

It was and it was not: Identity and the power of storytelling for Muslims (Guest blog)

lse blogs.lse.ac.uk/polis/2013/01/25/it-was-and-it-was-not-identity-and-the-power-of-storytelling-for-muslims-guest-blog/

2013-1-25

Can a minority community use storytelling to create a new identity for itself instead of having its identity decided by majority culture? Polis Intern Paula Brito reports on a talk by US playwright and author [Wajahat Ali](#) and actor Riz Ahmed.

Who is being represented and by whom? “We have our story told to us through others” says Wajahat Ali, and as a consequence, the stories of over 1.5 billion Muslims is packed into one narrative. He said that stereotypes, especially those perpetrated after 9/11 simplify the reality, history and religious values of an essentially heterogeneous group:

“Muslim extremists have high jacked our stories and religion”



Domestic Crusaders

In response Ali's recent and most renowned work “[The Domestic Crusaders](#)”, tells the story of a Pakistani-American family in the aftermath of 9/11. The approach to Islam impressed critics as it gives a real interpretation of the otherwise stereotyped “other”. It engages in the conflicts that arise within a typical Muslim family, battling between their assimilated American culture and Muslim religion.

Ali says that comedy is a good story-telling tool, “lessons sometimes go down easier when sweetened.” His play and the recent film “Four Lions” may just prove him right.

The Actor's View

From an actor's point of view, Riz Ahmed explained how one portrayal becomes the archetypical portrayal when portraying a Muslim on screen. Having played Muslim roles in diverse films (like “The road to Guantanamo” and upcoming “The Reluctant Fundamentalist”) Ahmed says have a particular responsibility:

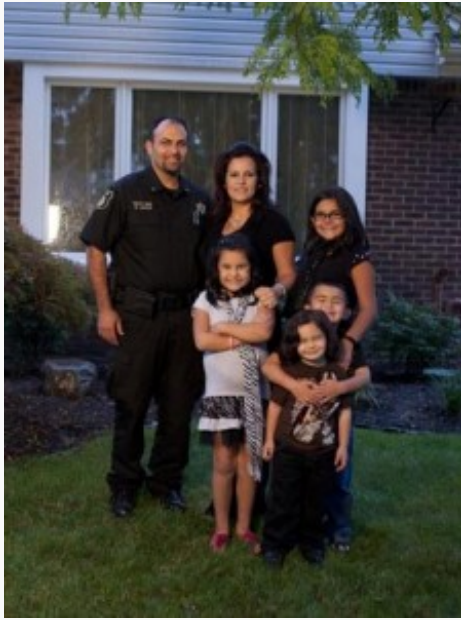
“you feel the weight of representation because it becomes a catch-all representation (...) You want to represent but in trying to represent everyone you represent no one”.

Communities are harsh to judge Muslim representations on screen precisely because demand exceeds supply, and expectations are high.

However, the problem does not lie only on the production side. Are audiences ready for more sincere representations? In the event, Ali stated that we must “invest in our current history.” Narratives should portray the contemporary Muslim.

The US reality TV-series “[All-American Muslim](#)” tried to do just this, portraying an American Muslim family living in

Dearborn, Michigan. The show premiered in 2011 with a complete nuance approach, yet, it lasted only one season and was cancelled in March 2012. The protests from the [Florida Family Association](#) pushed companies to pull advertising and boycott the show. [The controversy](#) was, paradoxically, caused by its lack of stereotypes.



All American Muslims

This is a sad end to an attempt to add plurality to media content. But who were the audiences? What did the Muslim communities have to say about such an eclectic mix of real life Muslim personas? Did this too cause controversy amongst them?

Ali and Ahmed remain positive. They believe that Directors and Production companies have increasingly become open to new, avant garde and authentic proposals and they want to help create them and in the process, help create new identities for communities like Muslims in Britain and the US.

This article by Polis Intern Paula Brito.

The event was organised by Leaf Network and the Radical Middle Way

- Copyright © 2014 London School of Economics and Political Science