in America. If the stripper understood the significance of the beads and what they are used for she would be less likely to take and wear them as an accessory to seduce Ramy. A necklace with a cross on it is widely recognized as a symbol for Christianity, but the same is not true for a Muslim's prayer beads. This illustrates the critical race theory notion that Western society is structured such that the dominant group is advantaged, and the minority group is disadvantaged by social forces that are embedded and normalized in daily life (Bakali 2016:19). Christian practices are normalized in the West while Islamic practices are widely misunderstood. Critical race theory, thus, exposes why we can easily recognize Christian religious symbols but not Islamic ones.

Ahmed checks up on Ramy as he is using the urinal in the bathroom. Ramy tells Ahmed that he's disgusted, and he expected more from him. Ahmed fires back and says, "Do you know how many times I've watched you do crazy things, slowly waiting, praying that you do the right

thing?" Ahmed exposes Ramy's hypocrisy here. He never judged Ramy throughout his many instances of zina, including an affair with a married woman. But now that Ramy has been a "good Muslim" for some time since he committed to a serious relationship with Zainab, he looks down at his friends for visiting a strip club.

Ahmed reinforces another instance in which Ramy's identities are at odds with one another in order to make a point about how hypocritical Ramy is for judging him. He scolds Ramy for using the urinal since all the backsplash from it makes him unclean and his prayers will not count when in this state of impurity. Urinals are so normalized in the West that Muslims may not think anything of them. But setting this scene in a bathroom of a sleazy strip club, in addition with Ahmed's hyperbole of stating "you're covered in piss," emphasizes the taken-for-granted-ness of Western norms that go against Islamic values. Thus, in tandem with critical race theory, norms embedded within Western social structures make it difficult for Muslims to stay true to their faith (Bakali 2016:18).

The idea of Ramy trying to uphold his Islamic values while in the face of adversity with himself is brought to a crescendo at the end of season two. He is about to be married, finally able to have a sexual relationship that is permissible in Islam, but is tempted by his desires and ends up compromising his morals. In S02E10, preparations are being made for Ramy and Zainab's wedding. Ramy is upset to hear that his cousin, Amani, is invited to the wedding. He is tasked with having to drive her to 7-Eleven. As they emerge out of 7-Eleven, Amani wants to smoke a cigarette quickly in the parking lot. Ramy is shown eating candy. The only other times we have seen Ramy eating candy is when he is doing something he knows is wrong, such as watching an excessive amount of pornography in S02E01. The candy here signals that he knows that it is wrong that he came out alone with Amani tonight, given their history. Amani tells Ramy that she

is happy for him and rubs his arm. There is a lot of sexual tension here and finally the two of them kiss as the scene cuts to black. But we learn later in the episode that this went much further and the two of them had sex again. Notably, this occurred the night before Ramy and Zainab's wedding. It should also be noted here that Ramy has rejected the taboo in America of dating one's cousin. In S01E10, Ahmed and Mo convince Ramy that it is a good idea to pursue Amani because it simplifies the meeting of in-laws and the chance of children born from parents who are cousins to have birth defects is very modest. Thus, Ramy is rejecting cultural norms in America while simultaneously rejecting Islamic principles, as he cheats on his fiancée the night before their wedding.

Ramy proceeds with the wedding. After a brief wedding montage, Ramy is alone in a hotel room with Zainab. He sees her without a hijab for the first time and they have their first kiss. We have not seen Zainab without her hijab up until now because as a devout Muslim woman, she does not expose herself to men who are not either her close blood relatives or her marriage partner. The scene cuts to them lying in bed, implying that they just had sex. Ramy starts telling Zainab vaguely that he may be interested in having multiple wives. Zainab starts getting concerned and Ramy eventually tells her about his affair with Amani with the preface that he did not technically have to tell her since it happened before they were married. Not only was Ramy being selfish when he had sex with Amani the night before his wedding, but now he expects Zainab to clean up his mess. He is using her to cleanse his conscience and seems to have no barometer for how much he is hurting her. When Ramy says, "I don't have to say anything, but I wanted to," he is framing the situation in a way that makes him somehow seem like the one in the right. He is not actually taking responsibility for his actions. The only reason he is telling Zainab all this is so that he can possibly be with Amani as well. Zainab expresses betrayal that

Ramy had sex with his cousin the night before their wedding and Ramy focuses on the wrong thing by saying that being against cousin marriage is “West shit.” Zainab puts a pillow between the two of them and goes to sleep. Ramy is trying to use Islam to his advantage here by alluding to the possibility of a polygamous marriage. He does not understand the history and purpose of the permissibility of polygamous marriage, rather, he just wants to fulfill his desire of being with Amani. Ramy also uses the term “West shit” to refer to monogamy in this scene. It is interesting to see Ramy condescend to Western culture when so much of the series shows how he is immersed in it. He wants the best of both his American and Muslim worlds. His American identity has made it easy for him to engage in zina and pornography, as these things are normalized in mainstream American culture, and he opportunistically tries to leverage the ruling on polygamy in his favour without taking responsibility for the fact that his affair with Amani was a major sin. As a result, he loses Zainab, as is implied by him waking up to an empty bed with Zainab’s wedding ring left on the nightstand.

The aftermath of Ramy’s wedding night fiasco takes such a toll on him that he buries his guilt with even more meaningless sex and pornography to the point that they become much more crippling addictions that negatively affect his health and spirituality. Ramy has sunk so low after what happened with Zainab that he retreats from his devotion to Islam, no longer offering daily prayers, and instead embraces his American identity to find capitalistic success. This does not mean that the world of capitalism is incompatible with Islamic values. For example, Naseem is depicted as a devout Muslim with a successful business. Ramy does not necessarily stop being devout in order to become financially successful, rather he needs money and decides to focus on making it in the business world.

In S03E01, Ramy is now sporting a mustache instead of his typical beard. This visual change indicates a shift in Ramy as he is no longer a devout Muslim who keeps a beard for sunnah. Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon Him, encouraged Muslim men to grow out their beards while keeping their mustaches trimmed or shaved (Anon n.d.). The mustache illustrates that Ramy's facial hair is actually the opposite of what Muslims are taught in accordance with the sunnah.

A significant amount of time has passed since season two, as we learn that Ramy and Zainab got a divorce and Ramy must pay Zainab's divorce mehr, a compulsory payment in Islam from the husband to his wife, putting Ramy in a considerable amount of debt. In the episode, Ramy attempts to have sex with a woman, but he is not able to get an erection. Later, Ahmed (who is a doctor) runs tests on Ramy at the hospital, monitoring his brain as he shows Ramy various pictures of women. Ahmed concludes that Ramy is way too overstimulated, and it is likely due to pornography, as Ramy himself admits that even pornography is barely doing anything for him anymore. This, along with his promiscuity, indicates that Ramy has retreated to his crippling habits since the divorce. He is straying away from Islam and is living a destructive lifestyle; one he does not appear to be happy with as he chases money and uses sex as a distraction from his guilt. Ahmed advises him that he needs to find something real, love. Ramy arranges a date with his ex-girlfriend Sarah, but then argues with her about the fact that she has money and therefore does not have to worry about earning it, which allows her to do fulfilling nonprofit work. The date ends abruptly and Ramy is alone. Because Ramy has stopped praying regularly at this point in the series, the subtext here is that he is miserable without Islam guiding him. He is trying to distract himself with so much meaningless sex and pornography that he is suffering from erectile dysfunction.

S03E04 shows Steve is now dating a Muslim woman, named Lena. When Ramy asks how he was able to match with a Muslim woman on a Muslim dating app when he is not, himself, Muslim. Steve explains that he is using "Muslim guilt" to his advantage, as women look at Steve on the app and feel bad for him. This mirrors Ramy's relationship with Steve, in how he often hangs out with him to make up for something bad he has done. Ramy drives Steve and his date to a wrestling match but is unable to take them all the way as he gets caught up with business. Steve misses the match and fights with Ramy. Ramy, as a distraction, resorts to going to a brothel, disguised as a massage parlor, to have sex with an Indian woman who calls herself Olivia. Like we have seen Ramy use pornography as a distraction in previous seasons, he is now resorting to more extreme alternatives. He is driven purely by his desires and does not seem in anyway excited to meet Olivia. Rather, his body language and facial expressions are comparable to that of a drug addict waiting for his next fix. Ahmed was right in S03E01 when he said Ramy needs love. But at this point, Ramy does not need to love of a romantic partner. He needs to regain the love that Islam brought to his life. Without it, he has never been more miserable.

Ramy's misery can be observed throughout season three as he falls from Islam and only lives for his desires. But his addiction-fueled desires bring him no fulfillment. Having sex with a prostitute is only a distraction for him, one that brings him temporary satisfaction. In S03E10, Ramy admits to Oliva, that he does not like coming to see her. He does not have fun with her, and sex is not fun for him in general. He claims he has a buzzing in his head, and it only goes away when he has sex. He is a prisoner to his sexuality, and he does not enjoy it. Ramy later expresses that the best sex he has ever had was with Zainab. Even though it was not perfect, due to her lack of experience being a virgin, Ramy expresses that it felt the best because he loved her. What he fails to mention is that when he had sex with Zainab, it was the only time he was having

a kind of sex that is permissible in Islam, since they were married at that time. The subtext here is that Ramy feels bad every time he commits zina and feels content with sex only if it is Islamically permissible.

In S01E06, we get a Dena-focused episode. Dena is struggling with her sexuality but in a much different way than Ramy. Rather than having the freedom to have sex and later feel bad about it, Dena has restricted herself to remain a virgin until marriage, upholding her Islamic values. However, in accordance with American norms, she is fed up with being a sexually repressed woman in her mid-twenties and wants to have sex without feeling so guilty about it. The show's narrative illustrates how Muslim women have a lot more pressure on them than men to remain virgins until marriage. The episode opens with a flashback in which Dena appears to be much younger, possibly twelve years old. Her father lectures her about sex saying how, "there is no greater sin in this entire world than having sex before marriage. If you have sex before marriage, you'll get pregnant. No one's going to marry you. You'll have to marry any man that comes along, most likely a White guy." Again, the series here is talking down to White people, separating them from the notion of "good" and suggesting that White people cannot be Muslim. This is a dichotomy that the series itself contradicts when it features White-Muslim converts. The notion of "White person" is used as slang here to indicate non-Muslim; even though that is very reductive, it does not seem to be literal.

Dena looks fearful as her father lectures her and this same fear from her childhood is present throughout the episode. This fear resonates within Dena's character in a way that is much different from Ramy. It can be assumed that Farouk did not give this same lecture to Ramy, as Ramy is shown to have a lot more freedom than Dena. Ramy is able to go out without being questioned by his parents while Dena is constantly interrogated as to why she has to go out so

much. The example present in this episode is one in which Dena wants to just spend time with her friend, Fatima, at her house, while Ramy is likely going out to continue his affair with Salma. Ramy is unquestioned when going out late and not returning home until the next morning, while Dena is looked at much more closely when trying to hang out with her friends, even after giving her parents all the information regarding her whereabouts. This illustrates a double standard between how some Muslim parents treat their children differently according to gender.

Later in the episode, Dena is tired of all the restrictions that she must abide by. She wants to lose her virginity like her friend Fatima and not feel bad about it. She agrees to go on a date with Kyle, a barista she met on her campus. As they start getting intimate with one another, Kyle keeps asking Dena to speak to him in Arabic as he is turned on by this. After several attempts of Kyle trying to fetishize Dena's Arab background, Dena eventually asks him if they can just have normal sex without all the roleplay that Kyle is forcing on her. Kyle tells Dena that being normal is boring and begins ranting about how his art goes unnoticed because he's just another White guy, implicitly expressing frustration against minorities for somehow having it easier. Kyle, here, represents an illustration of tone-deaf White privilege in which he assumes that because there are certain initiatives for diversity that he is now the one being marginalized. Dena, on top of feeling uncomfortable with Kyle's sexual advances is now absolutely annoyed by his rant and gives him no empathy, deservedly so. Dena is so frustrated by Kyle that she gets dressed and leaves. Dena is not so easily able to have sex like Ramy is. When she finally does get the courage to break the rules and go on a date, the guy she finds only likes her because she is Arab. Additionally, as Dena gets back to her car and turns on her phone, she sees several missed calls from her mother, intensifying Dena's guilt for going out on this date. This reinforces the difference between the way Dena and Ramy are treated by their parents. When Dena is out, her parents are worried sick

and constantly want to know her whereabouts. But when Ramy is out late in his many escapades with women, we never see him getting missed calls from his parents, as they give him considerably more freedom than Dena.

In S03E05, an older Dena (by about two years) who has since lost her virginity, impulsively tries to have sex with Tarek, a Muslim man that Maysa was trying to set her up with for the purpose of marriage. Tarek is extremely hesitant to lose his virginity in this way, outside of marriage, but Dena convinces him that she is not just some White woman and things are serious since he already met her mom. The suggestion by Dena here is that it is okay for them to have sex since they are likely to get married anyway. However, Tarek is stricken with guilt and regret in the morning when Dena reveals to him that she is not interested in marrying him. He is tortured by the idea that he just committed a major Islamic sin and is not even getting married to Dena afterward to render their relationship permissible. This version of Dena reverses the roles, subverting the notion of Muslim women as virgins while Muslim men fool around by showing a devout Muslim character, Tarek, who was waiting until marriage to have sex. In this scene, Dena does not feel nearly as bad or conflicted as Tarek. Tarek prays the next morning trying to repent for his sin from the previous night, feeling used and betrayed since Dena is not interested in marrying him.

A different perspective is featured in S02E09, in which Ramy's Uncle Naseem is struggling with his conflicting identities as a devout Muslim and an unmarried closeted homosexual in his fifties. The episode opens with Naseem intensely exercising at a gym while listening to "Break Stuff" by Limp Bizkit. Notable lyrics include:

> "It's just one of those days. Where ya don't wanna wake up. Everything is fucked, everybody sucks. You don't really know why. But you wanna justify rippin' someone's

> head off. No human contact. And if you interact your life is on contract. Your best bet is to stay away mother fucker! It's just one of those days!" (Durst, Borland, Otto and Rivers 1998).

Gianetti and Leach (2005:220) suggests that the music at the beginning of a film narrative often captures the spirit of the story. This music sets the stage for Naseem as a very masculine character by the tone and hard edge to the music. However, the lyrics are more in line with Naseem's life, and it foreshadows what the audience will see in this episode. He doesn't have "human contact," physically, because he is gay, and he only allows himself to carry out homosexual acts if it is not under the "contract" of a relationship. Moreover, Naseem does not even acknowledge the homosexual acts he engages in once they conclude. Naseem is shown sitting in a sauna after his workout and a bald man named Paco casually walks in and sits beside him. Paco smiles at Naseem and kneels between Naseem's legs. The audience does not see the action he is doing but Naseem does not make eye contact and looks up in the air, then closes his eyes, implying that Paco is performing oral sex on him. This is an interesting revelation for this character because earlier in the series he was vocally homophobic.

