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TV Teacher: Is *Little Mosque on the Prairie* Good for Canadian Muslims?

Öslem Sensoy

I met a Danish journalist in New York a month after the attacks. “I am sorry I didn’t have a chance to read the Koran before I came to see you,” she said, “but you know it was sold out in Copenhagen.” I failed to see the reason for her rather strange apology. “I wanted to read it to understand,” she immediately explained, which led me to ask her what exactly it was that she wanted to understand. “Islam,” she said ruefully. “I wanted to understand Islam before I came to New York to interview you about the events of September.” This was the first time it had been explicitly suggested to me that my comments about 9/11 would be illuminated not by whether they made sense but by whether or not my questioner had read Islam’s holy book.

—Edward Said (2002)

Introduction

Why would a Danish journalist apologize to a non-Muslim Edward Said for not reading the Qur’an? Why would she assume that answers to acts of terrorism would be located in the gold-edged, onion-skinned pages of a holy text? And why would she be so presumptuous as to assume that in flipping through this holy text, she would, in the course of a handful of hours of study, come to “understand Islam,” and simultaneously to understand acts of terrorism?

It is questions like these that have been a part of my life in North America for decades. For some reason, those of us who are acculturated Muslims (wherever on the spectrum between secular and orthodox we may be), have always been known by the caricatures and mainstream myopic representations crafted by those who had the power to generate and disseminate knowledge and writing about us (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2006; Steinberg, 2002; Steet, 2000; Stonebanks & Sensoy, 2008). Edward Said (1978) popularized this dilemma in his book *Orientalism*, referring to the imagined ways in which those of the Occident (the West) shaped and transmitted knowledge about the Orient.

It is thus compelling to contemplate the potential power of those who *are* members of any particular group in telling their own stories, wherever those stories are told (whether in schools, or in media). For Muslims and Middle Easterners in general, so many of our stories are told by others, and by the mass media. From Disney's *Aladdin* (1992) to *Midnight Express* (1978), *I Dream of Jeannie* (1964-1970), to 9/11, the movies, TV, and news-based representations matter. However, it wasn't until the premier in 2007 of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's (CBC) *Little Mosque on the Prairie* that I paid close attention to the complexities of group-representations *by* those belonging to the group, and who exactly these representations might be for.

In the Beginning: There Was TV

Ok, maybe not in the *very* beginning. But it is undeniable that TV has played a big role in the dissemination of knowledge about society, and the people who live in it. During my decades-long love affair with the boob-tube, I never deeply examined what it was that drew me to the shows I watched. Was it seeing (or wishing to see) something of myself in the characters and situations depicted? Or was I seeking what was comfortable, familiar, predictable, and safe about "others"?

What did I learn about the people in the world by watching my favourite sitcoms? How did *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985) or *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) influence my thinking about African Americans? Do I have a better understand of the lives of African American families in the United States, and other people of Black heritage who I might encounter in my life in Canada, having watched these sitcoms? What about *Three's Company* (1977-1984) or *Will & Grace* (1998-2006)? Did those shows influence how I think about the LGBTQ communities? Or, specifically, how I conceptualize relationships between (real or pretend) gay men and straight women? What did *The Golden Girls* (1985-1992) teach me about the lives of (White) women, and my expectations about how our interests, problems, and relationships evolve as we age? Or *Designing Women* (1986-1993) about the U.S. south? What did I learn about Italian American families when watching *Everybody Loves Raymond* (1996-2005)? Did I learn that they were "just like us," whatever "us" was a placeholder for?

I suspect that the producers of these sitcoms would tell me that they are about entertainment, and not education. However the question of what we as audience learn by watching shows that are rooted in a particular socio-cultural group's experiences sharpened for me in 2007, when the CBC launched a new sitcom, called *Little Mosque on the Prairie* (herein LMOTP or *Little Mosque*). For the first time in my history as a Canadian who is acculturated (but secular) Muslim, there was a show on TV about "us." So was this "good" for us?

