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## The Problem with Borat

Ghada Chehade

There is just something about Borat, Sacha Baron Cohen's barbaric alter-ego who *The Observer's* Oliver Marre (2006) aptly describes as "...homophobic, racist, and misogynist as well as anti-Semitic." While on the surface, Cohen's Borat may seem to offend all races equally—the one group he offends the most is the very group he *portrays as* homophobic, racist, misogynist, and anti-Semitic. Or in other words, the real parties vilified by Cohen are not Borat's victims but Borat himself. The humour is ultimately directed at this uncivilized buffoon-Borat. He is the butt of every joke. He is the one we laugh at, and are intended to laugh at, the most inasmuch as he is more vulgar, savage, ignorant, barbaric, and racist than any of the bigoted Americans "exposed" in the 2006 film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. This would not be quite as problematic if the *fictional* Borat did not come from a very *real* place and did not so obviously (mis)represent Muslims.

While the 2006 film has received coverage and praise for revealing the racism of Americans, very few people are asking whether Cohen's caricature of a savage, homophobic, misogynist, racist, and hard core Jew-hating Muslim is not actually a form of anti-Muslim racism. To be characterized as any of the above is a form of discrimination, and watching this film it is hard not to walk away wondering why funny man Cohen feels the need to depict a Muslim character in such a vulgar and deplorable light.

A lot of Internet discussion is focused on whether or not Cohen's character Borat is racist in general, and anti-Semitic in particular. When people realize that Cohen is himself Jewish many conclude that he is not racist but rather holding a mirror up to American culture in order to demonstrate, through comedy, how racist *Americans* are. But rarely is the question raised about whether Cohen's portrayal of Borat represents anti-Muslim racism. And when the question *is* raised, it is usually dismissed as being a bit absurd. The justifications for this are that first of all

Kazakhstan is not a Muslim country; second, Borat never claims to be Muslim; third, no one has even heard of the country; and last, it is just comedy. The third defense is quite peculiar, as if the geographical ignorance of the west somehow excuses racism against an “obscure” country.

Let us examine some of the reasons many people claim Borat is not an example of racism against Muslims. First, it seems to be widely held on the Internet that Kazakhstan is not a Muslim country. Indeed, many forums I visited described it as being half-Muslim and half-Christian. Like so many others, I knew almost nothing of the country before the Borat controversy, so I did a little demographic digging. To get some clarification, I consulted the websites of UNESCO and the Association of Religion Data Archives (ARDA). While many on-line blogs and opinions claim that Kazakhstan’s population is divided almost equally between Muslims and Christians, the 2006 data of ARDA paints a very different demographic picture. According to ARDA, Kazakhstan is divided along the following religious lines: Muslim (49.81%), non-religious (26.34%), Christian (14.06%), atheist (9.38%), ethnoreligionist (0.16%), and other (0.25). Clearly Muslims are the majority and are almost twice the size of the next largest group, which makes them a rather large majority. And the second largest group is “non-religious,” meaning it could easily include people who were born or raised Muslim but do not adhere to it and/or practice it at all like many non-practicing Christians in the West.

Officially, the country is secular. However, this also does not mean that it is a non-Muslim country, only that it is *secular*, which literally means “not connected with religion.” Secular means that the State is separate from religion or that religion does not guide or influence the affairs of the State, but this does not change the fact that the majority of its private citizens are Muslim. Indeed the Kazakhstan National Commission for UNESCO (2002) reports that, “Kazakhstan is officially a secular state, but Sunni Islam is the major religion.”

Many in Europe and North America may not consider Kazakhstan a Muslim country because of its “moderate approach to Islam” or may feel that “it doesn’t seem Muslim.” However, this has nothing to do with the country or its people and everything to do with Western monolithic misperceptions of Muslims as religious fanatics and extremists. In post-9/11 North America and Europe to be “Muslim” has become synonymous with being a “fundamentalist” or “fanatic.” Indeed the Pew Research Center (2006) found that “many in the West see Muslims as fanatical, violent, and as lacking tolerance,” but also feel that Europe’s Muslims are more “moderate.” Yet the very use of prefaces and disclaimers like “moderate Muslims” betrays a Western prejudice. It implies that to non-Muslims, Muslims are generally considered to be the opposite of moderate-fanatical. In this respect, when we encounter a Muslim who is not a religious fanatic or some sort of “terrorist,” we are shocked and feel the need to differentiate that person from the fanatical and crazy majority by kindly labeling them “moderate.”