Indeed, in S01E02, during a dinner scene with Ramy's family, Uncle Naseem tells a story from his job in the diamond district about how his delivery person asked for a discount on a ring. Naseem was happy to give him a discount until he learned that the ring would be engraved with his partner's name, David. Learning that his delivery person is gay, Naseem made him pay full price. Naseem then states that it is "wasteful" for the government to focus on the LGBT community as he claims there is only 3.6 per cent of them. The revelation that Naseem, himself, is gay in S02E09 shows that Naseem's bigotry stems from his self-hatred. As a Muslim, he

deeply struggles with his identity and represses his homosexuality to the point where he makes homophobic statements.

Naseem is put into a situation in which he must confront his sexuality in order to continue his relationship with Paco, but he is so deeply closeted and afraid to admit to himself that he is gay as this goes against his Islamic identity. Naseem tracks down Paco who missed leg day at the gym and learns that he was absent because his brother died from cancer. Paco expresses that he is happy he was able to tell him that he was gay before he died. Paco also expresses that he does not want to hide anymore by doing discreet sex acts with Naseem in the gym, he wants a real relationship with him. Naseem gets upset and storms off. For Naseem, this arrangement of him and Paco being intimate in the sauna is successful because he is able to fulfill his physical desires while maintaining distance from Paco. Now that Paco wants something more, Naseem wants nothing to do with him, denying his homosexuality.

As a result, Naseem no longer has a sexual outlet. Out of desperation, he visits an old friend he had a sexual history with, but again, he is too repressed to admit his motive for visiting. Naseem visits his old friend Yassir at his house. He is greeted at the door by Yassir and his wife Najla and they invite him to join them for dinner. During the dinner scene we learn that Najla tried to set Naseem up with a woman named Nadia but Naseem did not call her after the second date. Yassir and Naseem are eventually left alone in the living room as Yassir starts telling Naseem that he knows what he is doing here. He reveals that the two of them had a past in which they committed homosexual acts with one another and then acted like it never happened, similar to Naseem and Paco's relationship. Yassir tells Nassem that nothing will happen between them and that he is done with that part of his life and is now at peace by living in accordance with Islam. Yassir then bends over across Naseem's lap to pick up a prayer mat next to Naseem.

Naseem's eyes shift from anxious to disappointed when he realizes Yassir was only bending over for a prayer mat. Yassir was sitting beside Naseem and bent over his lap in the exact same way that Paco did before he performed oral sex on Naseem in the sauna and the shot is framed in the same manner. Naseem is reminded of this but realizes that Yassir was not bending over for the same purpose. He is extremely conflicted between being a devout Muslim here and dealing with his homosexual desires. Unlike Yassir, he has not settled down with a wife and permanently repressed his homosexual desires. He does not want to do that, nor does he want to be openly gay.

This leads to Naseem trying to pursue Paco under the guise of a platonic relationship. Naseem visits Paco at his apartment and brings him a cake that has "Deepest Condolences" written on it. The two of them have some pizza and watch TV. Paco went out of his way to get pizza from a halal Domino's Pizza out of respect for Naseem. Paco is understanding that Naseem is Muslim and wants to pursue a relationship with him in a way in which Naseem is comfortable. Paco eventually leans in for a kiss and Naseem pushes him away and smacks him on the face. We get an immediate cut to Naseem stitching up Paco's lip where he hit him. Naseem then offers Paco cake and Paco angrily refuses.

Naseem is then found sitting on a curb eating the cake with his hands by himself in sadness. His eyes are shown building up water and eventually he begins shedding some tears as an Arab cover of "I Will Survive" plays in the background. The lyrics of the song tell the story of a woman who is telling her ex that she will be fine and survive without him. This can be applied to Naseem and what is going on inside his head. He knows that he cannot continue the relationship with Paco now because it is going beyond his established rules of homosexuality as nothing more than the act itself, with no emotional attachment or even any real

acknowledgement that the act occurred. Kissing is taking this too far for Naseem because it implies an emotional attachment. In Naseem's mind he is telling himself that he will be fine and survive without Paco, or even Yassir, but this is just the presumable internal monologue in his head. He is still overcome with emotion and conflict with his desires here. This is why he is seen crying. He is unable to come to terms with his homosexuality to the point in which he can pursue a relationship with Paco because it goes against the rules he established for himself in accordance with his identity as a Muslim man. He cannot completely repress his desires like Yassir, nor can he fully commit with Paco. He is stuck in the middle. Although Naseem's arc here is a lot more complicated than Ramy's with the addition of homosexuality, it is comparable as Ramy too struggles a lot with balancing his Muslim identity and his sexual desires.

In conclusion, Ramy's biggest vice is his sexuality. He puts pressure on himself to be a good Muslim, but he often fails and finds himself lost to his sexual impulses, going after prostitutes and watching obscene amounts of pornography. He is driven by his desires and hates himself for it. He wants to be closer to Islam and become a more devout Muslim. But like anything in life, it is not easy. Dena had even more pressure on her than Ramy as her father warned her as a child how there is no greater sin than zina and she will become unmarriable; a speech he likely never gave to Ramy (S01E06). Additionally, we learn of the different ways that Maysa and Farouk parent their children, policing Dena much more strictly than they do with Ramy, illustrating a disparity between how men and women are viewed in some Muslim households. However, Naseem's struggle makes Ramy and Dena's struggles seem so trivial in comparison as he is a deeply closeted homosexual and does not allow himself to embrace these desires in any conventional way. He only allows himself to discreetly have sex with men in the sauna of his gym but does so in a way in which he avoids any emotional attachment.

A wide range of Muslims are represented here with their nuanced approaches to their sexuality. This representation is not monolithic, nor does it try to take the experiences of one Muslim and try to apply it to all in the world of sexuality. The audience is shown a range of very different approaches in which Muslims negotiate their Muslim identity and sexual identity. In contrast, Sutkutė (2020:35) found that in the film "Submission," not only did it represent Muslim women monolithically as oppressed, but it tried to generalize the experience of the Muslim women represented in that film to all Muslim women. "Ramy" does an excellent job at representing nuanced female characters with such specificity that it is impossible to draw generalizations. Nour represents a character who is very sexually active, and Fatima represents a hijab-wearing character who has engaged in zina once. Dena's arc shows her, at first, fearing to lose her virginity, then trying to lose her virginity and failing while feeling incredibly guilty about it, and lastly, going so far as to take Tarek's virginity in what, at the time, was nothing more than a one-night stand to her.

Additionally, Morey and Yaqin (2011:121-122) discuss how in the film "Yasmin," the main character keeps her White boyfriend a secret from her husband and is ready to divorce him, freeing herself of his stereotypically oppressive Islamic ways, thus, creating a binary between her Islamic and British identities. At no point in "Ramy" is Islam represented in a manner in which one must choose between such a rigid binary. Rather, tensions between one's American and Muslim identities are examined to provide a commentary on how Muslims struggle to balance their faith with cultural norms rather than how Muslims are somehow forced to choose one identity or the other. The dichotomy between American cultural norms versus Islamic norms is depicted as not so rigid, as various characters engage with these norms in a variety of ways.

Concealing Muslim Identity and Assimilation

There are multiple moments in the series in which Muslim characters conceal their Muslim identity, either out of fear of alienation, or just wanting to be accepted, aiming to achieve the path of least resistance when faced with potentially awkward situations in contemporary New Jersey.

For example, the characters are shown concealing religious practices (such as how doing drugs or drinking alcohol for the purpose of intoxication is not permissible in Islam) in order to be accepted by friends or colleagues who may potentially judge them for their beliefs. While some characters simply pretend to drink when around non-Muslims, other characters compromise their beliefs to assimilate.

In S01E01, Chloe asks Ramy how he can be a religious Muslim when he drinks, but Ramy admits that he has only made it appear that he drinks by buying a round of drinks for his friends at the bar while he discreetly drinks Coke. He has been fooling Chloe into believing that he is not a religious Muslim. When confronted about why he felt the need to conceal this, Ramy tells her that he has had experiences with women who are not open-minded to the idea of him being Muslim. This scene shows not only that Ramy goes to great lengths to keep his Muslim identity secret from his girlfriend, but that he has had this issue in the past. He elaborates on this point in S01E10, in which he tells Amani that he's dated women who "think it's crazy" that he believes in God. This suggests less of an issue with women who naively think Muslims are terrorists, and more of an issue regarding a disconnect between religious and secular individuals.

From Ramy's past experiences with women, he likely did not want to reveal his Muslim identity to Chloe out of fear that she would judge him or view him in a negative light. In

S01E03, Ramy is offered ecstasy during Sarah's party. Ramy responds by saying, "I'm all right. I'm just not feeling it tonight." Similar to how Ramy misled Chloe into thinking he is not a devout Muslim and drinks alcohol, he is concealing the fact that he is Muslim and that Muslims are not permitted to take drugs for the purpose of intoxication. Since he does not want to reveal his Muslim identity here, he plays it off like he is not in the mood to do ecstasy, rather than admitting that he is morally obligated to refrain from such things.

In S02E01, Ramy's family is having dinner at Farouk's boss's house. When Farouk's boss asks if he wants some whiskey, Maysa begins to explain that they do not drink alcohol since they are Muslim. Yet, Farouk cuts her off and accepts the drink before she could say anything, presumably, out of fear that his boss may think of Muslims unfavorably due to the dominant discourse that misrepresents Muslims. After Farouk accepts the drink, a medium shot focused on Maysa is shown in which she is left speechless, awkwardly looking at Farouk and his boss. Ramy is shown in this frame too, out of focus, but frozen and starring at Farouk. The scene then cuts to a medium shot of Dena who is frozen with a similarly awkward and speechless expression. All three of Farouk's family members seem to freeze here, not knowing exactly what to say or do, but also, they are not getting visibly upset or making a scene. This is extremely uncomfortable for Farouk's family, but Farouk's boss's family seems not to notice anything at all, and Farouk's family are doing their best to keep it that way. This illustrates that, to some extent, Farouk's family is also assimilating by not questioning Farouk's obviously haram actions in front of his boss. Farouk drinks the shot of whiskey in one quick gulp without hesitation in a medium shot. The lack of hesitation here implies that he has done this before. Then, the scene cuts to Maysa looking at Farouk and subtly pulling back in discomfort while staring in disbelief.

Next, there is a cut to Ramy looking down visibly upset and asking to use the bathroom - wanting to escape from the feeling of discomfort caused by Farouk's un-Islamic actions.

This illustrates the high pressures that some Muslims feel to assimilate into Western culture, throwing fundamental religious beliefs out the window in order to not be looked down at. Kazemipur (2014:88) outlines how the widespread media coverage that misrepresents Muslims plays a significant role influencing the relationships amongst Muslims and non-Muslims. While Farouk feels comfortable being his Muslim self around his family, he turns into a completely different person in his professional life in order to be accepted and not have any issues that may arise due to his Muslim identity and non-Muslims misunderstanding of what Islam stands for.

Additionally, we learn in S02E08, that Farouk uses the name "Frank" professionally, taking on a more Americanized identity to fit in at work. Thus, the character of Farouk has so deeply repressed his Muslim identity in his professional life that he has literally taken on another identity and compromises his faith in the process. Understanding that Farouk was very hurt by how his neighbours were shunning him in the aftermath of 9/11 (in S01E04) reinforces the point that Muslims who are exposed to negative representations of Islam in the media are less likely to reach out for acceptance regarding their Muslim identities (Saleem and Ramasubramanian 2019:385). As a result, Farouk completely buries his Muslim identity in his professional life.

Furthermore, the series shows Muslim characters hiding basic Islamic practices such as engaging in prayer, so as to not reveal they are Muslim to potentially hateful groups of people. In S01E02, as Ramy is assisting Steve in the bathroom, he is about to pray quickly while still in the bathroom, out of the sight of the rest of his co-workers. Ramy carefully lifts Steve off the toilet and back into his wheelchair in a medium shot that follows him in a handheld motion. Gianetti

and Leach (2005:162) explain that handheld shots are often used as point-of-view shots due to their noticeable jumpy motions. This seems to follow a third-person point of view of Ramy as the camera jerks awkwardly as Ramy awkwardly lifts Steve, complaining that he is heavier than he looks. The shot also shows graffiti all over the walls of the bathroom, further implying that this is not a pure and clean place to be praying. In this same shot, Ramy tells Steve that he is going to wash up and pray quickly. The scene cuts to medium shot of Steve sitting in his wheelchair while Ramy is next to him washing his hands. Steve says, "Dude, I have to take a shit. You don't have to pray." Next, there is a closeup on Ramy's face illuminated by the daylight from the window as he washes his hands. The illumination on Ramy's face here suggests that as Ramy is washing his hands, he is purifying himself, and about to make wudu so he can pray. Steve continues in this shot, "And you know that we have a meeting." Ramy frustratingly rinses his hands and shakes his head while hearing people at his workplace gathering. In a medium shot, Ramy looks outside of the bathroom and notices that the meeting is starting and says to Steve, "Okay, all right, fuck it, let's just go. You good?" This illustrates how Ramy is giving up with his attempt to pray at this time since it is too inconvenient, but also shows his care for Steve, even when Steve is verbally disrespecting Ramy's beliefs. Overall, the scene frames Muslims as patient and kind even in the face of adversity and disrespect.

The fact that Ramy was about to pray in the bathroom illustrates the hesitation that some Muslims have in practicing their religion in the eyes of the public. This complements Ramy's character arc at this point, as we just learned in S01E01 that he went to great lengths to blend in with friends, covertly drinking Coke while everyone else is drinking alcohol, concealing his Muslim identity. Also, the fact that Ramy eventually decides against praying, as he did not want to miss the meeting, implies that he has not talked to his boss about his prayer schedule. It is easy

to identify his needs to be excused from work for just a minute or two to pray a few times during the workday. The loss in productivity is negligible and would be the same for a bathroom break or getting some coffee. Since Ramy rushes to the meeting without praying, it is concluded that he is concealing his Muslim identity out of fear of alienating himself. Indeed, it is a legitimate gamble for Muslims to express their identity and practices, depending on the type of person one interacts with. Ramy, as a closeted Muslim in front of people who may not be open-minded, reflects the hesitance and fear Muslims may have to express themselves when they do not know what other people around them think about Muslims in light of dominant discourses.

Sekerka and Yacobian (2018:820) outline the harm of anti-Muslimism in the workplace. They propose that both employees and employers need to openly communicate about religious accommodations as discrimination can easily occur (even if it is not intentional), in which religious practices are not respected. Ramy feeling the need to hide in the bathroom in order to pray compromises the quality of his prayer, since Muslims are encouraged to pray in clean environments, not public bathrooms. With a more open dialogue between employees and employers, in which Muslims are encouraged to openly discuss their practices without the fear of backlash, a more positive work environment would result. Here, the issues of workplace structure leading to discrimination is an example of critical race theory's assertion that racism is embedded within social structures, leading to a system that privileges White people and burdens those who fall outside the dominant group (Bakali 2016:19). While Ramy is burdened to conceal his prayer from his coworkers and managers, it is implied that a younger Farouk's burden was so severe when he came to America that he decided to fully assimilate into the persona of "Frank," in order to try to capitalize on the privilege of working as a fully assimilated American while denying his Muslim identity completely.