About *Little Mosque on the Prairie*

*Little Mosque on the Prairie*¹ is a Canadian sitcom about a small Muslim com-

munity in the fictional Canadian prairie town called Mercy. The sitcom broadcasts on CBC television, and aired its first episode in January 2007. The show has an eclectic cast of characters including: the big-city transplant Imam Amaar Rashid who leads the Muslim congregation in Mercy. There's Yasir Hamoudi, a Lebanese-Canadian contractor. Sarah Hamoudi, Yasir's wife, a White convert to Islam who works for the Mayor of Mercy. Rayyan Hamoudi, Yasir and Sarah's daughter, a feminist-Muslim doctor. Baber Siddiqui is the Pakistani-Canadian professor, and the most conservative member of the mosque in Mercy. There's Fatima Dinssa, a Nigerian-Canadian Muslim who runs the local diner. Fred Tupper is the local radio station's Rush Limbaugh-style host. Ann Popowicz is the Mayor of the town, and Reverend Duncan McGee is the Anglican minister whose congregation rents prayer space to the Muslim congregation of Mercy.

The CBC launched *Little Mosque* with a great deal of fanfare, extensive commercial advertising, and a prime timeslot on Sunday evenings at 8:30 following its very popular show, the *Rick Mercer Report*. The synopsis in the press kit for *Little Mosque* includes this description of the show: "The sitcom reveals that, although different, we are all surprisingly similar when it comes to family, love, the generation gap and our attempts to balance our secular and religious lives." There is a representation of ethnic and religious diversity in this sitcom that is uncharacteristic to the sitcom genre. For this alone, *Little Mosque* deserves attention and praise. For all its other conformities to the genre, to see so many people of colour in lead character roles, and have both men and women represent a spectrum (rather than simple binary) of attitude points, is truly unique.

Despite the unprecedented news coverage about "the Muslim sitcom," I wondered how much of *Little Mosque on the Prairie* was for me, and how much was for the rest of Canada, the non-Muslim Canadians to get to know us, and to see that in many ways, we were "just like one another." Could Little Mosque be good for Canada, and simultaneously be good for Muslims?

Ah, Airports: Flying While Muslim

One cannot separate the emergence of *Little Mosque* at this time in North American history, from the events preoccupying the media in general in the years since September 11, 2001. In fact, the press kit for *Little Mosque* includes some very explicit allusions to 9/11, which ironically lie in tension with the "we're all the same" discourse the show declares. In the pilot episode, the story follows Amaar Rashid, a young brown-skinned man, on his trip from the big city (Toronto) to his new job as the Imam of the small town mosque. While in line at the airport check-in counter, the Imam is speaking on his cell phone to his mother. Perhaps predictably, his use of trigger words and phrases, like "bomb," "Allah's plan," and "suicide," quickly find him arrested for (his joke) "flying while Muslim."

An interrogation scene follows, and it is disturbing along multiple fronts. First,

it minimizes the very real, and not at all humorous, constraints on Muslim or Arab (or perceived to be Muslim or Arab) young men and women. Such constraints may be as innocent as suspicious glances, or outright stares, that many Arabs and Muslims feel in public spaces. An aura of surveillance is a frightening reality for many in these communities. This surveillance ranges from the “innocent” gawks, to more frightening incidences, including those like the deportation and torture of Canadian Maher Arar who is the most notable yet not the only case of the transfer of Canadians of Arab origin to countries that are known for use of torture. Maher Arar’s case, and the role of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in his deportation and detention, are well known in Canada, having received extensive coverage in the news. Thus to present yet another airport scene in which a Muslim/Arab man is detained, in the current socio-political context, suggests that the audience for whom such depictions are considered humour, is likely not the same audience for whom such depictions are very real possibilities.

