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The Scapegoats of Terror: The Disparity in Muslim Representation in the Western Media

In the city of Cape Girardeau, located in Missouri, a mosque (which is a place of worship for Muslims) was set on fire on April 24th, 2020 at 5:00 in the morning. April 24th was also the first day of Ramzan, a month in which Muslims observe fasts from dusk till dawn, so the day on which this incident occurred was of great religious significance. The surveillance footage of this incident captured a 42 year old white male, by the name of Nicholas J. Proffitt, who broke into the mosque with methodical purpose, then proceeded to pour combustible fluid on the chairs and on the rugs. After which, he calmly lit everything on fire. A video of his actions was posted to the Facebook page of the Missouri Chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) by the board chair, Yasir Ali, so that people could see “how cold and determined that Proffitt was to destroy the mosque.” Fortunately, Proffitt was apprehended by the law and after his arrest, Proffitt was charged with burglary, arson, and property damage motivated by discrimination. But Yasir Ali rightly pointed out that if Proffitt had been Muslim, and attacked other places of worship, he would have been labeled a terrorist. Unsurprisingly, the word “terrorist” is nowhere to be found in discussions of Proffitt and his actions (Obeidallah). Muslims have been the scapegoats of terror in western media for a prolonged period of time and this has resulted in the reinforcement of negative stereotypes, which ultimately subject Muslims to hate crimes and increase islamophobia. This paper will first focus on how Muslims are portrayed as violent and most likely to be labelled terrorists in the news and in pop culture, then discuss the effects of this

portrayal on the Muslim community. Additionally, this paper will discuss the relationship between the media and the concept of terrorism and finally, provide solutions for media outlets to focus on a more objective portrayal of violent incidents and a more positive portrayal of Muslims overall.

The portrayal of Muslims in the mainstream media, whether it be coverage on the news or pop culture is disproportionately negative. A report published in September 2019 by the Media Portrayals of Minorities Project (MPoMP) at Middlebury College focused on the mainstream media portrayal of minority groups in the United States. The report examined a total of five significant racial, ethnic and religious minorities, namely African-Americans (who comprise about 13% of the US population), Asian-Americans (5%), Latinos (16%), Jews and Muslims (2% and 1%, respectively). The researchers wrote: "...our analyses show that coverage of Muslims stands out as being both the most frequent and the most negative by a wide margin." (The Bridge Initiative, pg.1). They also found that newspaper coverage of Muslims carried a more negative tone than the overall coverage of African Americans, Asian-Americans, Latinos, or Jewish people altogether (The Bridge Initiative). In the area of news, the mainstream media is also quick to equate Muslims with acts of terrorism. A more recent study in the *Justice Quarterly* journal also reflects on how religion is a major factor in the coverage of any terrorist attack. As a case in point, terror attacks carried out by Muslims receive on average 357 percent more media coverage and in the United States, most members of the community have a tendency to fear the "Muslim terrorist" as opposed to other threats. ("Terror Attacks by Muslims Get 357 Percent More Media Coverage than Other Terror Attacks, Study Shows")

In reference to Western pop culture, Hiba Alnajjar penned an article capturing the problematic, stereotypical portrayal of Muslims in Hollywood. She powerfully wrote: "Film and

television may be easily brushed off as mere entertainment, but the truth is, what we watch shapes our perceptions of the world in a monumental way.” (Alnajjar, pg.1). Alnajjar categorized the vilified portrayal of Muslims into six varying stereotypes, beginning from the association of Hollywood with terrorism and anger and ending with the stereotype of the oppressed woman in Islam. Of the six, the three overarching stereotypes of any Muslim character’s disposition in television and film are as follows. The first stereotype showcases Muslims as oppressed because of their religion, Islam. This stereotype is often seen in women Muslim characters, who are deemed oppressed because they must adhere to a “burden” of religious norms. The second stereotype perpetuates that Muslims are indefinitely linked to acts of terrorism or terrorist organizations, while the third stereotype insinuates that Muslims are an ultimate threat to the modern western lifestyle, no matter how well they seem to assimilate themselves within such a culture.