Further, characters are shown hiding their ethnic background to deny their religious origins, while over-emphasizing their American identities in public. In S01E04, the flashback to Ramy's childhood, at the time of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, one of his school friends asks if he is a terrorist. Ramy tries to re-negotiate his Egyptian heritage by claiming that Egypt is in Africa, and he is more Black than Arab. Ramy is trying really hard here to represent himself as a Black-American. The word "Muslim" does not come up in his friend group, but if his denial of his ethnicity is anything to go on, it can be assumed that he would deny he is Muslim here as well, out of fear of being associated with terrorism in this very anti-Muslim context. Also in this episode, in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Farouk, tries to make his family seem more American by displaying an American flag in his front yard. While doing so, he tries to greet his neighbour, but he is ignored. This illustrates the alienation that Muslims face, especially during this time.

In S03E10, Ramy's parents, Farouk and Maysa, are in the process of selling their house. Their real estate agent removes Islamic décor from their walls and claims that this will help the house sell since it now has fewer "ethnic vibes." This is a form of concealment of Muslim identity enacted by someone who is not Muslim and imposed on those who are. Is it really the case that the house would sell better when removing the "ethnic" décor? More likely, the real estate agent is sanitizing the house of any hints of Islam in order to not upset potential buyers who may have negative inclinations toward Islam, as perpetuated by the dominant discourse. The real estate agent here hides behind the word "ethnic" to avoid admitting what she truly wants to conceal.

In conclusion, this section outlines instances in which Muslims may feel pressures in the West to fit in and assimilate. The series does an excellent job at capturing that feeling of

uncertainty and fear that Muslims may have when contemplating to what extent they can openly practice Islam in the eyes of non-Muslims. Assimilation is certainly not a major plot point, as the narrative is more often focused on Ramy's quest to be a better Muslim. However, the examples discussed here still provide useful insight on the pressure Muslims may feel to fit in with the West in the wake of all the hatred toward Muslims and Islam. While Ramy is first shown to conceal his Muslim identity in the workplace, later when he is working in his uncle's diamond store, he uses the Islamic word "InshAllah" to sell an engagement ring by telling the customer that God has predetermined our destinies (S03E01). Since Ramy is working in his Muslim uncle's diamond store, he likely feels more comfortable expressing Islamic teachings (even to non-Muslim customers) than he ever did at his old job with non-Muslim managers and co-workers. Meanwhile, Farouk completely assimilates into the identity of "Frank," when at work in order to avoid any potential tensions that may arise as a result of him being Muslim. Thus, even within the same Egyptian-American Muslim family, there is a tremendous difference in the way Muslims express themselves. Kazemipur (2014:84) states that there is significant variation amongst Muslims in reference to how they practice Islam. This variation is not limited to diverging sects and schools of thought. Variation in practice and expression exists even within Muslims of the same sects and families.

Using Loopholes to Negotiate Competing Identities

In the following section, I discuss how various Muslim characters within the series try to use loopholes to justify certain aspects of un-Islamic behaviour as an attempt to smooth over the tensions of their competing identities. While American and Muslim identities are not exclusive, there are certainly American norms that make it difficult for Muslims to stay true to their faith.

In S02E10, Ramy tries to use the Islamic ruling on multiple wives to his advantage without understanding its origin and purpose. The intention of polygamy was for men to support widows and orphans, and while it is permissible in Islam, it is not recommended since it is not an easy task to treat all wives equally (Anon 2021). Certainly, the intention of polygamy in Islam, then, is not for the primary purpose of pleasure. Ramy here is deciding which parts of Islam work for him in order to justify his actions, without fully understanding them. When trying to justify his desire for a polygamous marriage to Zainab he condescends to the idea of monogamy. He refers to monogamy as "hallmark shit," and an idea that "Westerners" have. The only reason Ramy is proposing the idea of a polygamous marriage here, on his wedding night with Zainab, is because he wants to justify his affair with Amani from the previous night. He is using polygamy as a loophole to obscure and excuse the fact that he cheated on his fiancé. Ramy is hiding his behaviour behind Islamic teachings and condescends to the idea of "West shit", yet he has for so long enjoyed all the freedoms of the West and ignored parts of Islam. As a result, he is not fully Muslim and is not fully Westernized. He's a hybrid who is trying to find the best of both worlds to fulfill his selfish desires.

Additional commentary is given on polygamy in Islam in S03E07. In this episode, Ahmed is not considering polygamy for pleasure, rather, he only considers it because he wants to have a child, something his current wife Yasmina does not want. Ahmed meets Hakeem, a Muslim man with four wives, to get some advice. Hakeem tells him that each wife must be treated equally. This is illustrated by Hakeem's four town houses for each wife, all the exact same. This notion of equality and only committing to a polygamous marriage for the right reason is lost on Ramy.

In S01E03, Mo is shown drinking at Sarah's party. He hides behind the excuse that only grape wine and date wine are explicitly forbidden in Islam. This is a very weak excuse, as Muslim scholars argue that any substance that is used for the sole purpose of intoxication is forbidden in Islam (Uddin n.d.). Mo also uses another loophole to sin in S02E07 where he feels free to visit a strip club in Atlantic City, since he is going to attend a virtual Umrah via a VR headset shortly after. He seems to believe that because he will participate in virtual Umrah, this is a good opportunity for him to sin. He states, "all my sins are gonna be wiped clean within six hours so I gotta get in some shit right now." The point of repentance is to make up for one's mistakes. But Mo reverses this understanding and is using Umrah as an excuse to sin. Mo parties at the strip club as if it is second nature to him. He drinks alcohol and throws money at strippers. Mo performing virtual Umrah after this shows the complexity of this character's approach to Islam. Much like how we saw Ramy acting in season one, Mo is easily persuaded to sin, but then justifies his sins by doing something Islamic to make up for it. But the idea that he feels compelled to get his sins out of the way means that he has been influenced by the West and its normalization of alcohol and strip clubs, thus, creating a competing identity that is leading Mo away from Islam. Another smaller loophole is exhibited in S03E07, in which Mo justifies doing travellers prayers (half the length of the full prayer) when he travelled from New York to New Jersey, a 20-minute drive. When confronted about it, he claims that it is up to interpretation, a similar line this character used to justify drinking alcohol.

In S01E01, Nour proposes that she and Ramy to have a temporary marriage, performed by her cousin on the phone, so that they can have sex. Ramy does not like the idea using this loophole as he expresses that he is not interested in trying to "trick God." This notion is interesting here as it summarizes how illogical most of these loopholes are. In most cases, these

characters are aware of what is right and what is wrong according to Islam. Loopholes are used, not as a means to literally avoid sins on technicalities. Rather, characters utilize loopholes in order to try to feel less guilty about doing things that they know they should not be doing. The fact that Nour has a cousin ready to call in order to perform a temporary marriage for the purpose of having sex suggests that she has done this before and relies on this loophole to absolve her of guilt. While Ramy disagrees with this tactic, Nour is actually a good female counterpart to Ramy. Both were born and raised in New Jersey with immigrant Egyptian-Muslim parents. Both engage in zina but then try to do things to make their sins right somehow. The difference is Ramy judges Nour as a Muslim woman who is sexually active as he wants to marry a virgin even though he, himself, is not a virgin, exposing and forcing him to confront his own hypocrisy, which he does in a monologue at the end of the episode.

Ahmed, who for most of his screen presence is the most pious of Ramy's friends, gambles by proxy in S02E07. He puts his money in a slot machine and asks a stranger at the casino to pull the lever. The slot machine hits a jackpot and Ahmed tells the stranger to keep the money. While Ahmed is not gambling in the traditional sense, he is still contributing his money but he justifies it with the loophole of not taking the payout. Just because he does not take the payout does not mean that he did not participate, at least in some form, in the sin of gambling. Ahmed is haunted by the realization that he could be rich if gambling was permissible in Islam as he (later in the episode) watches World Series Poker on television with envy, proclaiming that he could have been one of the greatest poker players. Ahmed is shown to be conflicted by his apparent talent for gambling, one in which he can do nothing about since he knows it is forbidden in Islam. Asking a stranger to pull the lever for a slot machine is a much less extreme

loophole than we have seen other characters utilize within the series. Nonetheless, it is a sin by proxy, and he attempts to conceal the sin by hiding behind a stranger who takes the jackpot.

In S03E10, Maysa and Farouk are selling their house to downsize due to the recent financial difficulties they have been facing. As they are cleaning up, they find their nephew's magic mushrooms. They take the mushrooms together, presumably to escape their depressing lives for a moment. While they are high, they talk about how they used to feed the kids hotdogs, not realizing that they are made from pork. Farouk tells Maysa not to worry about it since hotdogs are just a mashup of "unidentified" pieces of meat. He then states that halal food is not the standard in America, and they are permitted some allowances. He hides behind the excuse that they are visitors in America. Maysa argues that they have been in America for 35 years. However, the two of them, while still high, go to a convenience store to buy some hotdogs. Just like those with food allergies, Muslims can easily inquire with the chef or read the ingredient labels of their food to determine whether it contains pork, so the excuse that hotdogs are a mashup of unspecified meat is not a strong one. Additionally, they are not visitors in America anymore as Maysa alludes to, so any argument for allowances while visiting foreign territory would not hold either. The only reasonable excuse here is that of ignorance, in that they were unaware that hotdogs were made from pork when they were relatively new to America. Nonetheless, they understand there is a good chance that hotdogs contain pork, and still buy and consume hotdogs. Their exceptions are not strong and Maysa even seems to disagree, however, their ability to think clearly has been compromised with their intoxicated state and they are more easily able to believe the lies they tell themselves about the rulings on certain Islamic practices.

In conclusion, the series illustrates ways in which Muslim characters are constantly struggling and attempting to negotiate their Muslim and Western identities in which there is

overlap, as the two are not binary. Characters are often shown justifying sinful behaviour by doing mental gymnastics to support their loophole-mentality toward Islamic practices. These exceptions are often illustrated with quick and simple statements that are not further explored. This is because the justifications that these characters hide behind in order to sin are weak, and the characters who are utilizing these loopholes are aware of that and do not want to admit that they are sinning. This provides commentary for Muslims in the West who struggle to balance their faith with their Western-influenced desires. This further sheds light on the various ways that Muslims practice Islam. Kazemipur (2014:84) addresses the various kinds of relationships Muslims have to Islam as this relationship is certainly not the same for everyone. In the show, each character has their own unique interpretation regarding how to deal with an issue that they face when negotiating their American and Muslim identities. While Mo is shown to have issues refraining from alcohol, Ahmed has no inclination or desire to drink alcohol and often finds himself at parties only to supervise and look after his friends. Because of this variation in characters' relationships to American cultural norms, the series does not reductively make a statement about what American culture is, nor does it reductively make a statement about what it means to be Muslim. Rather, it encompasses variation in these often competing but overlapping identities, in which some characters struggle more than others to balance their faith and their cultural desires.

Challenging the Dominant Discourse

Throughout the series, there are several competing discourses at play in reference to representations of Muslims and Islam. Each episode within the series consistently challenges dominant discourses of Muslims as violent and oppressive by providing us with alternatives.

Using narrative analysis, the hierarchy of discourses reveals which character's voices are elevated over others in order to understand whose voice is more prominently used to serve the narrative and derive meaning (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2016:245). Predominantly, the voices used within the series promote Muslims as nuanced individuals and not as a homogenous group to be generalized. The only times in which the mainstream discourse is illustrated is when the show aims to make a statement about how Muslims are viewed in today's very anti-Muslim environment, and the consequences that Muslims are made to deal with as a result. To illustrate this point, I discuss how the series deals with stereotypes and often uses humour to both dismantle harmful representations of Islam and educate the audience simultaneously. Additionally, I conduct a character analysis that illustrates how the series rejects simplistic and reductive representations of Muslims by featuring multi-faceted Muslim characters as humanized with a focus on their imperfections.

Stereotypes and the Use of Humour

Throughout the series, there are instances that, in a vacuum, could be considered racist. Yet, when examining the narrative for context, these "racist" instances serve anti-racist messaging. Additionally, there are other instances of racism or the misrepresentation of Muslims within the series are tackled with the use of humour. Humour is as an excellent tool used in order to dismantle and reframe misrepresentations of Islam. Bignell (2012:133) states that comedy in television is reliant on the inclination on the part of the audience to immerse itself within the characters and witness the comedic illustration and negotiation of social norms, but the understanding of what is comedic can vary broadly depending on one's social and cultural understandings, which is largely rooted in age, gender, ethnicity, and nation. Inevitably, there is some bias in this section regarding what I find funny. However, I focus on how the use of

humour is used as an educational tool. Bignell (2012:133-134) states that because comedy is so subjective, the majority of research looks at comedy psychoanalytically. For example, Ogba (2021:103) finds that since humour is correlated with positive social change, it is an effective teaching tool in the media.

The series addresses widely circulated stereotypes and misconceptions about Islam that have for a long time been prevalent, such as the notion that Islam promotes gendered discrimination, and that Islam encourages violence; these misconceptions have been prevalent since the seventh century when Islam started to be noticed and looked at as a threat by the Church in Western Europe (Bakali 2016:11-13). Throughout the series, various negative Muslim stereotypes are rejected and addressed with complex character interactions that shed light on and expose the dominant discourse as one that represents a misunderstanding of Islam. For example, the series turn on its head the assumption that Muslim men are violent and seek to oppress women. In S01E02, the audience is exposed to two sides to the character of Ramy's Uncle Naseem. Naseem at first is shown to be homophobic and misogynistic as he spouts bigoted rants during an uncomfortable family dinner scene. However, later in the episode, Naseem puts himself in harm's way in order to protect a woman from an abusive man on the street. While he does this, the man calls Naseem a "sand nigger," an offensive way to describe an Arab/Muslim, reflecting a negative stereotype. The man calms down when Naseem pulls a gun on him and leaves with the woman peacefully. The image of Naseem holding a gun paired with the misogynistic beliefs we have seen this character articulate, in addition to him just being labelled a "sand nigger," all seems to affirm negative stereotypes against Muslims, but these stereotypes are quickly subverted.

Ramy claims their efforts were pointless since the woman still had to go home with the man, and Naseem explains that it was still the right thing to do. Illustrating a different side to Naseem he then states, “we protect women not because we don’t trust women. We protect women because we don’t trust men.” This statement turns the dominant discourse on its head, suggesting that what is viewed as oppression, in Naseem’s mind, is protection. However, this notion of women requiring the protection of men (paternalism) promotes the subordination of women which ironically leads to gendered violence according to Bloom (2018:1963). Naseem believes that women need to be protected from dangerous men and that wearing a hijab and dressing modestly helps with this. He states that women in Muslim countries are made to wear hijabs while women in Western countries are pressured to dress like prostitutes, defending Muslim norms and exposing taken-for-granted Western norms. The function of women dressing modestly is to protect from dangerous men while the function of women dressing provocatively is for the sake of vanity and sex appeal. It is suggested here that by putting such an emphasis on the beautification of women in the West, women are being devalued by focusing on how they look over their character.