In the airport scene with the Imam, both the airport’s security officers as well as the Imam as the detainee himself, present the situation as nothing other than humour, a folly of stereotypes derived from cultural misunderstandings. In fact, the Imam is flippant in his interactions with the detaining officers, joking with them, “you can deport me to Syria.” He gestures that a joke has gone over the heads of the officers (hand slicing over head), and the officers jump, “what is that, some sort of signal?” Later, while being asked about his time in Afghanistan, the Imam is almost sarcastic, “I was *volunteering* with a development agency.” It is a series of questions that is not far from what any Muslim/Arab man might encounter. But the reality of the socio-political climate is that for many Muslim men, such a situation is an incredibly high-stakes setting and has the *potential* (even if not the norm) of escalating in very unpredictable and frightening ways.

Second, the interrogation scene presents the process of detainment and questioning as nothing more than a little nuisance. It follows, therefore, that the grumbling responses of those who *are* detained and questioned is either an over-reaction to what is likely to be a version of the event as it unfolds on the show, and/or that those who do undergo harsher questioning must be deserving of harsher treatment. The “regular” questioning is likely a variation of what we see on the screen, since *that* depiction is what becomes normal, not only in this episode, in this sitcom. But it is normal to align Islam, threat, and violence (as the Danish journalist does when speaking to Edward Said) in virtually every other media-based representation of Islam. If this point seems exaggerated, consider the effects of the movie *Midnight Express* on popular knowledge about what detention by authorities might be like. Why is it that for the case of Turkish prisons, the media-based representation is powerfully “real,” yet for North American detentions of Arabs/Muslims, they are perceived as comedic.

The first episode continues on with the post-9/11 theme. The Mercy mosque is thought to be a sleeper cell by the local small-town folk; in subsequent episodes,

LMOTP takes up topics such as the segregation of men and women in prayer, educating the town (and audience) about Islam via an open house at the mosque, co-ed swimming, polygamy, and dating. The second season of *Little Mosque* has begun. In the second season, the show tackles issues like women wearing burqas, no fly lists, and other “haram” (forbidden) elements of Islam such as drinking and gambling.

In 2001, *Statistics Canada* reports that there are just under 600,000 Canadians of Muslim heritage, representing 2% of Canada’s total population.² We can reasonably assume, then, that most of the 2 million strong audience of the premiere episode were non-Muslim Canadians. For many of them, the effects of a post-9/11 world are effects that they mostly read about in newspapers and watch on the television news broadcasts, rather than experience or fear firsthand. Thus an airport detention episode does more than smatter humour onto a tense reality. It simultaneously performs a great deal of education. Events are re-organized through a lens of meritocracy, as this Imam’s individual experience is presented apart from the historically-rooted events and patterns that continue the marginalization, demonization, and vilification of all who belong to (or are perceived to belong to) the group “Muslim.” Rather, this Imam’s detention is a collection of misunderstandings, a comedy of errors in Oscar Wilde style.

The earliest studies exploring the treatment of Arabs and Muslims in North American formal educational settings, primarily school textbooks, found them littered with familiar stereotypes like nomadic Bedouin lifestyles and cultural costumes (Alami, 1957; Jarrar, 1976; MESA, 1975; Suleiman, 1977), binary comparisons between West/good and Arab/bad (NAAA, 1980), and outright errors about the status of women, marriage, and the religion *Mohammadism* (referring to Islam) and its practitioners *Mohammadens* (al-Qazzaz, 1983, 1985). And in media, one only need to review the work of Jack Shaheen (1984, 1997, 2001) to see that Hollywood’s representation of Arabs and Muslims has been a catalogue of desert oases, harem maidens, sleazy Arabs drooling over White heroines, outlandish palaces, holy wars, oil sheikhs, and acts of terror (also see Kincheloe & Steinberg, 2004). In her study of 100 years of Arab representation in *National Geographic*, Linda Steet (2000) reveals how images of Arab women as veiled victims existed alongside harem seductresses photographed bare-breasted for the White male colonizer’s gaze. And is it really possible to argue that the history of representation of Arabs and Muslims in media and school contexts, *The Arabian Nights* tales, *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Midnight Express* (1978), *Not Without my Daughter* (1980), and *Aladdin* (1992) have no bearing on “our” capacity to make sense of newly-emerging images in the constructed context of a post 9/11 world?

