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Heroes, Villains and the Muslim Exception: Muslim and Arab Men in Australian Crime Drama

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Heroes, Villains and the Muslim Exception: Muslim and Arab Men in Australian Crime Drama

Abstract

This is a book review of Mehal Krayem, *Heroes, Villains and the Muslim Exception: Muslim and Arab Men in Australian Crime Drama*.

Author Notes

Sana Patel is a PhD candidate at University of Ottawa. Her thesis research focuses on the religious behaviors of young North American Muslims in online and offline spaces. She is particularly interested in hybrid media spaces that emerge from interactions of online and offline religion among Muslim millennials.

Krayem, Mehal, *Heroes, Villains and the Muslim Exception: Muslim and Arab Men in Australian Crime Drama* (Melbourne University Publishing, 2017).

Mehal Krayem's *Heroes, Villains and the Muslim Exception: Muslim and Arab Men in Australian Crime Drama* adds to the growing scholarship on media representations of Arabs and Muslims. Muslims have had a history of negative representations in North American media, including in television shows and news media (Shaheen 2001, Alsultany 2012). For example, after 9/11 Muslim women have been depicted as oppressed and Muslim men portrayed as terrorists and/or "evil" (Arjana, 2017). There is also the dichotomy of the good/bad Arab where often the understandings of "good" are associated with "moderate" Islam and "bad" with "extreme" or "radical" Islam (93). These negative depictions are based on widely held stereotypes and essentialized perspectives of race, ethnicity, gender and class. The Australian media landscape is similarly replete with damaging images of Arabs and Muslims. Arabs are exclusively associated with Islam regardless of their actual religious background. Krayem's focus on Australian media illustrates how Arab and Muslim communities are portrayed negatively and how certain television series and films have attempted to create counternarratives that aim to show an authentic interpretation of Muslims that oppose the villain and evil stereotype. Using Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and Ghassan Hage's "white nation fantasy" as theoretical frameworks, Krayem shows that through the regular production of negative images, Arab and Muslim men are dehumanized in media. The book examines three specific examples from the fictional crime genre that use alternative narratives to humanize Arab and Muslim men by challenging Orientalist constructions: the television series *East West 101* (2007-2011), and films *The Combination* (David Field, 2009) and *Cedar Boys* (Serhat Caradee, 2009).

Chapter 1 details the history of Arabs and Muslims in Australia, which goes back to the 1600s when trading between Macassans of Indonesia and the Indigenous population of Australia took place (11). Krayem points out that Muslims began to settle in northwestern Australia in the mid-1800s when Afghan cameleers started to trade and settle in the region (11). However, in the mid-1900s when more people began to migrate from Middle Eastern countries, the history between Arabs and white Australians was portrayed as uneasy by erasing the diversity of those from Arab-speaking countries including Muslims (12). The portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in media has intensified the experiences of these communities.

Chapter 2 takes up this history of Arabs and Muslims on Australian TV shows, discussing the broader implications through an examination of *East West 101* – a crime drama series where the main character is a Muslim police officer who must navigate life and dealing with family, faith and profession in the suburbs of Sydney (42). Krayem illustrates the importance of representation for minorities in popular culture and how creators aim to challenge Orientalist perspectives of Muslim and Arab men. Similarly, in the following chapters Krayem uses the three examples to demonstrate how certain media attempt to oppose Islamophobic narratives by representing Muslims characters as more than terrorists and oppressed beings.

Chapter 3 examines *The Combination* and *Cedar Boys*, two films about young Muslim men who become drug dealers. *The Combination* tells the story of two brothers of Lebanese-descent involved in the world of drugs. John attempts to keep his younger brother, Charlie, away from this life and the evils that come with it. In this struggle, the film covers issues of prejudice, isolation, and problems accompanying diversity in Australia such as tensions between white Australians and minority communities (83). *Cedar Boys* has a similar story of three Arab men whose goals are to earn money and make it big in life through working hard and doing legitimate jobs. However, the

world of drugs provides opportunities that other ways do not, such as entering social scenes of higher-class societies and profit from monetary gains (87). Krayem argues that these films illustrate concepts of hegemonic and subordinate masculinities where white Australian men are perceived to be dominating and Arab men are viewed as subservient. This concept is paired with perceptions and tensions of multiculturalism in Australia to a white, middle class audience.

Chapter 4 continues the analysis of representations of Western hegemonic and non-Western subordinate masculinities by focusing on how *East West 101* challenges these norms. Krayem points out that Australia as a nation is commonly recognized as white and masculine (99). However, *East West 101* counters this norm through its main character, Malik, where the intersection of race, religion and gender exhibits the realities of racialized and minority communities in a multicultural nation and white-dominated profession. Malik struggles to display his masculinity in a normative manner where it is not labelled negatively as “hypermasculine” or “emasculated” (125). Malik’s conflicts with certain aspects of his identity illustrates some of these challenges that non-white immigrant men in Australia face.