The article draws attention to a show named *The Bodyguard*, in which the viewer is introduced to Nadia, a female character whose story can be contextually understood with reference to the first and second stereotype. Nadia is first introduced as an oppressed Muslim woman who wears the hijab and is also donning a suicide bomb vest. Later, in the show, she ends up confirming that she is a terrorist. In fact, she is a significant organizer, as well as contributor, to the multiple attacks on people (specifically bombings) that take place throughout the course of the story. The plot twist from Nadia being perceived as vulnerable and oppressed, to a terrorist capable of inflicting mass harm is not genius. It only reveals how deeply entrenched Muslim stereotypes are within the entertainment industry, because instead of setting up Nadia’s character arc to break out of one stereotype, the writers made sure to cement her existence in the mold of another. Inevitably, what the viewer takes away is that Muslims are only to be equated to violence

and spreading terror on a massive scale, and even when oppressed they are still capable of significant harm. (Alnajjar)

As a reference to an intersectional relation between the second and third stereotype, the popular television show *Homeland* establishes a common theme that all Muslims are dangerous no matter how “modern” they seem on the outside. The picturization of the Homeland character Roya Hammad is testament to this. First seen and celebrated as a confident and successful reporter, Hammad is later revealed to have ties to a violent terrorist as the plot of the show thickens. The outcome of this portrayal being that Muslims are a people who are not only extremist but are also inadvertently connected to terrorism, which is an eventual threat to the Western lifestyle. (Alnajjar)

The effect of such negative portrayals in news and entertainment not only reinforces a negative stereotype about Muslims, but also puts members of the community in harm’s way. The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding (ISPU) reports that only 38 percent of Americans know someone who is Muslim. This means that 62 percent of American perceptions are wholly defined by what they see on their screens, which is a one-dimensional misrepresentation of Muslims (ISPU). As an effect, one can find multiple instances where Muslims have been subject to violence in the form of hate crimes. In 2019 alone, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) reported that Muslims were the second largest target for hate crimes, after Jews (“Anti-Muslim”). Just two years later, Muhammad Anwar, a 66-year-old Pakistani-Muslim immigrant who was an Uber Eats driver - was murdered by two teenaged girls, ages 13 and 15, as they assaulted him with a taser to hijack and then attempt to steal his car in Washington D.C. (Caitlin). As the American Pakistani Public Affairs Committee called on police to investigate the death as a hate crime, the news channel CNN was called out for its hypocrisy on Twitter for labelling this

incident as an “accident”, when it had adopted an entirely different narrative when reporting recent shootings that took place in Atlanta, Georgia, and Boulder, Colorado and ended up claiming 18 lives (Paul). Another incident took place in Queens, New York during the month of June. In a string of what the police label as Anti-Muslim motivated attacks, two different Muslim women were the victims of physical and emotional abuse by an unknown Black man. The first woman was 24 years old and was subject to Anti-Muslim statements as the suspect followed her, then had her hijab tugged while also being punched in the arm. The second woman was 56 years of age, faced anti-Muslim statements, and was punched in the face multiple times, which resulted in small lacerations on her head along with a fractured nose. The police noted that the man had not been attacked prior and ran off immediately after assaulting both women (Fung). As individuals, our thoughts and perceptions are strongly influenced, in thought *and* action by the content we consume, therefore it is of utmost importance to be aware of how the media is feeding into our negative bias of Muslims being dangerous and violent.

One of the first areas to explore in why Muslims are misrepresented in Western media, is the development of Islamophobia throughout history. The term Islamophobia can be generally understood as a dislike for Muslims which results in practices of discrimination and exclusion against them, but in 2017, the Runnymede Commission published a more detailed definition, which read: “Islamophobia is any distinction, exclusion or restriction towards, or preference against Muslims (or those perceived to be Muslims) that has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise, on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.” (“Islamophobia and Its Impact”, slide 7). According to the Islamic Networks Group, the historical development of Islamophobia can be traced through Orientalism. Orientalism refers to