Obviously, the fact that this is a sitcom means the plot and characters are fiction. Yet it would be problematic to assume that the plot and characters are *purely* fiction, divorced from any social context in which, and for which, they are presented. As Steinberg (2002) explains, “if pedagogy involves issues of knowledge production and transmission...then popular culture is the most powerful pedagogical force in

contemporary America. The pedagogy of popular culture is ideological, of course in its production of common sense assumptions about the world” (p. 206). And given the global nature of media representation and transmission, Steinberg’s observations about the role of media in America in creating common sense assumptions, is not limited to the United States. And further, the influence cannot be reduced to a simplistic “representation-causes-hate & fear” formula. Rather, it is in the repetition of particular narratives, in the normalizing and familiarizing of particular representations at the expense of a heterogeneity of stories and representations that is the most influential in creating a set of constraints within which the story of a particular group is told (Dyer, 1993; Shaheen, 2001). This repetition-makes-normal framework is expressed concisely by Shaheen (2001), “*al tikrar biallem il hmar*. By repetition even the donkey learns. This Arab proverb encapsulates how effective repetition can be when it comes to education... For more than a century, Hollywood has used repetition as a teaching tool” (p. 1).

The Bricolage and Kaleidoscope: Canadian Muslims on *Little Mosque*

In his book, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (2004), John Law introduces a compelling metaphor in his discussion around the “messes” of conducting social research and our ability as researchers to capture the complexity of human life and reality. A *kaleidoscope* of methods and theories for understanding social life, he writes,

reflects and refracts a world that in important ways cannot be fully understood as a specific set of determinate processes...What is important in the world including its structures is not simply technically complex...in the sense that they are technically difficult to grasp (though this is certainly often the case). Rather, they are also complex because they *necessarily exceed our capacity to know them*. No doubt local structures can be identified, but, or so I want to argue, the world in general defies any attempt at overall orderly accounting. The world is not to be understood in general by adopting a methodological version of auditing. Regularities and standardizations are incredibly powerful tools but they set limits. Indeed, that is a part of their (double-edged) power. And they set even firmer limits when they try to orchestrate themselves hegemonically into purported coherence. The need, then, is for heterogeneity and variation. It is about following Lewis Carroll’s queen and cultivating and playing with the capacity to think six impossible things before breakfast. And, as part of this, it is about creating metaphors and images for what is impossible to barely possible, unthinkable or almost unthinkable. Slippery, indistinct, elusive, complex, diffuse, messy, textured, vague, unspecific, confused, disordered, emotional, painful, pleasurable, hopeful, horrific, lost, redeemed, visionary, angelic, demonic, mundane, intuitive, sliding and unpredictable.... (p. 6)

It bears stating that the approach adopted in this piece does not claim to be Actor Network Theory (the critical tradition that sociologist Law is most closely associ-

ated with); Law's ideas in this discussion, specifically related to identified strategies for preserving the complexities of slippery and emotional social phenomenon, are extremely relevant here. In *After Method*, Law does not suggest wholeheartedly doing away with traditional qualitative or indeed quantitative research methods. Rather, he is seeking to push beyond the limits of traditional methods and ask those of us who work in social sciences traditions to consider how we may better capture the complexities of social life—to, as he writes, think in contradiction to think the unthinkable. More importantly, how might we capture the tension between the process of *producing* realities as we are *describing* realities (Law, 2004).