Nothing could be more racist. This is similar to saying about someone “he/she

is okay for a Black person.” The implication here is that most Black people are *not* okay. Extremists, fanatics, or fundamentalists exist in *all* faiths and yet when we speak of Christians or Jews we do not feel the need to make the necessary distinction between extremists and moderates. For example, when we speak of Christians in the U. S. we do not preface it with words like “moderate” or “secular,” even though one can easily argue that Christian fundamentalism exists and is on the rise in the U. S. (Reuters, 2005). This notwithstanding, loaded words like “moderate” and “secular” are reserved for Muslim people and Muslim countries.

The second common defense to the charge that Cohen is anti-Muslim is that his character Borat never *says* he is Muslim. Indeed, in one part of *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* (2006) he says he worships the hawk, which suggests that Borat is some sort of pagan. However, cultural studies scholars and students both know that what is suggested through visual imagery and symbolic representation is often more important and more telling than what is actually said. Indeed, during the Rodeo scene in the film, Rodeo manager Bobby Rowe says to Borat:

...Of course every picture that we get back from the terrorists...or Muslims, they look like *you* [emphasis mine], black hair and black Mustache. Shave that God dang mustache so you are not so inconspicuous, so you look like maybe an Italian...I see a lot of people and I think there's a God dang Muslim and I wonder what kind of bomb he's got strapped to him. And maybe you're not a Muslim...but you *look like one of them* [emphasis mine].

This, in essence, is my main point. While the Borat character never says he is Muslim, he *looks* Muslim and thus the average American is likely to *assume* that he is Muslim. Torchin (2007) maintains that, “The point here is that Cohen, though Welsh and Jewish, is mistaken for ‘Muslim...’” Sam Ali (2006) problematizes the Borat character, arguing that its construction is dangerous to Muslims. While Cohen denies Muslim identity of Borat, “Ali declares that Kazakhstan’s predominantly Muslim population, combined with Borat’s anti-Semitism and misogyny, is enough to cast Borat as Muslim in the American imagination” (Cited in Torchin, *Ibid.*). He concludes that, “like it or not, Borat is a Muslim stereotype.” While Torchin is not as critical as Ali, she does concur that, “Borat’s rehearsals of Occidental xenophobia feed a stereotype.”

This is especially true after 9/11, and we must always take into consideration the political and historical context in which images and representations exist. The power of the image cannot be ignored or understated here, and when you combine fictional images with real life geo-political context, Borat becomes so obviously “Muslim.” His black hair, black thick mustache, and thick accent, as well as his backward views toward women, gays, and Jews connote “Muslimness” as it is currently and stereotypically defined in the west due to Islamophobia. Although “Muslim” is a religion and not an ethnicity, Torchin maintains that the term—as

applied by the Rodeo manager for example—nonetheless refers “to an established set of images that Americans use for categorising the Dark side of Europe, as well as the Middle East.” Ultimately, she continues, “Borat is summarily converted into one of those ‘Muslim extremists’ who occupy the lead stories of nightly newscasts. The term ‘Muslim’ is a trope, not a category. It signals the enemy.”

This means that the *connotative meaning* behind the character Borat is ultimately more important than the denotative meaning. A connotation is an idea or meaning *suggested* by a word or thing; it is the set of associations that is *implied* by an image or a word:

Denotative functions are the direct meanings of a sign. They are the kind of thing you can look up in an ordinary dictionary. Yet, cultural signs and images can also have secondary, or connotative, meanings. These meanings get attached to the original word [or cultural text] and create other, wider fields of meaning. At times these wider fields of meaning can act like myths creating hidden meanings behind the more apparent. Thus, systems of connotation can link ideological messages to more primary, denotative meanings. (Hall, n.d.)

Connotation depends heavily on the historical context in which the word or image is read/*viewed*. As Derrida has shown, meaning does not reside in a text but in the *writing and reading* of it (Hodder, 2000). Thus there is no “original” or “true” meaning of a text outside specific historical contexts (Hodder, 2000). In this respect different types of texts must be understood in the contexts of their conditions of production and reading. Hodder (p. 704) explains that “text and context are in a continual state of tension, each defining and redefining the other, saying and doing things differently through time.” Thus, we must always be cognizant of the complexity of meaning as well as the conditions of the production and reading of texts. This suggests that the meaning we ascribe to an image or representation, such as Borat for example, relies heavily on *social, political, and historical context*.