the study of the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia regions by Western scholars during the 18th and 19th century. This type of study was developed and done by Western scholars to uphold the structure of European colonialism that was present in these specific regions. A professor by the name of Edward Said wrote a book about Orientalism in which he wrote about the way Eastern people began to be perceived by people of the West. He explained that Eastern people were portrayed as exotic and were deemed radically different from Western people. Moreover, they were also seen as inferior in comparison to the West. The Europeans who had observed the people in these regions ultimately generalized their behavior as a norm that was prevalent in all of Eastern culture. Thus, they formed their own narrative of people in the Oriental regions, a significant portion of who were Muslims and stereotyped people in the Orient by categorizing them as primitive yet irrational in their behavior, sexually promiscuous or sexist, and violent (“Islamophobia and Its Impact”). In the West, as of today, people often generalize the behavior of terrorists and extremist groups to that of all Muslims. This is because the same stereotypes that Orientalism subjected Eastern people to, have resurfaced to become the stereotypes that govern the concept of Islamophobia.

It also does not help that these negative stereotypes continue to be disseminated by a contemporary factor such as the media, an agency that does not responsibly portray information. With reference to reporting news, an article titled “Terrorism and the Media: A Dangerous Symbiosis”, discusses that the media has an incentive to cover terrorist attacks because that coverage carries the element of boosted viewership which leads to an increase in profits. They resort to covering terrorism related news in a way that sensationalizes already dangerous circumstances and this contributes to creating an atmosphere of tension for people in society (Bilgen). Moreover, when a terrorist attack occurs in the Western world, the mainstream media is

quick to associate phrases such as “Islamist extremists”, “Muslim terrorists” and “religious fundamentalists” to the violent destruction at hand. In doing so, it directly links a whole religion to destruction and widespread, intentional violence. (Jetter)

The media’s synonymous use of Muslim and terrorist carries a significantly grave impact which influences the genealogy of the word terrorism and impacts the media’s contextual use of it as well. Though there are many definitions, the word terrorism is understood by most scholars to mean a form of violence or threatened violence against a target to achieve a goal. Richard Jackson, in his article “Constructing Enemies: 'Islamic Terrorism' in Political and Academic Discourse”, writes that the concept of Islamic terrorism holds unacknowledged cultural assumptions that are damaging to the Muslim community. When terrorism is discussed, it often involves reference to labels such as “extremist”, “radicalism”, “jihadists”, “Islamism” and even though these labels are vaguely defined, they continue to be used in a highly flexible manner and are not at all acknowledged as being culturally loaded. (Jackson) When the media uses the framework technique - which can be understood as, “selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described”(Bilgen) - to equate terrorism and Islam, they are encouraging bias against Muslims by reinforcing culturally and racially loaded terminology.

To combat the negative portrayal of Muslims, it is necessary to view solutions with reference to civility. Civility means embracing an attitude of acceptance towards the diversity that is present in the society that you live in. It means being accepting of another’s background, race, religion, and culture as well as any other aspect of their identity they choose to identify themselves by. The active choice of adopting an attitude of acceptance instead of simple

tolerance can make all the difference in your interaction with people from all walks of life. You have the power to make people feel welcome, and more importantly, safe, in any conversation and space. Secondly, for the purposes of spreading information, accountability is an extremely important trait to embody. One needs to recognize that if they are in a position of authority, they carry a great power of influence over others, which should ideally be exercised in a way that is just for all parties involved. Lastly, civility also borders on the idea of community. If we, as a community can collectively work together to advocate for positive change, reform within the larger structures in our society are bound to occur.

The media industry can take several, civility-inspired, steps in this regard. The article by Adra Bilgen “Terrorism and the Media: A Dangerous Symbiosis” makes suggestions for how to do this by first suggesting the process of “Desecuritization”. This process entails that while the media should report terrorism, they should take the initiative to change the language they use to report it. Instead of trying to capitalize on the aspect of sensationalism, media outlets should strive to responsibly report incidents. As a result, it will reduce the emergence of immediate public fear and deescalate what could have been an atmosphere of widespread tension. (Bilgen) Media outlets should further focus on clear differentiation when it comes to reporting. Communicating without bias and making sure to highlight all the facts should be made a priority to ensure that information is being delivered to viewers in the most objective way possible. Along side this, the media should make the public aware of different types of terrorism and terrorist groups to prevent the mobilization of people against different racial, ethnic, and religious groups in society. Great care should be taken to report incidents in a way that does not create an “us versus them” scenario, which contributes to the “otherization” of Muslims (in this case). As Bilgen puts it: “Such dichotomy can give way to social unrest in multicultural societies

that fail to integrate certain groups and trigger further attacks, as the anger and hopelessness become pushing forces for potential recruiters, sympathizers, and even moderates to up rise.”