In a discussion that echoes Law (2004), Kincheloe (2001) takes up Denzin and Lincoln's (2000) concept of *bricolage* as a means of capturing the interdisciplinary methodological approach to understanding a socially-constructed object of research and study. In a discussion about the synergy that is possible in a bricolage approach to interdisciplinary research, Kincheloe writes: "Carefully exploring the relationships connecting the object of inquiry to the contexts in which it exists, the researcher constructs the most useful bricolage his or her wide knowledge of research strategies can provide" (p. 686). Although writing in reference to research method specifically, Kincheloe's discussion of bricolage and Law's image of a kaleidoscope both capture the need for "mess", for not simply tolerating but cultivating difference (Kincheloe, 2001).

This somewhat lengthy discussion of methodological approach is presented as an introduction to capturing the approach that is taken in this presentation of Muslim Canadians' responses to a web survey. In a series of open-ended items, Canadian Muslims were asked their thoughts on *Little Mosque*, and about life as a Muslim in Canada. In this next section, drawn to Law and Kincheloe's conceptions and discussions of capturing heterogeneity in the context of tension, hegemony, and disparate-ness within the Muslim community, I attempt to weave some of their voices of respondents into this discussion. Of course, this too is a selected list, falling into the failure of producing while describing realities of life as a Muslim Canadian.

Many respondents described being embedded in a history of little to no representation...

"Don't remember being taught about anything Middle Eastern or Muslims."

"I never read anything about them, other than references to Muhammad being the most important prophet in Islam."

...characterized by myopic representation in school...

"I didn't really read about any Muslims or Middle Easterners in school at all. Not for lack of trying, but they simply were NEVER mentioned or referred to. Whenever anything remotely relevant popped up, it was because of Ancient Egypt (my background is Egyptian)...no mention of Islam or Arabs at all."

"There was one geography lesson talking about Muslims in an African country

and how the men would take the animals out to pasture and the women would grind the grain and do things at home. I remember my teacher commenting that the men there are lucky because they can marry four wives.”

“Any Muslim characters or historic figures we were introduced to in school were only referred to in passing and in opposition to European characters or historic figures. For instance, I remember being shown Disney’s Robin Hood and hearing the teacher talk about Robin Hood and King Richard fighting against ‘bad people’ in the Crusades. It took many years and countless fantasy playing of ‘Robin’s Merry Men’ before I realized that those ‘bad people’ were Muslims defending their land.”

....and in media....

“None that I can recall. I do remember the First Gulf War cutting off the cartoons with updates. Muslims (in this case Iraqis) were portrayed as the ‘enemy’.”

“Most of the time however, i feel whenever muslims [sic] are portrayed in media, it is always showing that they are oppressed/in trouble/war.”

...except for a few special cases,...

“Very few. There was (and still is) Haroon Siddiqui of the Toronto Star. I believe that he was always an advocate of muslims [sic] in Canada and provided useful insight for non-Muslim Canadians.”

“Yes, I remember Nahlah Ayed from CBC, she’s a reporter/journalist and she gives Canada and muslims a positive image.”

“The only [Middle Easterns or Muslims] I was vaguely aware of was Jamie Farr from M*A*S*H and later Casey Kasem from a pop radio station.”

For many Canadians of Muslim heritage, *Little Mosque* offers hope...

“I heard about it saw commercials and had seen little house on the prairie so I wanted to see what it would be like. I like these sorts of comedies and it was something I could relate to and watch without having my parents object to what I’m watching on tv.”

“I heard a lot about it and wanted to see for myself.”

“[I knew] the producer was muslim [sic] and felt that it had incredible potential to tackle often difficult topics through humour.”

“I was hoping for a constructive television show that I could watch with my children, so that they could see this part of their heritage in a positive light.”

“I was interested in seeing a show about Muslims on mainstream TV which was created by a Muslim.”

“I was interested to see how they would pull off a comedy about Muslims.”

“Because it was the first show/sitcom that seemed to include a muslim [sic] way of life.”

...because alongside of the happy memories of life in Canada...

“Once the community reached a certain critical mass, it became evident that we started getting a voice to speak to politicians.”