While the dominant discourse frames the hijab as a symbol of oppression and submission to patriarchal systems, many do not even consider asking hijab-wearing women their opinion as it is already assumed that these women are oppressed (Kazemipur 2014:85-86). It is implied in the series here that women wear hijabs to free themselves of judgements cast upon them regarding their looks. Naseem’s misogynistic rants are challenged with his actions. He cares deeply about the protection of women as he literally put his life in danger for a woman he did not even know. However, because his actions also align with paternalism, there is still a conflict here regarding his view of women. As we learn in S02E09, Naseem is a deeply closeted homosexual

and hides behind misogyny and toxic masculinity to keep that part of his identity a secret. Thus, he genuinely cares about the protection, respect, and the rights of women, as are emphasized in Islam, even if he may be going about it the wrong way. This scene illustrates how wrong it is to reduce Muslim women to nothing more than the idea of "oppressed." This is clearly the case in "Yasmin" in which the character, Yasmin, is illustrated as an oppressed Muslim woman in a miserably toxic marriage (Morey and Yaqin 2011:122). Rather than conforming to the dominant discourse, "Ramy" educates its audience on the practical applications of the hijab. The character of Naseem rejects the idea of violence and misogynism that is often attributed to Muslim men by taking on that identity and then subverting it.

In S01E04, for most of the episode, the dominant discourse is promoted that Muslims are linked to terrorism, however, this discourse is only used to provide insight on Muslims' perspectives during a very anti-Muslim time. This is not to imply that racism against Muslims began during 9/11, as racism against Muslims has a long history. However, since 9/11, more emphasis has been put on the stereotyping of Muslims and Arabs in the mainstream media (Sutkutė 2020:30). The episode takes place from young Ramy's perspective around September 11th, 2001. Ramy is just trying to fit in with his friends at school, but things take a turn after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Anti-Muslim news broadcasts are prevalent. Ramy's online chatroom quickly becomes filled with anti-Muslim comments. Ramy's friends no longer want to associate with him because they think he has some connection to terrorism. And Ramy's family is shown to be ignored by the community, as they were initially invited to a pool party, but later are told that it was cancelled, even though it was not. Yet, the audience also sees an alternative to the dominant discourse that focuses on Ramy and his confusion about his identity as a Muslim due to the news coverage he is exposed to and different treatment he is getting from his classmates.

He has a nightmare about Osama Bin Laden in which he almost starts to believe that they are the same, but eventually he confronts Bin Laden in his nightmare and tells him that he is nothing like him. He wakes up and realizes that he is just like everyone else in his school, he is not anything like Osama Bin Laden. Ramy then walks to school without his old friends, now wearing a backward baseball cap. This implies that he feels like a normal American boy and has decided to dress like one. By rejecting Osama Bin Laden in his dream, the narrative is rejecting the dominant discourse that frames Muslims as terrorists.

We also get alternatives to the idea of how Muslims and non-Muslims interact in ways that are not overtly hateful, but address the dominant discourse with levity. As Ramy walks to school alone, a young Steve rolls up in his wheelchair and says, “Hey terrorist, do you go to school this way?” Then Steve asks if it is okay for them to go to school together for the next few weeks since his wheelchair van is currently not working. Ramy happily agrees. On the surface, this could be interpreted as anti-Muslim with the way Steve refers to Ramy as a terrorist. But he does so in such a casual manner. Since he asks Ramy if he can head to school with him, this implies that the earlier remark was not made out of fear or hatred. Rather, Steve uses it to break the ice with him so that they can become friends. Since this is a flashback, we know that Steve and Ramy remain friends into their adulthood. This cements the close friendship between the two of them, and explains why Ramy casually has been seen helping him use the bathroom and feeding him in earlier episodes. They have been friends for a long time. While Steve, who is not Muslim, may not be completely uncontaminated from the media’s depiction of Islam in this very racist time, he certainly does not care enough to let it get in the way of him making friends.

In S01E08, when Ramy goes to visit Steve out of guilt for having his affair, Steve greets him with a similar “sup terrorist?” Ramy takes no offense to Steve here as this seems to be

Steve's way of connecting with Ramy. Ramy was grateful to Steve for treating him like a normal person during such a hateful time, recognizing that not all Muslims are terrorists. While it is stereotypical to just look at a Muslim and call him a terrorist, Steve clearly does not have a problem with Muslims, otherwise he would not hang out with them all the time. And tonally, he never calls Ramy a terrorist with venom, he only ever says it in a casual manner. Because the context of the narrative does not frame Steve as racist against Muslims, him calling Ramy a terrorist in such a casual and non-hostile manner is a way of subtly reinforcing the message that Muslims are not terrorists.

The notion of dismantling Muslim stereotypes within character interactions, handled with levity, is reinforced even among Muslim characters who have somewhat antagonistic relationships with each other. In S02E08, Ramy's family is meeting Zainab and her father, Sheikh Malik, for the purpose of arranging an engagement between Ramy and Zainab. Naseem makes offensive statements rooted in stereotypes to Malik and Zainab and makes the assumption that Malik, as a Black man, must have converted to Islam in prison. Malik responds with stereotypes about Arabs owning liquor stores, and Zainab tells Naseem that it is Arabs who are the ones bombing places. This is one instance in which the series literally makes a statement pairing Muslims and terrorism. While the characters themselves are fighting one another (with some levity) the message present in this narrative is to not make assumptions about people based on stereotypes. The point of Zainab responding in this manner to Naseem was to flip the stereotype back on himself, as an Arab man, to understand the harm of stereotypes. This is evident by Malik saying, "We all battle our own stereotypes." This notion implies that these stereotypes are individually formed and neglects the fact that the dominant discourse has circulated them. Stereotypes are not "our own." In accordance with an underlying concept in

critical race theory, the highly perpetuated stereotypes against Muslims are entrenched in society through powerful institutions like the media (Bakali 2016:19). Thus, the stereotypes (circulated by the dominant discourse) that these characters are accusing one another of holding, have been cemented in their own minds to a certain extent. This lends itself to the idea of Marx's "false consciousness" in which the dominant group's ideologies are normalized by the subordinate group (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2016:161).

There are also moments in the series in which more extreme antagonistic relationships between Muslim and non-Muslim characters are present, yet they serve to illustrate the subversion of Muslim stereotypes, even in the burning presence of anti-Muslim discourse. In S02E02, the audience gets an interesting perspective on how the Muslims in the Sufi Center handle protesters outside of their building that have hateful signs condemning Islam. The idea is promoted that we should be kind, even to those who antagonize us. Sheikh Malik and Ramy bring the protesters hot chocolate since they are standing out in the cold. The protesters represent the view of the dominant discourse in which all Muslims are viewed as violent terrorists. Malik and Ramy serve them hot chocolate as a gesture of peace. The fact that they drink the hot chocolate proves that they cannot fear Muslims, as the notion of "Islamophobia" would suggest. If they genuinely feared Muslims, they would not drink the hot chocolate, fearing it is poison. But they do drink it, which establishes that their protest is one fueled by hate, not fear. They hate that Muslims "took over" their church, without realizing that the reason the Sufi Center replaced it because the church's lease expired. The audience is also shown in this episode an example of how generous and kind Muslims are when a homeless army veteran, Dennis, is offered food and a job to help get his life back together. He is so impressed by the generosity and kindness he received from Muslims that he decides to convert to Islam.

Another interesting perspective arises in this episode when Dennis, out of a blind rage of hearing the protestors chanting against Islam outside of the Sufi Center during their group prayer, leaves the prayer, and violently attacks one of the protestors. Dennis is represented here as a "violent Muslim," which on a base level adheres to the dominant discourse that associates Islam with terror and violence. However, this character is much more complicated than that. His violence is not a result of being radicalized by Islam, as he literally just took the Shahadah moments earlier. Rather, he is being violent because of his PTSD, given his history serving for the American army in Iraq and his traumatic memories tied to the call to prayer. Ramy went out of his way to conceal Dennis's history from Sheikh Malik so that he would hire him, but doing so caused the issue of Dennis's PTSD to go ignored and he was unable to get the help he needed. The violence is present in his attack, but more time is spent on the scene capturing the regret Dennis experiences. He might have justified the attack in some way in his mind as protecting his fellow Muslims, but when he sees Ramy and Malik come out to stop him, looking at his victim with deep concern, Dennis realizes he was wrong and is filled with regret. This scene inevitably associates violence with Islam, but it does so in a way in which several other factors are present, and events conspired in such a way that Dennis was in the wrong place at the wrong time in order to present a new interesting dynamic to the next episode, the media coverage of the event.

S02E03 begins with a news report that uses words such as "gruesome attack" to describe the incident. The graphics on the screen of the news report reads "Breaking News | Protestor Beaten by Muslim Convert | New Islamic Center Took Place of NJ Church." These graphics are "classic" examples of the way Muslims are misrepresented in the media. The flashy titles scream anti-Muslim propaganda. Additionally, misinformation is all over the screen here. The first title indicates that the new Muslim convert was radicalized for violence. The subtitle also distorts the

reality of what happened with the Sufi Center, as it is implying that the Center took over the church when really just the church's lease agreement expired and the Sufi Center kept the building from being taken down. In the report, there is no question or contemplation of why Dennis was being violent in the first place. His violence goes unquestioned in the framing of the report as it is understood that Muslims are violent according to the dominant discourse. Similar framings of Muslim criminals are present in mainstream Western news media. The Daily Mirror framed the 2016 Orlando nightclub shooting as, "ISIS MANIAC KILLS 50 IN GAY CLUB," while the same news outlet framed the 2019 mass shooting in a New Zealand mosque as, "Angelic boy who grew into an evil far-right mass killer" (Lazreg 2019). The death toll of both offenses is comparable, and the severity of gun violence is comparable, but the major difference is that the Orlando killer is Muslim while the New Zealand killer is non-Muslim. This tendency of the media to inflate Muslim identity when covering a violent crime is illustrated in the news coverage of Dennis's assault. Thus, the dominant discourse that regards Muslims as violent is widely present here.

To be sure, Anti-Muslim discourse is grossly perpetuated in the media. Critical race theory scholar Freeman (1995:30) points to the way individuals evade responsibility for racism when they try to illustrate there is a good reason behind a racist action. One "good reason" is the false assumption that racist media reports are noble in their warnings to the public about Muslim extremism. This justification positions the viewer within the dominant group, with a warning to stay away from Muslims who are framed as the "enemy." By framing Muslims in this way, in tandem with critical race theory, racism against Muslims is embedded within society (Bakali 2016:19). Such racist stereotypes are widely circulated by the mainstream media, spewing hateful messages against Muslims in the service of "protecting" the dominant group from the

Muslim "enemy." This is made very clear with the framing of the two above similar crimes in which Muslim identity is inflated and somehow linked to the criminal act without any further investigation, while White identity is used to re-frame and rationalize how someone from such an "angelic" background could have committed such a crime.

Even though the dominant discourse is present in S02E03, the alternative discourse, that which recognizes that Muslims are distorted in the media, and they stand for peace, honesty, and love, is much more present in the overall messaging of this episode. Within this alternative discourse, Muslims are humanized, for example, Zainab, a Black-Muslim woman in a hijab speaks perfect English to the surprise of a character who likely hates Muslims; the brother of Dennis's victim. The stereotypes against Muslims are widely present in this episode but they are rejected by the Muslim characters, as is shown in their actions. Muslims from the Sufi Center gathered at the hospital of Dennis's victim to pray for him. They also brought the victim's family some food. While the Muslims in the Sufi Center are not the ones responsible for the incident, they still feel a tremendous amount of compassion for the victim regardless of his position against Islam. Thus, the narrative promotes Islam as peaceful even in the eye of its opponents.

Contrary to the more antagonistic relationships of Muslims versus non-Muslims above, the audience sees examples of less hostile interactions with Muslims and their opposition with an emphasis on the Muslim perspective, allowing us to gain insight as to how the main characters feel about anti-Muslim rhetoric. In S01E05, someone vandalizes Mo's halal diner and writes "ISIS FAGS." Mo reacts to this graffiti with happiness that his halal diner is filled with business thanks to both the intersection of the publicity from the graffiti and Ramadan. This serves as an interesting alternative to what may have been framed as a more serious and dramatized incident, in which Muslim characters may be presented more as victims. Mo's reaction here takes power

back, as he is thrilled to be profiting from this hate crime. Additionally, the dominant discourse is upheld with graffiti that reads “ISIS FAGS.” This is a bigoted representation that lumps all Muslims into the terrorist organization “ISIS.” However, the main characters do not become angry at this vandalism. In this manner, the dominant discourse is rejected by simply having characters ignore the act of racism. But the fact that they are so easily able to ignore it implies that racism against Muslims is a normalized part of their lives. Critical race theory exposes instances in which racism is considered “normal” (Bakali 2016:19). With the characters featured in this scene, the series is making a statement here that racism against Muslims is so normalized that Muslims are almost numb to seeing hateful anti-Muslim messages like this. But it also does not try to homogenize all Muslims to adopt that same exact mentality since Mo’s Diner was filled with business that night, as the implication from this is that other Muslims responded to the hate crime empathetically by standing in solidarity with the restaurant and giving it business.

Humour is used to rework and resist dominant narratives in a multitude of ways, drawing attention to the ways in which Muslims are often stereotyped, even in seemingly innocent manners. For example, in S01E01, Ramy expresses how some liberal news stations covered Trump’s Muslim ban as a “terrible day for all Muslims,” but he proclaims that he personally had a great day that day. Nour expresses that the ban prevented her uncle from coming to stay with her family and it saved her from losing her room. In this scene, both characters are using humour to evade playing the victim. This illustrates that Muslims are all individuals and not just a blanket group to generalize against. It also implies that Muslims are strong and do not need to be spoken for. Using humour to provide an alternate scenario to capture how some Muslims feel in response to the Muslim ban illustrates that even statements that are not rooted in negativity are harmful because they homogenize all Muslims as one in the same. Just as critical race theorist

Williams (1995:195) notes that humanization of minorities is more likely to occur in the media when presented by people of that specific racialized group, it should be understood that Muslims have their own individual voices. Speaking on behalf of all Muslims feeds into the dominant discourse that has generalized against Muslims in the first place.

The dominant discourse on Muslims is sometimes addressed blatantly. Doing so with humour is an inviting way to educate the audience on how Muslims are not synonymous to terrorists. For example, S02E01 uses humour to provide an alternative to the idea of a "radical" Muslim. A Muslim convert named Michael is telling Ramy about this new Sheikh and when boasting about him to Ramy about how great he is, he uses the term "radical." There is an awkward pause and then Michael corrects himself that he means radical in a cool way and not to indicate that the Sheikh is literally a radical Muslim terrorist. The reason he made this clarification, aside from the brilliant comedic timing, is because of the dominant discourse that exists in which Muslims are represented as terrorists. The alternative discourse is present here as both Michael and Ramy were 100% on the same page in understanding what Michael initially meant when referring to the Sheikh as "radical."