For example, in the 1960s and 1970s, the image of a young man with long hair, round sunglasses, and a tie dyed shirt *implied* or *suggested* hippie. And in the racist and paranoid post-9/11 atmosphere everything about Borat, from his accent to his mustache, highly connotes “Muslimness.” Unless you have been living in a parallel universe or in an “Al Qaeda cave” after 9/11, the image and behaviour of Borat blatantly connote Muslim as they are currently ill defined. Borat is a mixture of every racist stereotype about Muslims, the most dangerous being that Muslims hate Jews—a point to which I will return. I find it hard to believe that an intelligent man like Cohen, educated at Cambridge, did not *know* that the average audience would assume Borat is a Muslim. Indeed I will go so far as to suggest that this was his *intention*. But since I cannot prove this, it is an issue best left alone for the purposes of this article. Whether or not Cohen *intended* Borat to be read as a Muslim is really not the point here. What is important is that the meaning of a text or cultural artifact does not exist in its production but ultimately depends on the

*context* of its reading (Hodder, 2000). And in the context of post-9/11 Islamophobia, audiences are most likely to “read” Borat as Muslim.

The third common defense of Cohen is that his Borat character is not offensive to Muslims because no one has ever heard of Kazakhstan, and the country was in fact chosen for its obscurity. For example, Oliver Marre argues that “it is not the Kazakhstani government which has anything to fear...the country was chosen for its obscurity, not as a target for satire.” This “logic” is absurd. If Cohen wanted to be obscure and inoffensive why did he simply not make up a country? Just because people do not know that Kazakhstan is a real place does not make his depiction of its people any *less* offensive. Is Marre suggesting that *our* ignorance of Kazakhstan’s existence somehow excuses Cohen’s racist depiction of its people? I certainly hope not. After all, while the rest of us might not know they exist, the citizens of Kazakhstan are aware of *their own* existence and thus have every right to be offended. Even a conservative policy advisor from the United Kingdom finds the obscurity argument absurd and offensive. Writing in the opinion section (Comment is Free) of *The Guardian*, Peter Franklin (2006) shoots down the obscurity defense:

Another excuse might be the obscurity of the Kazakhs, on the assumption that xenophobia requires a degree of familiarity to breed contempt. However, this would be to forget two things: Firstly, Kazakhs are hardly obscure to themselves and, secondly, we are much more familiar to them than they are to us. So how do you think they feel when we finally notice their country only to insult it?

Relying on the obscurity defense, when Borat portrays Kazakhs—and implicitly all Muslims—as backward and mentally deficient, Cohen creates a false impression that nobody of real import is being offended (Ali, 2006).

Ironically, the ethnic/religious group that many people assume should be most offended by Borat is Jews due to Borat’s rabid anti-Semitism. However, Borat is a fictional anti-Jewish character being portrayed by Cohen who is actually an *observant* Jew. As such, I must agree with Marre (2006) that, “the one thing it would be difficult to accuse Cohen of is anti-Semitism, not merely because he is Jewish, but because, having been raised by Orthodox parents, he still practices his religion.” Marre goes on to explain that while Cohen was studying at Cambridge, “he was involved with Habonim, a Zionist youth movement.” In his third year at Cambridge he wrote a thesis about the role of Jews in the American civil rights movement. Clearly, Cohen is not anti-Semitic, but because he almost never appears out of character, we are constantly reminded that Borat, his Muslim alter ego, *is*.

Cohen never appears as himself in interviews or awards shows. Instead he parades the bigoted, misogynist, anti-Jewish Borat around as if he were a real person. And this is highly problematic, for it plays on our unconscious in a type of repetitive Orwellian double-speak or reverse psychology that causes us to forget that the anti-Semitic Borat is not real, and that the man playing the part is in fact Jewish and quite sympathetic toward Jews. Speaking about Cohen, Marre explains that

At an awards ceremony, hosted by *GQ* magazine, he was presented with the editor's special award. In accepting the gong, he said: 'I would like to dedicate this award to you, Mel Gibson. Melvin, it is you, not me, who should receive this *GQ* award for anti-Jew warrior of the year.' Cohen was speaking in the guise of his alter ego (or one of them), Borat...