Chapter 5 then discusses the limitations of representation of minority communities in the media along with institutional limitations like TV corporations that shape their narratives based on specific understanding of issues. Krayem argues that SBS, the television network that hosts *East West 101*, “reproduces White-multiculturalism at an institutional level” (139). Because the network itself has not addressed structural inequalities in their own workplace such as not hiring a diverse team of creators (producers, writers, etc.), Krayem is uncertain of the nature of anti-racism work at the institutional level for such television networks. Krayem points out that for *East West 101*, there is only one Muslim consultant and Muslim writer for not even an entire episode (149).

The show is based around Muslim issues but is created by non-Muslim creators, illustrating the lack of representation.

Finally, in chapter 6 Krayem critiques *The Combination* and *Cedar Boys* as limiting representation of young Arab men where they are portrayed as working-class criminals. In this chapter, she discusses how the experiences of writers or directors influence the identities of characters and the narratives in the films. Krayem notes binaries of “Western” versus “Other” cultures that are illustrated in the films by these creators because of their own experiences of marginalization by white society (182). For example, one of the characters in *The Combination*, John (a Lebanese-Australian) raises concern with his girlfriend’s prejudice. He associates this behaviour with her as being part of the White and “blond” community rather than as her individual problem (Ibid). Similarly, in *Cedar Boys* the three main characters who are also Lebanese-Australian are shown to pursue blonde, Western women symbolizing the desire of Anglo women by Arab men (185). In the conclusion, Krayem suggests that inclusive practices, such as hiring teams of diverse workers, need to be prioritized in Australian media. Krayem argues that we should “not underestimate the role that film and TV play in reimagining a more equal and just society” (10).

The history of Arabs and Muslims in Australia is characterized by marginalization and demonization of the “other” and is incited by “White Christian values” (19). These “white Christian values”, which include resisting patriarchy and speaking English, emerge from the historical divide between white Australians and people of color (Ibid). Instances of ethnic gang violence, such as the 2005 Cronulla incident in Western Sydney, where Anglo Australians attacked whomever they perceived as being of Middle Eastern origin, and 9/11’s impact worldwide contributed to orientalist images of Arabs and Muslims. Krayem uses the framing of Orientalists

portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in Australia to highlight the diversity within the community that is often ignored by mainstream producers and screenwriters. For example, *East West 101* confronts the everyday realities of multiculturalism that is often ignored in stereotypical representations. Through detailed character analysis, Krayem successfully demonstrates how each story challenges stereotypical images of Arab and Muslim men. She also breaks down the navigation and negotiation process that characters go through when they are presented with “us” vs “them” scenarios. Analysis of this separation between Australian and non-Australian and the villainization of Arab and Muslim men leads Krayem to emphasize that the targeted communities can use pop culture as a “powerful tool...[to] reclaim a history marginalization....” (194).

The most valuable take away from this book regards the anti-Arab and anti-Muslims sentiments that overpower Australian media. Krayem points out that “Australianness” is defined as being white and Anglophone, along with conforming to white-heteronormative masculinity culture that subjugates other understandings of masculinity. This in turn has taken up spaces which are dominated by “White-multiculturalism” (148), marginalizing and othering Arabs, Muslims, and other immigrants. Xenophobia, racism, and Islamophobia are at the core of most of Australian media when depicting others who do not fit normative ideas of being Australian. Krayem’s argument about the hegemonic characteristic of Australian media is useful in understanding how gender, race, and culture are used in constructing images of those who are almost always excluded in the media or portrayed in unfavourable manners. It is also important to note that Krayem points out that although attempts are being made to challenge the mainstream representations of Muslims, the characters in these films and television series are created by non-Muslim writers such as the main character – Malik - from *East West 101*.

Perhaps surprisingly to some readers much of the book is focused on the social-historical context of Muslims in Australian society. For those interested in media analysis specifically, it should be noted that much of the book is about anti-Muslim and anti-Arab events rather than critical analysis of the television series and films. Surely, this context is significant in understanding the portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in Australian media, but some readers will want to know more about the significance of the works in combatting Arab and Muslim stereotypes in the end. The structure of the book also makes a clear synthesis of Australian media difficult for the reader because the analysis of the three media examples are distributed throughout the entirety of the book. Although certain chapters are dedicated to each media example, some analysis is scattered within other chapters.

Overall, *Heroes, Villains and the Muslim Exception* is an excellent resource for readers interested in the representation of Muslims in Australian media, along with how hegemonic masculinity creates hostile environments for those who are framed as “others.” This book would be a good source for researchers focusing on religion and media or Muslims and film. Krayem’s work should be read with other similar works such as Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media; Race and Representation after 9/11* (2012) and Peter Morey, Amina Yaqin, Alaya Forte (eds.), *Contesting Islamophobia: Anti-Muslim Prejudice in Media, Culture and Politics* (2019).

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