Another inviting and humourous way to educate the viewer is present in S02E02, in which we get an example of how some Muslims feel about the mispronunciation of the word "Muslim." When Ramy is generously treating Dennis to a meal at Mo's diner, Ramy and Mo express frustration with how non-Muslims pronounce the word "Muslim" with a "Z" instead of an "S", changing the pronunciation from "Muss-lim" to "Muz-lim." They express how easy it is to pronounce it correctly by comedically expressing it has a soft "S" like the word "pussy." The mispronunciation has been widely circulated amongst non-Muslims and when this occurs in anti-Muslim verbal discourse, people are not only misrepresenting the religion, but the word for the

followers of the religion as well. It is not a difficult word to pronounce correctly and conforms completely with the conventions of English in its pronunciation. Using humour to educate the audience on how to pronounce this word by using a word like “pussy” to demonstrate the verbal mechanism of the “S” in “Muslim” simultaneously educates and entertains the viewer in a hilariously inappropriate way.

In conclusion, just because a scene is tackling an issue of racism, that does not make the messaging of the narrative racist. Rather, it is used to provide room for discussion. Additionally, humour is used as a tool to discuss serious issues in a manner in which the narrative is not lecturing or having an antagonistic relationship to its non-Muslim audience. Mo and Ramy could have been more upset, and the scene could have played out more dramatically when correcting Dennis on his pronunciation of the word “Muslim” in S02E02, but by educating Dennis in a humourous way, the audience is more easily able to understand and internalize the message without feeling antagonized.

The Humanization of Muslim Characters

The character of Ramy Hassan is a deeply flawed individual. He has sex with a married woman during Ramadan (S01E05). Feeling bad for his friend with muscular dystrophy, Steve, he aides him in meeting an underage girl and inadvertently supplies alcohol to her (S01E08). He cheats on his fiancée the night before their wedding with his cousin, Amani (S02E10). He persuades the Sufi Center to hire Dennis without notifying them about his violent history which leads to the beating and eventual death of a protestor outside the Center (S02E02). After being given a gun by his Uncle Naseem (for protection at his job in the diamond district), he callously lets Farouk’s boss’s dad take it from him (S02E01). We learn in S02E08 that this leads to the death of Farouk’s boss’s dad, who commits suicide with that gun, and leads to Farouk getting fired due to

his boss's distress. Ramy stops praying after Zainab divorces him, decides to focus on his work, while his destructive habits are exacerbated, watching so much pornography that he suffers from erectile dysfunction (S03E01). He even pays to have sex with a prostitute, in order to distract himself from the emptiness of his life (S03E04).

The entire third season focuses on Ramy's distance from Islam. He is miserable for the majority of the season, which implies that he is miserable without Islam. He prioritizes his work at the expense of his relationship with his Uncle Naseem, as he enters his own business venture in the jewelry industry, competing with Naseem, while Naseem was the one to give him a job and introduce him to this business in the first place (S03E08). In S03E02, Ramy is asked to prove his faith will not get in the way when doing business with a Jewish woman. He is asked to draw a picture of Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon Him; an act that is forbidden in Islam. He is made extremely uncomfortable by this request and his hand trembles as he hesitantly reaches for the pen, but after a moment of silence the woman starts laughing, revealing that she was just joking, to which Ramy is relieved. Ramy is desperate to secure a deal with this woman as he is in dire need of money to pay his $100,000 divorce mehr to Zainab. It is unclear whether or not Ramy would have actually done the task had it not been a joke, but he definitely thought about it for a second. The message present here is one in which a Muslim character is conflicted about his faith but does not want to forsake and extinguish it completely. Additionally, Ramy explains in this episode that the term "Allahu Akbar" has been misused, likely referring to how people use it now as a war cry. He claims it is a beautiful expression, but it has been used in the wrong way. This implies that Ramy is still loyal to Islam and the practices of the religion, even if he, himself, is not fully practicing at this point. However, the extent to which he is practicing is up for debate. While he is not praying, he still is working to pay Zainab's mehr, which is an Islamic obligation.

In this context, Ramy fills the empty void inside him by having meaningless sex with a prostitute, an activity he admits that he does not even enjoy (S03E10).

In the final episode of the season, Ramy is incredibly stressed about his job when he loses an extremely expensive custom watch. This scene displays Ramy outside in the darkness leaving a voicemail for his business partner, which is really just a vehicle for Ramy to talk to the audience. The camera is focused on Ramy's profile in a medium shot that blurs out the background. It is not clear where he is, but he is somewhere outside at night by himself. In his distress, he realizes that his prostitute, Olivia, must have stolen the custom watch after distracting him by tackling him to the ground and kissing him. His fear and anguish over losing the watch and putting his job into jeopardy turn to joy as he realizes this was God's doing. He proclaims it is "maktoub;" an Islamic term for something being written or pre-determined. In a frenzy, he exclaims that he was not supposed to have this kind of money and immediately donates $50,000 through an app on his phone.

A closeup on his phone emanates brightness. He rushes to make wudu on a beach and prays more enthusiastically than he ever has before, literally yelling "Allahu Akbar!" Ramy is now shown in a wide shot against the Jersey Shore while the lights from the city reflect in the water. Gianetti & Leach (2005:76) explain the role of lighting, indicating that darkness is used to suggest evil while brightness is used to suggest virtue. Ramy was both literally and figuratively encased in darkness when he voices his distress over losing the expensive custom watch in his quest for success in the world of capitalism. However, the brightness of Ramy's phone as he makes a donation implies virtue. Additionally, Ramy passionately praying, while the water in the background of the shot is illuminated by the city lights, implies that Ramy is now in a more pious frame of mind. The scene is accompanied with solemn and hopeful music, which serves to

add to the emotion of Ramy finally returning to prayer, and resonates the feeling of virtue that is being illustrated in this scene. This scene also features "graphic editing" in which Ramy praying on the beach is interspersed with scenes of Ramy's parents praying with Dena and Tarek, implying a similarity between these characters at this time (O'Shaughnessy et al. 2016:229). Ramy is praying here because he is thankful to God for giving him clarity, and Ramy's parents are praying with Dena and Farouk because they are thankful that their daughter is getting married to a pious Muslim man.

Being robbed was the best thing that could have happened to Ramy. It allowed him to let go of his quest for money and success and finally return to Islam in a profoundly impactful way. He is now embracing Islam, praying not out of desire for something more, but out of gratitude for being given clarity on what he really cares about and being relieved of the burden of chasing money. Ramy was miserable and this is the first time we have seen him happy and at peace in all of season three. He prays passionately and the end credits of the episode appear over this wide shot as he just sits in peace after praying. He continues to perform additional sajdah as the credits roll. The narrative does not glorify Ramy's fall from Islam in any way. Instead, it shows Ramy as the most miserable he has ever been. Conversely, the happiest version of Ramy is depicted in the end here with his passionate return to prayer, thanking God that he now has the clarity to see what matters; not money, but his spirituality and morality anchored by Islam.

Ramy expresses that he believes losing the watch was God relieving him of his lust for capitalism. Islam is represented here to promote clarity and happiness. This is accomplished by illustrating a character at his lowest only to be elevated to his highest. This is what O'Shaughnessy et al. (2016:250) refers to as a closed/progress ending, in which a positive moral change is present in our main character. This change is evident not only in reference to season

three, but since Ramy's struggles with his conflicting identities are introduced in season one. From the very beginning he has been struggling to find clarity in his devotion to Islam, so much so that he took an impromptu trip to visit his grandfather in Egypt in order to help take him away from his desires and distractions in the West (S01E09). Never in the series has Ramy prayed with such passion as in the season three finale. This illustrates significant progress regarding his character arc in his quest for getting closer to God. Although Ramy could be in serious trouble after losing the expensive custom watch - not only losing his job but possibly being in serious debt because of this - he does not care in this moment. And regardless of the open-ended nature of this potential consequence, which may lead to another season, this still serves as a conclusive ending for the character in which Ramy has finally found clarity.

Ramy's flaws do not conform to stereotypical misrepresentations of Muslims in the media. Rather, they do not conform to any specific pattern of behaviour as he is a very nuanced character. The show does not make the mistake of showing us a flawed Ramy who then turns to Islam and becomes pious. Instead, Ramy is a practicing Muslim who makes mistakes. He turns to Islam to better himself and attempts to right his wrongs. But making a conscious decision to improve upon oneself is not as easy as that, and the show does not give Ramy an easy out. Rather, Ramy is humanized through his mistakes. He tries to better himself and he fails at bettering himself by going about it the wrong way. This is not a commentary on how Islam does not solve problems. Rather, it is a commentary on how embracing Islam and learning to be a good Muslim is not easy. Like with anything in life, failure is a part of growth.

Other Muslim characters within the series, while not nearly as developed as Ramy, are also often humanized through their imperfections. This point is illustrated in S03E05, where Tarek states that the world might be full of Muslims, but it is becoming empty of Islam. Muslims

are a large population now, but that does not mean that everyone in that population is a practicing Muslim that "properly" follows the teachings of Islam. This is illustrated later in the episode, when Dena is shown drinking at a bar with her friends after learning that her career as a lawyer is not what she thought it would be. Another example is present in S03E03 when Farouk sells Maysa's Limoges as he struggles for money. A distressed Maysa exclaims, "It's haram to touch your wife's money!" This illustrates the financial rights that women have over their husbands in Islam while also showing an example in which some men do not follow this. Later in S03E10, Maysa and Farouk take magic mushrooms and indulge in some hot dogs containing pork. While the characters of this family certainly do sin, they still are shown following the pillars Islam. For example, after Maysa and Farouk take shrooms and eat pork, Dena lets them know that her and Tarek want to get married. They are all happy by this news and the four of them pray together.

In S01E09, in his trip impromptu trip to Egypt, Ramy, in an attempt to escape the un-Islamic West, realizes that young adults in Egypt behave similarly to Americans. His cousin, Shadi, is not very religious at all, and he urges Ramy to come to his party rather than praying at the mosque. This subverts the assumption of Muslim-majority countries being completely different than Western countries. While Ramy consistently inquires about Mosques and prayer, Shadi almost gets annoyed by this. Shadi is shown taking cocaine at the party he pressured Ramy to attend.

In S03E01, a different version of Shadi is presented. Several years have passed since his season one appearance and he has now moved in with Ramy's family in New Jersey, living in their garage. He tells Ramy that he was confused about why he was so religious during that trip but now that he lives in America, he misses hearing the call to prayer, when back in Egypt, it

used to annoy him. After this scene, Shadi is shown praying Isha. Shadi did not pray when he was living in Egypt, rather he was partying and snorting cocaine. He claims in this episode that after tripping on magic mushrooms he realized that he missed God. He thought life in America would be great, but only after leaving a Muslim-majority country did he realize that he misses it. It is now too quiet for him when he does not hear the call to prayer at fixed times throughout the day. For Shadi, he had this idea of America when consuming pop culture movies and television shows, but when he immigrated to America, he realized how spiritually empty his life is without the presence of Islam.

A similar story of finding Islam is illustrated by a White-Muslim convert character, Michael, in S01E03. In that episode, Michael suggests that he was so immersed in the world of drugs and sex that he decided not to continue with it and found more clarity and meaning in his life when he came to Islam. With both of these examples, the notion of overindulgence is a catalyst for wanting to take one's life in a different direction. The experiences of these Muslim characters are examined here to provide context for their lives, humanizing them as people who make mistakes and lose themselves to their desires. Islam is represented here as a way to bring meaning back to life.

In conclusion, a range of different kinds of Muslim characters are presented within this series, none of whom are represented as terrorists, nor are they presented as perfect. While these extremes are present in mainstream media to either condemn Muslims or to praise Muslims, both instances are reductive and misrepresentative of the Muslim population. Much less stereotypical, is a representation in which Muslims are shown to make mistakes. The lead character, Ramy, made so many mistakes in the first two seasons that he actually stepped back from how religious he was in season three. In doing so, he at no point condemns Islam. Rather, he feels he is too

broken, and Islam can no longer fix him. Even in this less religious version of the character, he still stands up for Islam and defends it as a peaceful religion. After a season of misery, when he finally returns to Islam, he is at peace. There are several less-expansive Muslim character arcs throughout the series, and they too are humanized with an emphasis on imperfection, illustrating Muslims who commit various sins, such as drinking, doing drugs, committing zina, and eating pork. Regardless of the extent of one's sins throughout the series, these Muslim characters do not at any point completely abandon their relationship to Islam.

Limited Diversity in "Ramy"

Overall, the series does a great job in representing Muslims in very nuanced and unique ways. However, the diversity within the series is lacking. It fails to comprehensively represent female characters in meaningful ways, especially in regard to the wearing of the hijab as an aspect of Muslim identity. While there is some mention of this topic, issues impacting Muslim women take a backseat to the men represented within the series. Ethnic diversity is also limited within this series as majority of Muslim characters featured are Egyptian-American. Lastly, the series predominantly focuses on Sufi Muslims and does little to outline differences with and between other sects.

Many of the characters that are analyzed here are from the same family, sharing both ethnic and Islamic identity while residing in New Jersey. Ramy and Dena are American-born children of parents who immigrated from Egypt. While the audience does not know specifically Naseem's history of immigration, it can be assumed that he immigrated nearly the same time that Ramy's parent's Maysa (Naseem's sister) and Farouk immigrated to New Jersey, as he seems to

have established his own successful business as a diamond store owner within decades of his arrival. The fact that the main characters of this series are all from the same family - sharing ethnic and religious heritage from Egypt while residing within New Jersey - goes against the argument for a more widespread representation of Muslims. However, these characters are all dealing with their own unique struggles in very different ways, which illustrates that even Muslims who have so much in common with one another are still very distinct, as there is more at play here than just one's ethnicity. The differences between characters of even this subset are primarily rooted in gender, age, and sexual orientation. The audience does observe the perspective of several side characters with different cultural backgrounds such as Black-American Muslims, White-American Muslim converts, and non-American Egyptian Muslims. But since these side characters are not the focus of the series, their perspectives are limited.

For instance, Naseem makes the assumption that Sheikh Malik must have converted to Islam in prison just because he is Black (S02E08). Sheikh Malik responds to Naseem by trying to educate him in the harm of stereotypes, but the Black identity of his character is not further explored. We also see that Zainab, a Black-American female Muslim who wears the hijab, interacts with someone who is surprised that she speaks fluent English in S02E03. Zainab's master status here is her Muslim identity, as is indicated by her wearing of the hijab, to which someone assumes that she must be oppressed and not raised in America. However, her identity as a Black-American Muslim woman is not meaningfully explored, nor does the series fully explore her struggle as a hijab-wearing Muslim woman in America.