Here we get a clear indication of who or what Borat is to Cohen, for he describes Borat as an "anti-Jew warrior." So while Borat is generally racist, he is intended to be especially anti-Jewish, and this is indeed the impression audiences walk away with from the film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan*. In the beginning of the film, Borat gives us a tour of his homeland and tells the audience that though it is a great nation, Kazakhstan has many problems: "social, economic, and Jew." And then there is the annual village event, the running of the Jew, in which townspeople dress up as demonic Jews and chase the locals. And of course we cannot forget Borat's paranoid and deeply racist reaction to the kind and hospitable Jewish couple who owns the Bed and Breakfast. He and his companion are afraid to eat food prepared by the couple and accuse them of being "shape shifting Jews." To me, this does not suggest anti-Semitism but rather anti-Muslim racism on behalf of Cohen.

In scene after scene Cohen victimizes Jews through Borat's rabidly anti-Jewish statements and paranoid assumptions. However, Muslims are the real victims insofar as to be *accused of* being anti-Jewish (as well as the myriad other bigoted things Borat represents) is itself an attack and form of discrimination. I can't help but wonder about the motives for Cohen's lofty "reverse discrimination." By repeatedly depicting the *fictional* Muslim Borat as being anti-Jewish, the real-life Cohen in fact appears to be quite anti-Muslim.

Given the long-standing tensions between Muslims and Jews in the Middle East over the illegal occupation of Palestine (Boyle, 2003), Cohen should know better than to fan the flames of such tensions. Moreover, he should be chastised for his irresponsibility in perpetuating the baseless stereotype that Muslims hate Jews. Indeed given *his obsession* with portraying Muslims as savages and/or buffoons (let us not forget that his other alter egos is Ali G, the absurd though admittedly hilarious wannabe gangsta rapper with an undeniably Muslim name), one must wonder if it is not Cohen who has some sort of disdain for Muslims. Borat sleeps with his sister and farm animals, takes naked pictures of his own son, has no respect for women, condones rape, and masturbates in public (just to list a few of his disgusting traits). The depiction of Muslims in such a vulgar manner suggests a level of disdain for them.

Returning to "Borat's" aforementioned statement about Mel Gibson, the biggest problem is that Cohen conflates a *fictional* character with a *real* person and his actions and/or statements. By equating Borat to Mel Gibson and/or showing him to *admire* Mel's anti-Semitism, Cohen implies and/or suggests that Muslims are also anti-Jewish. It all happens at a very subconscious level, and the sugges-

tion is that like Gibson, Muslims are anti-Jewish. This is unfair because Borat is being compared to a real person and real events though he is in fact made up. But what makes it more problematic is that while he is fictional, Borat “represents” real people and a real region—Muslims and the Middle East-Central Asia.

In appearance after appearance, Cohen is in character as Borat, the anti-Jewish buffoon. He does not even break character when asked to address serious matters such as statements made by the government of the nation he has represented in a negative light—Kazakhstan. For example, “when told that the government of Kazakhstan was intending to engage in a campaign against the film. . . Cohen responded in character: ‘I fully support my government’s decision to sue this Jew’” (Cited in Marre, 2006). Again, one wonders why Cohen constantly makes defamatory remarks against Jews while posing as a character that so obviously connotes and represents “Muslimness.” Just what is he trying to prove and whom is he trying to provoke? Pitting Muslims and Jews against one another, even if only through fictional comedy, could not be more irresponsible given the current geo-political landscape. But instead of being reprimanded, Cohen was awarded a Golden Globe, which is disappointing but not shocking given the current culture of blatant anti-Muslim racism in which we live.

When novelist Jeanette Winterson was asked about Ali G, another of Cohen’s characters, she commented that she found him impossible to stomach: “‘I don’t know what the difference is between him and the Black and White Minstrels’” (Cited in Marre, 2006). Her point is that Cohen is making fun of “Black culture” through his wannabe gansta rapper character Ali G. Black comedian Felix Dexter agrees with Winterson, “he [Cohen] allows the liberal middle classes to laugh at Black street culture in a context where they can retain their sense of political correctness” (Ibid.). But Marre explains that most cultural commentators prefer to see Ali G as a parody of a White wannabe. I am inclined to agree with Winterson and Dexter that Cohen’s Ali G character is really a racist parody of Black street culture. And I also want to stress that while the character Ali G *looks* White, his name is indeed Arabic and Muslim. So it may also be argued that perhaps Cohen is making fun of Black street culture or Black Muslims, or *Arab* (not White) wannabes, or all of them at once.