“Being able to practice my religion freely (ie: wearing hijab in public schools).”

“Going to pray or celebrating eid wearing hannah and taking of days from school due to eid or being excused from gym for fasting were always good memories. I remember other nonmuslim friends of mine were like oh you’re so lucky you get to be excused from gym class.”

...there are circumstances that make it difficult to be Muslim in Canada like...

“being called Osama bin laden’s [sic] wife, being swore at or spit on in public places.”

“Some kids in a department store once sarcastically told me and my mom that they liked our Halloween costumes - in reference to our hijabs.”

“September 11th.”

“9/11.”

“911.”

“September 11th.”

And along with this socio-political reality, there is a deep cautionary mistrust...

“[the show] is unrealistic and unrepresentative— [my friends and family] also feel it emphasized minor issues and underemphasizes key issues in muslim [sic] communities. it does not reflect my experiences as a muslim [sic] in Canada.”

“At first I think it had the attention of many of my family members, as we hoped to see some of ‘us’ in it. But, perhaps because our experience with Islam is more secular and personal (not in any way revolving around the life at the Mosque) we started to lose interest.”

The respondents convey a cautious optimism. The *potential* of such a show, a sense that finally there was something that included them, that they could watch as a family, that depicted their family with humour. The potential of this sitcom gains even greater significance when placed alongside the representations of Muslims and Middle Easterners the respondents recall seeing in their prior school and media experiences.

Despite the curiosity and hope that drew the survey participants to watch the first episode, when asked if the show is popular among their friends and family, respondents were either lukewarm or definitely “no.” One respondent wrote,

“Little Mosque on the Prairie certainly needs our support. It will hopefully pave the way to greater and more diverse portrayal of Muslims and people of Muslim descent in a positive way.”

Conclusion

The fact that this show bears the burden of these challenges is noteworthy. In a context of a sea of current and historical school and mass-media representations of Islam and Muslims, *Little Mosque* has taken on topics like feminism in Islam, has presented for open discussion some of the common stereotypes about the homogeneity of the Muslim community, it has brought to light some of the issues faced by Muslims living in a predominantly non-Muslim cultural milieu, and has done all this with a light tone, a tone we don't often see in relation to the Muslim community in Canada, or anywhere for that matter.

For anyone who would like to see episodes of *Little Mosque*, many clips from the already-aired episodes are available on the CBC's website. As well, there are numerous websites, including YouTube.com, that have episodes collected there. In addition to clips of the show, there are numerous comments that convey lukewarm appreciation for a sitcom about Muslim life. For instance, of the over 400 posts in response to the clip of part 1 of episode 1 (in which the Imam's airport scenes are), there are some who posted comments like:

"People need to stop taking a simple sitcom so seriously, Im [sic] Muslim Canadian and I LOVE this show, its hilarious [sic]. FYI North America wasnt [sic] built on Christian values it was built on the enslavement of African people, stealing the land and riches of Natives and exploiting the land!!!!"

However, overwhelmingly the posts are of this type:

"little mosque on the fuckin' prairie does not reflect Canada
it's islamofascism
it denigrates Christianity
and it subjugates traditional values"

"now they want to vote with their burkas hiding their faces
fuck them
they preach hate in their mosques
and their objective is to destroy western values
fuck off little mosque on the prairie
it's pure propaganda"

"Hey, let's have a CBC crew go to Iran and film a sitcom called Little Chapel in the Camel Shit Infested Desert. Everyone would get their throats slit."³

Whatever coating we may wish to put on it, the reality is, that for many Canadians of Muslim and Middle Eastern heritage, *this* is what it means to be Muslim in Canada.

Notes

¹ Information about the show is from <http://www.cbc.ca/littlemosque/>

² from Statistics Canada: <http://www40.statcan.ca/101/cst01/demo30a.htm?sdi=muslim>

³ retrieved on September 15 from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tu2-lXDe2to>

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