The audience gets some additional commentary on the wearing of the hijab from Dena in S02E05. Dena's car breaks down and she rides in a tow truck to get to the mechanic. The tow truck driver starts telling Dena that she should not be wearing her hijab as it is representative of

oppression. Additionally, he states that Dena is lucky to be living in America, getting to study law, whereas if she stayed "back home" she would have had a clitoridectomy by now. Dena breaks down and explains that she put on her hijab to pray and then just left it on because she is losing her hair. She gets out of the tow truck, yells at the driver to just drop her car off at the mechanic and then walks off upset as she fixes her hijab. Kazemipur (2014:86-87) states that Muslim women who wear hijabs are often attributed the master status of the oppressed Muslim woman, even in situations in which women work tirelessly to be seen as more than that in the professional world. Here, Dena mentions to the driver that she is studying law, but the driver cannot see her as anything more than an oppressed Muslim woman. In tandem with Kazemipur's (2014:86-87) finding, this scene is representative of the experience that many hijab-wearing Muslim women face when trying to be seen for who they are and certainly not how they dress. But again, this is just a snapshot insight in one particular scene of what it is like for women to wear hijabs in America. Because Muslim women are not the focus of this series, issues affecting them are not fully explored. Primarily, the narrative unfolds through Ramy's perspective, a young Muslim man struggling to battle his pornography and sex addiction in an effort to be a devout Muslim.

There is a wide variety of sects with branching schools of thought in Islam. "Ramy" primarily focuses on Sufi Muslims and there is no mention of other sects of Islam. However, there are implications of other sects of Islam present in the series. After Ramy takes the bay'ah, Ahmed tells Ramy that he knew someone in medical school who took the bay'ah and went deep down the Sufi path, to which he completely changed his life and quit medical school as a result (S02E02). This implies that Ahmed belongs to a different sect, likely Sunni, as is evident in the manner in which he prays. Additionally, Mo and Ahmed join Ramy for Friday prayer in the Sufi

Center and are surprised to see that there is no border separating men and women; instead, the women stand on one side of the room while the men stand on the other with a gap in between them (S02E02). This implies that both Ahmed and Mo are not Sufi, however, it also suggests that the rigidity in different sects of Islam are not so cut and dry in that non-Sufi Muslims are still welcome to pray in the Sufi Center, just as Ramy has been seen praying in the mosque.

Because the series focuses primarily on the perspective of Ramy, the audience's understanding of Islam is predominantly funnelled through Ramy's experience, which is in large part informed by cultural influence. For example, Ramy was born and raised in New Jersey. He has held onto some of his heritage, such that he is able to fluently speak Arabic, however, he is unable to read Arabic. In S01E05, in his quest to be a better Muslim during Ramadan, Ramy is reading an English translation of the Qur'an. Muslims learning the teachings of the Qur'an through English translation is problematic because Arabic has completely different structural mechanisms than English and a lot is lost and misunderstood in direct translations. As a result, many scholars provide various interpretations in their English translations of the Qur'an to smooth over gaps in language. But these various interpretations can be impacted by translators' schools of thought. Consequently, reading English translations of the Qur'an is not the ideal way to understand it. Many Muslims feel this way, as is illustrated in S01E05 where Farida is extremely put off by the fact that Ramy cannot read the Qur'an in Arabic. Growing up in Egypt, Ramy would have had the opportunity to learn how to read Arabic in school, but it is likely that he was not given that opportunity in New Jersey. This likely differs from the way that Ramy's family in Egypt practices Islam, even if they belong to the same sect. However, there is not much insight into how Ramy's extended family in Egypt practices Islam, for example, even in S01E09 when Ramy visits his relatives in Egypt the focus is still primarily on him. At most, Ramy's

cousin, Amani, takes Ramy to a Sufi circle in which Islamic versus are sung to the beat of a drum (S01E10).

It is interesting that this series focuses on Sufi Muslims, while majority of the world's Muslim population is Sunni. Doing so indicates that the creators of the series wanted to capture a very specific story of a few individual Muslims rather than try to speak on behalf of all Muslims. Hirji (2011:44) criticizes the series "Little Mosque on the Prairie" for representing all Muslims to be practicing in the same exact way while differing sects are not discussed. "Ramy" differs in that it actually does bring up the fact that Ramy is a Sufi Muslim. While there is not a discussion regarding other sects of Muslims, it is clear that Mo and Ahmed are disoriented when inside of the Sufi Center, witnessing different practices than that of the mosque that they are used to (S02E02).

"Ramy" has a lot of side characters with their own branching stories. Majority of the narrative focuses on Ramy's journey, but there are still, at times, entire episodes in which Ramy is absent and other characters are the focus. However, within these episodes there is not much diversity regarding various sects of Islam. It can be assumed that Ramy's family is Sufi and that Ahmed and Mo are Sunni but the non-Muslim audience receives little insight into the differences between these two sects. Muslims who watch the series can clearly see various Sufi practices that are not Islamically universal such as the singing of Islamic verses in a Sufi Circle and the spiritual commitment to the bay'ah. But the series does not make it perfectly clear which practices are Islamically universal and which are specific to certain sects.

In conclusion, "Ramy" predominantly features Egyptian-American Muslim characters. Additionally, the most expansive character arcs are reserved for male characters. Women still are represented in the series, but their screen time is limited. The series positions Sufi Muslim

characters in the center of its narrative. While Sunni practices are also featured, the series does not always make it clear which characters follow which sects of Islam, leaving it largely to audience interpretation. The non-Muslim audience is then left in the dark as to the various practices within the various sects of Islam, and without close examination guided by a history of knowledge in the various sects, specific Muslim practices featured in this series may wrongfully be interpreted to apply to all Muslims.

Conclusion

This chapter illustrates how the Muslim representation within "Ramy" is more nuanced and multi-faceted than the images conveyed by mainstream entertainment media. While a large portion of the narrative pivots around sex, it does so in a way that is anchored to Islamic principles, and characters often illustrate how distressed they are when committing the sin of zina. It moves the narrative forward as it challenges Ramy to re-evaluate his decisions and attempt to be a better Muslim; a goal he is often not successful at. But Ramy's vice of both his pornography and sex addictions are not easy issues to overcome and the series does not provide him with Islam as an easy solution to his problem. Rather, he constantly has to work at it, and take responsibility for his mistakes.

Additionally, by showing us side characters with their own unique struggles when it comes to negotiating one's sexuality and Muslim identity, we get a multitude of nuances that can in no way be reductive to all Muslims as there is diversity within the characters of the show itself. Muslim identity is at times concealed by Muslim characters out of their own fear of alienation from the non-Muslim world. While some characters are nervous to express their Muslim identity in front of non-Muslims, other characters go so far as to fully assimilate and

take on new identities when in the company of non-Muslims. But rather than Muslims being exclusively preoccupied with fooling non-Muslims in the series regarding their Muslim identities, we more often see Muslim characters doing mental gymnastics in order to fool themselves into believing that they are not being sinful. Loopholes are used to smooth over tensions from characters' competing American and Muslim identities. They are utilized by characters, in a manner in which they allow themselves to sin without feeling too guilty. However, these loopholes are often not strong and can be summed up with Ramy's notion in S01E01 in which he states that he is not interested in trying to "trick God." The complexities of the characters within this series in regard to how they negotiate their Muslim and American identities is wide-ranging and in no way reductive to all Muslims.

The overall narrative illustrates a constant rejection of the dominant discourse of Muslims as violent and oppressive. This is at times, expressed outright, such as in S03E02 when Ramy proclaims, "Allahu Akbar," is a beautiful phrase that has been distorted and used in such a wrong way. Other times, it is done with subtext, such as in S01E05 when Mo casually responds to the hateful graffiti on his restaurant, "ISIS FAGS," as free advertising. The characters here do not need to state that they have no relation to ISIS because it is clear that they are just normal young adults hanging out at a diner with no malicious hidden agenda. The presence of racism within the series does not in itself make the narrative racist. Sure, the words "ISIS FAGS" are present in S01E05, but this enabled the show to present alternative discourses in which the characters have no relation to ISIS. Mo does not even care enough to remove the vandalism from his restaurant, as he is profiting from this hate crime. He gained more business as attention is being drawn to his halal diner during Ramadan. Humour is used in powerful ways throughout the series in order to both provide alternative discourses and educate the viewer in a way that is not antagonistic.

When Muslim convert, Michael describes Sheikh Malik to Ramy in S02E01 as “radical” he pauses for a moment to clarify that he means radical as in “cool,” not the other meaning. This takes into account the dominant discourse that regards Muslims as radical extremists but turns it on its head with humour by simply using “radical” as a play on words.

The character of Ramy is far from perfect and leaves behind a storm of chaos after making some really bad decisions. Specifically, the damage he has done in the service of fulfilling his selfish desires is widespread. He inadvertently caused the death of two characters on the show and is responsible for his family’s financial troubles. He has had multiple affairs, one in which he sleeps with a married woman and another in which he cheats on his fiancée the night before their wedding. This leads to a divorce and causes him to fall away from Islam, as he feels that he is too broken to fix. Season three shows us the most empty and miserable version of Ramy, who only cares about making money. He is given clarity after giving up his capitalistic goals and returns to Islam in a very impactful way, praying loudly and passionately, thanking God for this clarity. Other characters in the series are also shown to make mistakes, but even after committing substantial sins, they always come back to Islam. The characters in “Ramy” do not conform to the dominant discourse on Muslims, but neither do they conform to some exaggerated representations in which Muslims are completely perfect and free of sin. This presents a nuanced and humanized representation, one that is much more grounded in reality than what audiences are used to seeing in the media.

While the series does an exceptional job at showing diversity in the way individual characters practice Islam, it primarily focuses on the perspective of Egyptian-American Sufi Muslims, as Ramy and presumably his family are part of that sect. While women are certainly featured within this series, their stories are not nearly as expansive as the main male character.

Issues, especially in regard to the wearing of the hijab in America, are noticeably limited. Other ethnicities are featured within the series and the audience gets brief insights into the perspectives of these side characters, but because they are side characters, their stories are not fully explored. There is also a missed opportunity here to showcase other characters who are among different sects in the series. Additionally, not enough is done in the series to explain which Islamic practices are universal and which are specific to Sufi's to the non-Muslim observer.

Chapter 6 | Conclusion

Discussion

I expand a discussion of my major findings in this section, examining both the strengths and limitations of this series and the impact it has on Muslim representation in the media. Additionally, I develop my discussion outside of the confines of the fictional narrative of "Ramy," and discuss the implications of the popularity of this form of Muslim representation, concluding that the commercial and critical success of "Ramy" has the capacity to slowly shift the dominant discourse on Muslims that is widely present in the media.

The series "Ramy," illustrates some of the most nuanced and multi-faceted Muslim characters that have been represented in mainstream television history. Not only is there depth in the character nuances, but this show stands out as one in which Islam is normalized as an anchor of morality which characters openly embrace. Muslim representation is more than just present within this series, as the plot is centered around the significance that Islam has on the lives of its characters. This series stands out from other nuanced representations of Muslims in that it addresses how Muslims interact with their religion in a meaningful way. It is not even that all these characters are devout Muslims. What is notable here is that all the major plot points on the show are focused on one's relationship to Islam and how this relationship varies across the different characters represented. The specificity and nuance prevalent throughout the series, focusing on issues directly related to one's Muslim identity, provide viewers with useful commentary in understanding Muslim perspectives in a manner that is humanized.

An important plot anchor in the series is the discussion of sexuality and Muslim identity. Ramy has sex with a married woman in S01E05, he cheats on his fiancée the night before their

wedding with his cousin in S02E10, and he even starts paying a prostitute for sex in S03E04. None of these events are the least bit romanticized, in fact, we mostly see Ramy in the aftermath of these moments full of regret and confusion as to why he keeps feeling compelled to commit these sins. Ramy even proclaims in S03E10 that he does not enjoy having sex like this. Dena's sexuality is briefly explored in S01E06 in which she attempts to lose her virginity but realizes the guy she is with only likes her because he has fetishized her ethnicity. This leaves Dena uncomfortable, unfulfilled, and full of regret afterward for compromising her religious beliefs for someone like that. Naseem's struggle makes Ramy and Dena's look simple in comparison, as he is an unmarried deeply closeted homosexual Muslim man in his fifties (S02E09). He draws a strict line between sex and emotion as he forces himself not to pursue a homosexual relationship. He cries as he is tortured by the idea that he is unable to express his sexuality since he does not want to compromise his religious beliefs. Even polygamy is discussed in the series. In one way, Ramy does not understand it and tries to use it to justify his affair with Amani the night before his wedding with Zainab (S02E10). But in another way, it is introduced as a means for Ahmed to have children since his current wife does not want any (S03E07). Ahmed does not proceed without his wife's permission. The diversity within this series, featuring a variety of different relationships that Muslims have to their sexuality, has achieved a level of nuance and specificity that cannot be monolithically reduced to all Muslims.

While there is some diversity in the representation of different genders and age groups and various struggles with Muslim identities, the narrative largely focuses on Ramy's perspective as an Egyptian-American young Muslim man in New Jersey. Ramy gets the most screen time and has the most expansive character arc. While the series does explore the female perspective in a few episodes, there is not enough engagement with issues that Muslim women in

America deal with. For instance, there are several female characters throughout the series who wear hijabs, but the series only explores what it means to wear a hijab through male voices or through very brief scenes such as one in which Dena, who does not wear the hijab daily, just happens to be wearing a hijab and is criticized for it (S02E05). There is another brief scene in which Zainab, a Black-Muslim woman who regularly wears the hijab is talked down to by a non-Muslim White man who is surprised that she can speak English (S02E03). Muslim women, especially those who wear hijabs, deal with complicated issues that are largely absent from the narrative.

The focus is on Ramy, and there are instances in which both his Egyptian and American cultures shape his Muslim identity. In S01E05, Ramy wants to be a better Muslim during Ramadan and on top of praying and fasting he is seen wearing a Galabiya, a traditional Egyptian garment. However, the Galabiya is quite small on him, which implies that he has not worn it and embraced his Egyptian culture in this manner since he was a child, illustrating a disconnect from that part of his identity. Additionally in this episode, Ramy is shown eating Suhur before sunrise at Mo's diner and subsequently is shown praying Fajr in the parking lot with a group of Muslims who also are presumably having Suhur in Mo's diner. This, in addition to seeing Mo's diner filled with business at this unconventional hour, implies that there is a large Muslim community in this part of New Jersey. The fact that they pray together in the parking lot, rather than praying individually at home, also suggests a strong sense of community. Thus, this part of Ramy's American identity is complementary to his Muslim identity, as he has a strong Muslim community around him that makes it easy for him to openly practice Islam.

Conversely, there is a recurring theme in which Muslims conceal their identity and try to assimilate in America. This is reflective of the modern-day environment in which Muslims may

feel they are unable to express their identity freely without being alienated in some way by people who are ignorant to Muslim practices. In S02E01, Farouk accepts whiskey from his boss in order to appear as a regular American. Additionally, it is revealed that Farouk uses the name "Frank" at work (S02E08). Farouk literally takes on a new identity, sanitized for Americans at work, while leaving his Egyptian-Muslim identity at home. This is illustrative of the pressures that many Muslims in the West may feel to conceal their identity out of fear of being alienated or even targeted for a hate crime in the wake of so much anti-Muslim discourse.