In the case of Borat, I argue that Cohen is more or less a “Jewish Minstrel” portraying Muslims in a savage and offensive manner. We cannot refute that when White comedians of the 1930s-1950s painted their faces Black to “entertain” the crowd, it was a form of anti-Black racism. Similarly, Cohen is a non-Muslim “painted up” as a Muslim, and this can easily be read as anti-Muslim racism. Yet he is being likened to comedic legends such as Andy Kaufman and Peter Sellers (MSNBC). While these legends are also known for never breaking character, the former made fun of Jews *as* a Jew and the latter made up fake countries for his characters so as not to offend *real* people. Ultimately, when a White guy paints his face brown and plays the part of the Black buffoon it is obviously racism, and the same can be said of a non-Muslim playing the part of a savage and anti-Jewish Muslim character.



Given the tension and violence in the Middle East between Muslims and Jews, these two groups should know better than to make fun of the other or perpetuate the stereotype that Muslims hate Jews or that Jews hate Muslims. In other words, if anyone does not have “the right” to make fun of Jews at the current historical juncture, it is Muslims. And similarly, Jews of all people should not be making fun of Muslims and portraying them as savage and vulgar anti-Semites. Because of his celebrity and success Cohen is in a position of power over the people—Muslims—he is representing. He can choose to represent Muslims positively or negatively in a manner that reaffirms and creates harmful stereotypes. The latter results in a type of cultural oppression insofar as “...in cultural oppression... the dominant group represents the subjugated in such a way that negative connotative meanings and myths are produced” (Hall, n.d.). This is precisely the way in which Cohen represents Muslims through Borat—he produces and re-produces negative connotative meanings and myths about Muslims as barbaric and rabidly anti-Jewish. Even his Jewish “victims” in the film felt it was an anti-Muslim representation. In a *Boston Globe* article (2006), Miriam Berhar, the kindly Bed and Breakfast owner whom Borat attacks in the film, claims that, “to me, it’s an anti-Muslim movie, not anti-Jewish, because Kazakhstan is mostly Muslim.”

### Conclusion

Comedy is no excuse for racism. When Michael Richards of *Seinfeld* went into an anti-Black tirade at the Laugh Factory in Las Angeles in late 2006, no one found it funny. Instead he was called out publicly and driven to “apologize” on David Letterman. But Richards was not dressed up as a character when he revealed his racism, so it was easy to point the finger at him because the racist comments came directly out of *his* mouth. But Cohen’s racism is a lot subtler and much more difficult to call out. Indeed, Cohen has never said a bad word (that I know of) against Muslims, not as himself and not even when he is in character as Borat. Still, it is possible to argue that Cohen is being racist against Muslims in his very depiction of Borat. While many are quick to come to his defense, the fact remains that Kazakhstan *is* a Muslim country. What’s more, even though Borat never claims to be a Muslim, everything about his physical appearance, his behavior, and the way he sounds *implies* and *connotes* Muslim—in a perjorative manner—especially after 9/11. Indeed one of the racist Americans exposed in the film *Borat: Cultural Learnings of America for Make Benefit Glorious Nation of Kazakhstan* warns Borat that even if he is not a Muslim, he *looks* Muslim and thus Americans are likely to assume he is one.

Overall, to be portrayed as a “Jew-hating Muslim” *is* a form of racism and negative stereotyping, for clearly Cohen is not *really* attacking Jews. Indeed, as previously mentioned, even his Jewish “victims” in the film ultimately found the film to be anti-Muslim. That so few people make the same connection is sad, but not surprising. It merely reaffirms the reality of unabated Islamophobia that has

existed for decades but has spiraled out of control since 9/11 (Deen, 2004). Sadly, in the “post- 9/11 world,” Islamophobia is the only *acceptable* racism left. Rather than applaud racism against other human beings—even if done through fictitious comedy—we must name it and stand against it. What are needed at the current juncture are realistic positive images of Muslims. Replacing the “bearded Muslim terrorist” with a mustached Muslim savage does very little to move humanity forward in a time when intercultural literacy is most needed.

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