(Bilgen, pg.1)

On an individual basis, I propose a call to action to plan. The first phase of this plan involves practicing information literacy. This allows us to interpret information critically and question the sources through which we get our information. After which we can practice reading and responding. In the second phase, I would encourage the reader to familiarize themselves with a framework to interpret the entertainment they consume on their own time. This framework is known as the Riz Test, inspired by British-Pakistani actor Riz Ahmed and his speech at the House of Commons in 2017, and is meant for viewers to measure the portrayal of Muslim characters on television and film through a list of five questions: “Is the character: 1. Talking about, the victim of, or the perpetrator of terrorism? 2. Presented as irrationally angry? 3. Presented as superstitious, culturally backwards, or anti-modern? 4. Presented as a threat to a Western way of life? And 5. If the character is male, is he presented as misogynistic? or if female, is she presented as oppressed by her male counterparts?” (Ahmed). If the answer is yes to any of these questions, then the entertainment piece being watched fails to represent Muslims within its plot. The utilization of this framework will allow us to slowly become aware of the long withstanding misrepresentation of Muslims in the entertainment industry. Finally, I encourage advocating for Muslims by getting in touch with organizations that are working to encourage positive Muslim portrayal. An example of one such organization is Muslim Advocates, who proudly “work in the courts, in the halls of power and in communities to halt bigotry in its tracks”(“Newsroom”). Their website contains an abundance of information and volunteer opportunities, in the area of politics, social justice and entertainment, which can help in

getting acquainted with information and updates about how they are striving to make the necessary space in society for Muslims.

In addition to solutions for media and individuals, it would be in great social interest if the Muslim community were to continue finding innovative ways in which they engage with other demographic groups to build relations with them while also establishing safety measures to protect fellow Muslims. Both these actions are necessary to establish an overall stronger sense of community in our society. The article “Struggling Against Stereotypes”, published by The Pluralism Project at Harvard University, highlights that many Muslim individuals and groups alike, are practicing transparent communication in order to dispel the negative stereotypes that have been perpetuated about them. Mosques across America are holding open houses and actively invite Non-Muslims to lectures about Islam or to attend Friday prayers (which hold significance for Muslims). In Boston, Massachusetts there are flyers posted in subways and trains, inviting people to Islam 101 classes, and Muslim student groups across college campuses are hosting “Islam Awareness Week” too (“Struggling Against Stereotypes”). All this to encourage a more accurate flow of information that comes directly from the people of the community itself and to encourage community building with those people who do not know much about Islam as a religion and Muslims as a people. In addition to this, in order to protect other Muslims within the community, The Islamic Circle of North America has set up a toll-free number to report bias and hate incidents and the Council of American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), has continued to track hate crimes against American Muslims. (“Struggling Against Stereotypes”) If these practices were to continue to be implemented on a larger scale, there is hope for a positive transformation within the society we live in.

To conclude, the inaccurate, negative, and one-dimensional portrayal of people belonging to the Muslim community leads to an increase in Islamophobia which in turn, subjects Muslims to bias and bigotry. This leads to them becoming victims in the many hate crimes that occur against them. A prominent contributor to this misrepresentation, are the media outlets that convey news to the public, and the entertainment industry, which effectively manages to equate terrorism with Muslims. Thus, it is important for the media to be more aware about the ways in which their reporting reinforces negative stereotypes against Muslims and strive to portray Muslims in a way that does not vilify them. If the media industry practices accountability as it strives to communicate information to its viewers in a way that is objective, *and* captures the identity of Muslims in a way that is positively holistic, we can begin the long-awaited and much needed transformation to positive representation for other religious, ethnic and racial groups in our diverse society.

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