Sekerka and Yacobian (2018:820) advocate for the need for there to be more open dialogue in the workplace regarding Muslim accommodations to create a space where there is no fear of racism. However, that is much easier said than done. The structures of the workplace in America, without any inclusive policy interventions, do not make it easy for Muslims to practice their faith. There is scene in which Ramy about to pray in the bathroom at work, out of sight of his co-workers and managers, but he decides against praying when he realizes that he is going to be late for a meeting (S01E02). Because it is not normalized to give Muslims accommodations, such as being permitted to take a short break to pray a few times throughout one's shift, Muslims are, in accordance with critical race theory, systematically disadvantaged in the workplace (Bakali 2016:19). This is an instance in which racism is entrenched within the structures of society in such a manner that it appears as normal to the dominant and privileged group (Bakali 2016:19). Ramy's boss further lacks any understanding of Ramy's Muslim identity, as is illustrated when he tells Ramy that he appreciates the diversity he has brought to the company with his "Mediterranean flair" (S01E02). Clearly, his boss has no conception of Ramy's actual Egyptian-Muslim background, and has a shallow understanding of the "diversity" within his staff.

In his attempt to make right his wrongs, Ramy sometimes tries to use loopholes to justify his actions such as in S02E10 when he tries to justify his affair by claiming that polygamy is allowed in Islam. But he does not understand the reason for the permissibility of polygamy and is just trying to use it to his advantage. Other characters utilize loopholes as well throughout the series to try to balance both their Muslim and American identities, but none of these exceptions have much of a foundation. They are just mental gymnastics these characters are doing to make whatever sin they are committing seem okay. The characters seem to be aware that loopholes are not good arguments to sin, as is expressed in S01E01 when Ramy proclaims that he is not trying to "trick God." These characters are always tethered to the belief of Islam as the path to righteousness, which subverts the dominant discourse.

While there are aspects of racism and stereotyping within the series, the narrative never takes a racist position. Rather, it uses the idea of stereotypes and racism in order to provide room for discussion in which stereotypes are addressed; they are often understood as harmful, and they are subsequently rejected throughout the narrative. In S02E08, Uncle Naseem realizes that it is wrong to stereotype Black-Muslim men as ex-prisoners when he is taught this lesson by Sheikh Malik, who points out the harms of stereotypes. Additionally, humour is used as a means to educate the audience in a manner in which the narrative is not antagonistic to that audience. Rather than expressing disdain toward the audience for the widespread mispronouncing the word "Muslim," the characters express a mild annoyance with how this word is mispronounced and proceed to educate the audience.

A comprehensive examination of the main character, Ramy, is conducted in order to dismantle how flawed he is and how much damage this character has done, beyond even just himself. As far as Ramy goes with his extreme flaws, not once does he commit an action that

conforms to the dominant discourse of Muslims as terrorists. Even in his temporary break from prayer, Ramy still stands behind and defends Islamic practices. This character, with all of his flaws, is humanized as a person who makes mistakes and wants to do better. Other characters also make mistakes. But no matter how much they have sinned, they do not abandon Islam.

"Ramy" does not and simply cannot encompass the diversity within the Muslim community in its representation of Muslim characters. The issue is not that "Ramy" fails to provide a comprehensive representation of all Muslims, rather, it is one of the few non-stereotypical representations of Muslims in mainstream media. It is unfair to expect one series or film to encapsulate the widespread diversity within the Muslim community. Putting such pressure on "Ramy" to capture the widespread diversity of Muslims would likely result in representation for the sake of representation that may lack character depth and nuance. While the cultural representation in "Ramy" is focused on Egyptian-American Muslims in New Jersey, there is still certainly a degree of diversity between various characters here. It represents both first-generation and second-generation immigrants, and it features both heterosexual and homosexual characters with nuance and specificity. By focusing on these characters and their precise issues, "Ramy" is nuanced to the point in which it does not try to extend itself to encompass the experience of all Muslims. Still, the series is limited in its representation of various sects of Islam, it is limited in its scope of telling stories from the Muslim female perspective, missing the opportunity to explore stories regarding American-Muslim women who wear the hijab, and its main characters largely belong to the same ethnicity.

Bakali (2016:21) explains that storytelling is an integral part of critical race theory considering how little we are exposed to the experiences of marginalized groups. Ramy Youssef, the creator of "Ramy," largely tells the story from the perspective of a character who is an

alternate, semi-biographical, version of himself, with similar cultural traits, such as the fact that he is an Egyptian-American Muslim who grew up in New Jersey (Patton 2019). The fact that Youssef is a Muslim director telling a story that semi-reflects his real-life experience is largely why the series is so impactful in its nuanced representation of Muslim characters. This specificity lends itself to, in tandem with critical race theory, exposing structural racism embedded within American society. For instance, the stripper's disrespect of Ramy's prayer beads in S02E07 is indicative of the lack of awareness of Islamic symbols and practices in America, which creates an environment in which Muslims are disadvantaged. America is structured in a manner in which Muslims are often made to either compromise their beliefs or abstain from American norms.

The character Ahmed highlights this tension in S02E07 when he criticizes Ramy for using the urinal. Ahmed points out that urinals inevitably cause a backsplash of urine on the clothing, and when Muslims are subjected to this level of impurity, their prayers will not count unless they change their clothes and clean themselves. It is not as if urinals are put in bathrooms in order to burden Muslims, as one can often find a toilet as an alternative to the urinal. But it is the fact that urinals are so normalized in America that Muslims themselves may not even realize the impure nature of using them. Muslims are taught to remain clean, especially so when offering prayers. However, Ramy does not uphold this teaching in the scene in S01E02 when he is about to offer his prayers in a bathroom at work in order to remain hidden from his co-workers and managers. His inclination to pray out of sight is indicative of his fear of being publicly Muslim in the workplace, while shedding light on how the workplace as an institution is not structured to provide accommodations for Muslims. With all these structural incompatibilities experienced by

Muslims in America, it is not surprising that Farouk goes by the name "Frank" at work in order to fit in.

However, the series does not always get it right when it comes to dismantling institutionally embedded racism against Muslims. In an attempt to teach Naseem the harm of stereotypes, Sheikh Malik utters the phrase, "we all battle our own stereotypes" (S02E09). This implies that stereotypes are created on an individual basis and denies that racial biases and stereotypes are largely circulated and reinforced by dominant discourses.

Critical race theory is used to understand anti-Muslim racism holistically, not just looking at obvious acts such as hate crimes, but at political and media discourses that circulate and maintain racism against Muslims (Bakali 2016:21). The mainstream media has largely circulated stereotypical representations of Muslims. As more non-stereotypical representations of Muslims are distributed in the mainstream media, in the telling of stories about and from Muslim perspectives, there is hope for the dominant discourse to slowly shift. The institution of the media is not structured to encourage the production of stories involving minorities. Williams (1995:191) notes that there is still concern, even in cases in which minority owners have autonomy over media programming, as this does not guarantee diverse stories to be produced. This is because the market dictates what sorts of series and films are financially successful and producers fear circulating "niche" content that will not sell. This creates a system in which the dominant group is catered to, but it overlooks the widespread population of some of these so-called "niches." Islam is a widespread religion and Muslims encompass a large and growing percentage of the global population. The popularity of a series like "Ramy," given that it is largely tailored to a Muslim audience, indicates that there is certainly an audience out there that wants this type of content. Even though the series focuses on the specific subset of second-

generation Egyptian immigrants in New Jersey, it still is a critical and commercial success. This indicates that these kinds of representations of Muslims are certainly welcome and have proven to be a success. In order to see more diversity in Muslim representation, the solution is for more producers to greenlight projects that focus on narratives from various Muslim perspectives. We cannot expect all Muslim diversity to be encompassed into a single show, but with a multitude of different films and series, diversity within the Muslim community is more likely to be represented.

Contribution of this Research

The level of nuance within the series is more than has been observed in any other current representation of Muslims in mainstream media. This nuance is achieved by featuring Muslim characters who embrace Islam as a major plot within the narrative. In the first two seasons, Ramy continuously tries to negotiate his Muslim and American identities simultaneously. He never is forced to choose between one or the other, as doing so would be reductive, discrediting the diversity within the Muslim community and how Muslims often balance their faith and culture. It is only in season three that Ramy stops praying, but even then, he at no point forsakes Islam entirely. Instead, he retreats from being a devout Muslim as he believes that he is too broken to be fixed anymore. He is focused on his work and making money, which is actually first initiated by the need to pay Zainab's mehr, an Islamic obligation that he at no point refuses. Even if there were any argument to be had about the third season representing Muslims unfavourably, S03E10 concludes the entire season with Ramy returning to Islam in euphoria as he prays passionately, thanking God that he is relieved of the burden of chasing financial success.

The representations of Muslims in this series are so nuanced and humanized that it leads to the creation of some despicable characters. Ramy first appears as a likeable and charming

character, but as the series continues, he descends into darkness as he moves away from Islam and closer to his desires. The fact that the series makes the audience hate the character as he sins and falls further away from Islam illustrates that the series aims to represent Islam favourably and portrays Muslims who are devout to be much more likeable and seemingly, more at peace than their more sinful Muslim counterparts. Tarek says it best in S03E05, that the world, even with a large Muslim population, is becoming empty of Islam. He said this in a manner that paints the world as a dystopia of people living only for themselves and losing any sense of spirituality and morality.

A similar sentiment is stated by Yasmina in S03E07, in which she states that good men are being lost to pornography. There is a lot of commentary on how pornography kills the drive and motivation of young men throughout the series, which portrays Ramy's unhealthy addiction as alienating from his friends and his faith. This largely refers to the cultural divide between the West and Islam in which Muslims are systematically disadvantaged in terms of being able to faithfully practice their religion when living in such a secular world that encourages sin and that often does not provide accommodations for them. However, the series does not promote a rigid binary between American and Muslim culture. As we witness in S01E05, Ramy has ties to a strong Muslim community in New Jersey such that they are seen to gather at Mo's halal diner during Ramadan for Suhur and subsequently offer Fajr prayer together in the parking lot.

While the series does not try to illustrate Muslims as perfect individuals, it does illustrate Islam as the answer to the hardships the characters in the series face. By doing this, it positions Islam as a moral anchor that guides Muslims to peace, clarity, and happiness. This is antithetical to the dominant discourse that represents Islam as a violent religion. This starkly contrasts from Morey and Yaqin's (2011) analysis of, "Yasmin," in which they found that Muslims are

represented as violent extremists, and "White Girl," in which they found that Muslims are positioned as voices for social responsibility and reduced to "pure beings" with no element of depth, nuance, or humanization. "Ramy" is not guilty of either of these extremes. There are no stereotypical representations of Arab Muslim terrorists, nor are there reductive representations that try to position Muslims as flawless. Rather, the main character is humanized in a manner that makes him seem quite despicable but still grounded in reality. Thus, this research rejects the notion that Muslims in the media are exclusively represented in the manners that conform to the dominant discourse.

"Ramy" is not guilty of attempting to "flip the enemy," and position a fictional, but obviously Muslim looking individual as a terrorist (Alsultany 2013:164). There is no terrorist even featured within the series, other than Osama Bin Laden in Ramy's dream in S01E04. This dream only occurred in order for Ramy to proclaim that he is nothing like Bin Laden, rejecting the stigma that he experienced as a child at the time of 9/11. When Dennis attacks an anti-Muslim protestor in S02E02, this is indeed an example of a "violent Muslim," however, we get the full backstory as to why the violence occurred. The character Dennis is an ex-army veteran who served in the Iraq war, and because of his PTSD, he attacks a protestor outside of the Sufi Center. This happens immediately after Dennis takes the Shahadah but is still at an elementary level in terms of his knowledge of Islam. The character is clearly not positioned as a radical Muslim as there are a number of factors that caused him to be in the wrong place at the wrong time, which is largely Ramy's fault, since he ignored Dennis' PTSD in order to hire him at the Sufi Center and get him off the streets. Just like Bin Laden serves a function, Dennis's incident allows the subsequent episode (S02E03) to illustrate how Muslims are depicted in the news media. He is illustrated as recent Muslim convert who commits a "gruesome attack," reflecting

how Muslim identity is largely inflated in relation to crime. The series is thoughtful and provides insightful commentary as to how Muslims are represented today.

Sutkutė (2020:35) found that the film "Submission" generalizes the experience of Muslim women as oppressed, and suggests this experience is shared by all Muslim women. "Ramy" does not reductively make a statement about all Muslims. Because the narrative within "Ramy" is so extraordinarily specific, the series goes out of its way to not make any generalized statements about Muslims. The fact that the series is called "Ramy" expresses that this is a story that follows a specific individual. There are certainly aspects of the series that a lot of Muslims can relate to, such as the addiction to pornography, but because we only witness one character's struggle with pornography, the series is not making a statement regarding all Muslims. This is further illustrated by how different the characters are from one another. For example, Mo's vice is alcohol, Ahmed is sometimes tempted to gamble, Naseem is a repressed homosexual, Dena is represented as a virgin who later commits zina, and Farouk and Maysa are seen doing magic mushrooms and eating pork. These characters are in no way positioned to be representative of all Muslims since they differ so much from one another. Their nuanced imperfections humanize them and allow the audience to relate to them.

It is important to examine Muslim representation that does not conform to the dominant discourse, providing alternatives to the dominant discourse with nuanced and multi-faceted character development. Of course, there is an abundance of misrepresentations of Muslims in the media. But ignoring the few representations that do not conform to the dominant discourse and only affirming negative representations through research, neglects to look at the full picture. It is especially important to note when Muslims are represented in more nuanced and impactful ways

when this representation is circulated and featured on mainstream streaming services that are widely available and promoted.

Muslim Representation is Shifting

Muslim representation in the media is no longer purely stereotypical. “Ms. Marvel” is a 2022 Marvel series on one of the most popular streaming platforms, Disney+, featuring a Pakistani-Muslim teenage girl who has superpowers (Ali 2022). Her Muslim identity is not hidden in the series, but it inevitably takes a backseat to the superhero action involved in the plot. “Mo,” another show co-written by Ramy Youssef, featuring Mo Amer (also from “Ramy”) is a 2022 Netflix series that revolves around a Palestinian-Muslim family who has been struggling to gain American citizenship (Amer and Youssef 2022). This series certainly has nuanced Muslim representation, much more so than “Ms. Marvel,” but again, the major plot is not focused on Islam. Additionally, the series “We Are Lady Parts” is a 2021 Peacock series that features and follows the journey of an all female, Muslim punk-rock band, and notably, the women in this band wear hijabs (Manzoor 2021). The plot of “We Are Lady Parts,” is focused on the struggle of a band trying to get popular. There is still nuanced Muslim representation here, but the plot revolves more around the band.

This is not necessarily a bad thing, as of course, television is entertainment and not every series that has Muslim representation needs to go into as much of a focus around the commitment to Islam and the difficulties that competing identities introduce in this commitment. Nonetheless, “Ramy’s” primary focus on Muslim identity conflicts propels it above the rest in terms of the nuanced and multi-faceted representation of Muslim characters. It is a one-of-a-kind show that other television series and films involving Muslim characters would do well to take

inspiration from by telling diverse stories focused on Muslims in other countries, with their own specific nuances and multi-faceted character dynamics related to the balance of Islam and other cultures. There are certainly other smaller productions that express nuanced Muslim representation. However, it is important to look at these examples here in which multi-faceted Muslim representation is present on some of the most popular streaming services: Hulu, Netflix, Disney+, and Peacock.

Future Research

As multi-faceted Muslim representation in film and television grows, we are inching closer to a world in which the dominant discourse of Muslims as violent and oppressive is becoming a tired old narrative. While current research on Muslim representation often looks to uphold this narrative, I believe there is more value in looking to the few examples that represent Muslims through alternatives to the dominant discourse. We should learn from the handful of examples that challenge dominant discourses in order to present research that says something different and has a voice for positivity and change in the current landscape of predominately stereotyped representation. Of course, it is not up to researchers to enact this change; it is up to producers to launch new and innovative forms of Muslim representation, and it is up to audiences to encourage producers that these projects are worthwhile in their demand for, and consumption of such films and television shows. But this change is already slowly taking shape with shows like "Ramy," and it would be foolish to ignore the significance of this. "Ramy" is certainly worthy of analysis as it tackles the narrative from a perspective anchored around Islam and the way in which Muslims practice Islam in the West. While other recent representations of Muslims do not do this outright, there is still value to be gained from examining entertainment media that represents Muslim characters in more nuanced ways. Shows like "Ms. Marvel," "Mo," and "We

Are Lady Parts" feature nuanced Muslim representation, and while these series' do not go in-depth into Muslim-related issues like "Ramy" does, it is still worth analyzing these shows and their own nuanced representations. These shows are in the eye of the public, and this is certainly a step in the right direction, in terms of circulating more nuanced representations of Muslims in the mainstream media. This cannot go ignored as research continues to examine the representation of Muslims in the media.

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Appendices

I am providing a sample of the data collection and analysis for the pilot episode of "Ramy" in order to demonstrate how my data was organized. Narrative analysis was conducted by simply answering key questions regarding the structure of the narrative. The language of film analysis describes how scenes were shot, notes dialogue transcriptions, and includes analytical memos regarding the subtext and themes.

Appendix 1: Narrative Analysis

S01E01 "Between the Toes"

a) Who/what is responsible for moving the narrative forward/whose point of view are we focused on? And in what order are we seeing things in?

Ramy Hassan is responsible for moving the narrative forward.

1. Ramy has a conversation with his mom in the car outside of the mosque before his friend's katb-kitab in which his mom suggests he should find a woman for himself.
2. Ramy enters a mosque and performs wudu without washing his bare feet, he is then lectured by an older man to wash properly. Ramy argues with the man "I think God knows what's in my heart." But the man proceeds to aggressively wash Ramy's bare feet.
3. Ramy's friend's grill him for dating a white woman and encourage him to find a Muslim woman.
4. Ramy has sex with his girlfriend, Chloe. He then goes to the bathroom to test the condom they used with water to ensure there are no holes and she confronts him and learns that he is a more devout Muslim than she was led to believe. It is revealed that he has misled her into thinking he drinks when he does not.
5. Ramy and Steve, at work, look at Muslim women on a dating app called "Muzmatch." Steve gets Ramy to hit yes to a woman in a headscarf even though Ramy insists that is not his "type."
6. Ramy is sitting with his family during dinner. They all seem disconnected as they are preoccupied with their devices. He asks his parents to set him up with a Muslim woman, and they agree.
7. Ramy is on a date with a Muslim Egyptian woman named Nour. Ramy tries to give her a platonic goodbye, but she insists on a goodnight kiss which escalates quickly. She tries to have sex with him, but he refuses. She gets upset that he is trying to put her in this "Muslim box" and the date ends.
8. Ramy defeatedly approaches the same man at the mosque who washed his feet but is now outside of what seems to be his restaurant. Ramy rants to him about the expectations that he has to live up to as a Muslim.

b) What is everyone's role?

- Ramy is the main character, the narrative centers around him. His role in this episode is to try to be a better Muslim by opening his mind up to the idea of dating a Muslim woman.
- Mo and Ahmed are Ramy's Muslim friends who encourage Ramy to break up with his White girlfriend, Chloe, and find a Muslim woman.
- Chloe confronts Ramy about his lies in their relationship and how he pretended he wasn't really a practicing Muslim.
- Steve is Ramy's friend from work who calls Ramy out for being picky about not wanting to date a Muslim woman who wears a head scarf.
- Ramy's parents support Ramy's decision to date a Muslim woman and help him find someone.
- Ramy's sister, Dena, selfishly makes it all about her and how if Ramy gets married then she will have to be next and does not support his choice to date a Muslim woman.
- Nour is the Muslim woman that Ramy goes on a date with. Her role is to show Ramy he can have a good time with a Muslim woman but also that he pigeonholes her as a "type" of person who needs to conform with his idea of what a Muslim woman should be.
- The man outside the restaurant serves as a vehicle for Ramy to air out his inner thoughts and explain the conflicting feelings he is having as both a Muslim and an American.

c) What dominant discourse is being promoted and over what other discourses?

Alternative to the mainstream discourse of Muslims as violent and oppressive, the pilot episode of the series shows Muslims in an alternative discourse, a discourse in which Muslims are much more nuanced and complex. These nuances are even at odds with one another. Ramy is told by his Muslim friends that dating a non-Muslim white woman is wrong and he should be with a Muslim woman. Ramy wants to be a better person and ends things with his girlfriend Chloe and goes on a date with Nour. However, Nour essentially calls Ramy out for being a hypocrite who will have sex with non-Muslim women but not with Muslim women.

There is also an alternative discourse to the way in which some media stations represented the Muslim travel ban as "a terrible day for all Muslims." Ramy says he personally had a great day that day, using humor to evade playing the victim.

d) In what ways are women and men positioned differently?

In this episode, women are essentially vehicles for the men in the show. The women are not very fleshed out characters on their own and are only used to move forward the narrative of the main character, Ramy Hassan.

e) What does the ending conclude about the episode's ideology?

The ending of this episode shows Ramy sadly walking away as the restaurant owner resumes his job tending to some new customers who just arrived. After Ramy asked some very loaded

questions regarding if he is a bad person the restaurant owner disapproves of his unislamic habits and tells him he should wash his feet properly. Ramy walks away with his head down seemingly contemplating all that happened to him this episode. He acknowledges his shortcomings, and wants to become a better person. The ideology behind this episode is thus that people can work to make themselves better people and that they should first work on themselves before judging other people.

Appendix 2: Language of Film Analysis

0:59 – [Wide dolly shot] Shot begins focused on a sign of the Mosque (Islamic Cultural Center of North Jersey) and then follows Ramy as he enters. Camera following a character in a dolly shot implies revelation (Gianetti & Leach 2005:159). The dolly shot continues from an interior perspective as Ramy enters the Mosque which then freezes on the shoe rack. He looks around and realizes there is no vacant slot for him to stash his shoes so he quickly decides to remove someone else's shoes, throw them on the ground, and then place his shoes in the now empty slot.

- Ramy switching out shoes like this establishes his selfishness. It implies he only cares about himself and has no regard for the person whose shoes he just threw on the ground, not caring if they have a hard time finding them later, nor even trying to place them somewhere neatly.

3:11-3:30 – Ramy is shown praying in the mosque but is not focused (he is looking around and then down at his feet). We see from his perspective how his socks look (one is torn with his toe poking out due to the prior interaction in which his feet were washed). He looks around again (unfocused on his prayer) and then there is a jump cut to the opening title.

- The title "Ramy" appears in both English and Arabic, flashing in various colours and appearing in multiple parts of the screen at once. The music accompanying the title is a cheerful Egyptian style song which contrasts from the previous more serious scene. Gianetti & Leach (2005:222) refer to this shift in tone as a way in which music can form an ironic contrast.

5:33 - 5:44 – Very short scene where Ramy and Chloe are kissing. The first angle could be classified as a closeup focused on Ramy, but he is mostly covered by Chloe's head, obscuring the kissing action. This is followed by a very quick medium shot of the two of them starting to take their clothes off. Upbeat and romantic indie music is playing in the background.

5:44 - 8:38 – [Closeup on Ramy] Ramy has an uneasy look on his face while Chloe is shown sleeping facing away from him. Ramy turns to the garbage to grab the condom they just used.

- [Tilting shot/closeup of condom in sink] Ramy inspects the condom carefully to ensure there are no holes in it.
- As Ramy and Chloe begin to discuss what he is doing Chloe is shown closer to the doorway implying a growing distance between her and Ramy.
- 7:24 – [Closeup on Chloe] Chloe has a look of surprise when Ramy claims he is Muslim. Trying to make sense of it she says "You're Muslim, I thought, in the way that I'm Jewish. Like, it's a cultural thing. I didn't know you were Muslim-Muslim."
- 8:09 – After some banter about how Ramy tricked her into thinking he drinks alcohol Chloe is cross armed and leaning against the wall and asks in another closeup "So why are you hiding everything from me?"

- 8:11 – [Closeup on Ramy] Ramy looks apprehensive to speak his mind but says "Look Chloe, it's just… I've met girls who seem open-minded, and then they're not." He goes on to say "I thought maybe you'd be into the idea of me being culturally different but hate that I actually believe in God."
- 8:32 – [Closeup on Chloe] Chloe responds "I don't care that you're Muslim. I care that you've been lying to me."
    - This scene shows not only that Ramy goes to great lengths to keep his Muslim identity secret from his girlfriend, but that he has had this issue in the past with other women in which his Muslim identity somehow became an issue.

8:39-9:21 – [Closeup on Ramy] Ramy is in a car leaning against the door and looking up, out the window while melancholic Music is playing in the background.

- [Dashboard perspective] We see the car is about to enter Jersey City as we are crossing a sign that says "Welcome to Jersey City New Jersey." This implies that Chloe must live out of town.
- [Wide shot] car is shown driving through the city.
- [Medium shot] Ramy is shown laying awake in his bed with his eyes wide open.
- [Closeup angled down at sink but tilts up to Ramy] Ramy is performing wudu.
- [Medium tilting and ease in] Ramy sets his janamaz. The camera tilts up to Ramy standing there looking extremely conflicted with his two identities as we ease closer and closer to his face. He then begins his prayer and the scene ends, cutting to black.

9:44 – [Closeup on Ramy's phone] Ramy is using a Muslim dating app "Muzmatch" and hits no on a girl wearing a headscarf. His friend Steve says "Dude, why did you swipe "no" on her? You're swiping no on all the girls that have scarves."

- [Medium showing both Steve and Ramy sitting next to each other appearing to be at work (Steve is sitting in a wheelchair and appears to have some kind of Muscular disease by his flaccid hands)] Ramy responds "Dude, no, it's just, she's not my vibe. Steve says "You're a fuckin' racist."
- [Closeup on Ramy] Ramy, confused, says, "How is that racist? Head scarf's not a race, it's-it's something that people wear.
- [Closeup on Steve] Steve replies "Oh, I love when they're all covered from their head to their toe like that. Yo, that mystery is sexy." Steve goes on to say "Have you ever dated a Muslim girl?"
- [Closeup on Ramy] Ramy says "No, I haven't, and… that's-that's why I'm doing this. I'm trying to meet someone, you know, different."
- [Closeup on Steve] Steve replies "You're such a racist."
- [Closeup on Ramy] How is that Racist dude? Islam's not a race, it's-it's something you believe in. Ramy is expressing Islam is far too complex to be pigeonholed into a single race or, within this context, a type of woman who is either non-Muslim or Muslim. There are far too many complexities and nuances within Muslims to pigeonhole them into a type.
- Steve eventually convinces Ramy to hit "yes" on one of the women wearing a headscarf.

12:50 – After Ramy asks his parents to set him up with a Muslim girl… [Closeup on Ramy's Mom] Ramy's mom says to Ramy "We'll find you a girl, whoever you want. Do you want her covered, uncovered? You tell me."

- [Closeup on Ramy] Ramy hesitates but says "Umm… uncovered."

- [Clouseup on Ramy's mom] Ramy's mom nods approvingly and says with a smile "Good choice." The implication here is that both Ramy and his family are put off by Muslim women who cover their hair. This is also implied in that Ramy's sister does not cover her hair. It can be speculated that this family may not like Muslim women who wear headscarves because they view them as more conservative Muslims.

17:52 - 21:08 – Ramy walks Nour to her car after their date. They are shown smiling at each other. Ramy seem's to be fighting his natural instincts and in a [Medium shot] leans toward her and awkwardly pats her on the arm saying "Get home safe, okay?"

- [Medium on Nour] Nour asks "What, I don't get a good-night kiss?"
- [Medium on Ramy] Ramy replies "I just… I wasn't sure if you did that" After having a good time together on their date, Ramy is unsure of how to conduct himself at the end of the date, given that this is his first date with a Muslim woman it seems that he doesn't want to do anything that he is not supposed to do Islamically before marriage, even though he has had sex with other non-Muslim women.
- They eventually start kissing and continue inside of Nour's car. Ramy is very hesitant when she asks if he wants to have sex.
- [Medium showing both Ramy and Nour] Ramy states "I didn't know if-if you could, [have sex], you know, just 'cause we're not married." Nour replies "Oh, I-I didn't even know you were that strict. [closeup on Nour] I mean, yeah, we can get married. Uh my cousin does, like, nikah's over the phone if you want to do, like, a temporary marriage."
- [Medium on ramy] Ramy says "No, no, no. I'm not… I don't think we should try and, like, trick God or whatever, I just think we should, you know, slow down?" Two very different representations of Muslim characters are at play here. Ramy wants this to be more or less a halal date, but Nour is sexually demanding and seems to have experience with temporary marriages as loopholes to justify her haram behaviour. The irony is that while Ramy does not want to do that, he has had sex with other women before.
- [Medium showing both Ramy and Nour] Nour eventually gets frustrated and says "I'm like in this little Muslim box in your head, and I'm the wife or the mother of your kids, right? I'm not supposed to cum." Nour's frustration is not with Ramy not committing a sin with her. It is because she has a strong suspicion that he has sex with other women just not Muslim women because he sees them as this "type" unlike other women he's been with.

22:47 Ramy finds the man who lectured him about washing his feet properly "between the toes" at the mosque. The man is standing outside of his restaurant taking a break with a cigarette and a coffee. [Ramy and him are both leaning against the Restaurant's window in a medium shot] Ramy rants to this man about the mistakes he's made saying "and, yeah, I have sex even though I'm not married, and I'm probably gonna try mushrooms one day. So what? That means I'm not a good Muslim? Like, I can't do it 'cause I don't follow all the rules and the fucking judgements that are always just being put on us. And then, I do the same thing. I put the same fucking judgments on everyone around me. I'm just, like, trying to be… good. Do you really think God cares if I wash between my toes?" The character Ramy is talking to may as well be the audience since he is really only serving as a vehicle here for Ramy to express his inner thoughts. He acknowledges his mistakes, and is frustrated with trying to follow the rules of Islam while being tempted by the culture of the West, but at the same time he realizes it is wrong of him to put rules and judgements on other people.