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The Good Muslim: When Positive Portrayals Prevail

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(https://thepolitic.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/normal_the_messenger_536.jpg)

In 1976, Syrian director Moustapha Al Akkad achieved what had seemed impossible: the funding, production, and release of a Hollywood biopic about the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the origins of Islam. Akkad's film is called *The Message* and still stands as an iconic piece of art in the Muslim world.

More remarkable is how *The Message* became reality: the project was financed by the governments of Kuwait, Libya, and Morocco, production crews spent nearly five months building historical simulacrums of the cities of Mecca and Medina, and Akkad simultaneously filmed English and Arabic versions with alternate casts. To top it off, *The Message* received approval from Al-Azhar University, the most prestigious

Islamic university in the world, as an accurate and respectful retelling of the rise of Islam. The movie was even nominated for an Oscar in the Best Original Score category. Although the film is all but forgotten in the United States, in the Muslim world it is well recognized.

The Message was, and remains, the most ambitious attempt ever made to retell a major Islamic story on screen for an American audience. The only other Hollywood film of a similarly epic scale that includes nuanced and heroic portrayals of Muslims is Akkad's own 1981 historical drama *Lion of the Desert,* which told (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s_lpj5k0TnU) the real-life story of Omar Mukhtar, a Quran teacher-turned-general who eventually led a war of resistance against the Italian Royal Army occupying Libya pre-World War II. Perhaps not coincidentally, Akkad himself was a Muslim.

But in spite of the American desert that is positive Muslim representation, a small handful of oases have appeared in the years since *The Lion of the Desert*. Those appearances, though transient and forgotten, were enough to demonstrate that Hollywood's regurgitation of trite Muslim narratives is not just damaging because it further marginalizes Islamic media representation, but perplexing because it leaves a deep well of narrative potential untapped.

In failing to engage with Islam on a deeper level, Hollywood deprives both itself and its viewers of reinvigorating storytelling. Depicting better Muslim characters doesn't just have representational value; it very much has entertainment and literary value as well. As it is, the rarity of Muslim characters who are allowed to be religiously observant and human is a product of harmful ideologies, financial (dis)incentives, and the dearth of Muslims in the entertainment industry.

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Perhaps the best demonstration of the storytelling potential afforded by exploring more thoughtful Muslim narratives comes in the contrast between Lincoln and Sheba's romance in *Prison Break* and Roger and Aisha's romance in *Body of Lies.* Lincoln's romance with Sheba develops in accordance with the dictates of tired convention rather than any organic character work: their interactions are initially terse (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7LG04ml7zp4), until Lincoln saves Sheba's life, after which her attitude softens (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFLivPrFbqk) and slight flirtations ensue, all of which culminates in a dramatic kiss that marks the beginning of an official romantic relationship.

Sheba's pursuit of romance with Lincoln unfolds without regards to her cultural or religious background, reducing her to a generic Hollywood love interest when actually acknowledging her potentially alternate sexual ethics may have complicated their dynamic in new and interesting ways. As it is, Lincoln and Sheba's

relationship, despite crossing racial, cultural, and religious lines, is confined to the narrow box of Hollywood's action-adventure romantic orthodoxy and is thus forgettable.

Contrast Sheba with the richer portrayal of Aisha in *Body of Lies*. Her romance with Roger is so unorthodox because it unfolds in accordance with Islamic and Arab cultural norms rather than secular Western ones. Throughout the entirety of her time with Roger, she does not touch him and he, in turn, respects her personal space.

Even when Roger flirts with her, she is firm in establishing (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tezz15pLGi8) proper boundaries on her terms, saying, for example, "First we [need] to have a conversation about the proper way to have a conversation." The closest thing they have to a date is a nursing trip (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SOhYYBPKCqQ) to a Palestinian refugee camp. Only when Aisha is sure that Roger is serious about pursuing a relationship does she invite him to meet her sister, whose approval is a prerequisite for any official relationship.

Roger's lunch (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vTeY6H581pg)at Aisha's household is remarkable not just for his respectful compliance with customs at total odds with that of his own culture, but also for the unpatronizing portrayal of Aisha's sister as a Muslim woman with angry but valid political views. After the dinner, when Roger extends his hand in farewell, Aisha bashfully but firmly rejects it on her principle of not touching an unrelated male. And, ultimately, Roger and Aisha never (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1dATrt6uR98)share the iconic Hollywood kiss.

Throughout the film, aside from the judgemental stares that she receives from passersby and neighbors for being with a white man, Aisha's conservative sexual code is neither demonized nor undermined by the film's narrative nor by Roger himself.

Their story scales greater heights that of Lincoln and Sheba simply because it appreciates Islam as a relevant factor in their relationship and mines it for dramatic potential rather than sidelining it. The rarity of such a depiction on the American screen brings a distinctiveness to Roger and Aisha's relationship sorely lacking from most Hollywood action films. It is both a novel depiction of romantic development between two movie leads and an exploration of the complicated terrain of religious and cultural differences.

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Tellingly, Hollywood's best portrayal of a Muslim character came in an obscure 1999 film that was both a critical and box office failure. *The 13th Warrior*, loosely based on the novel "The Eaters of Death," follows real-life 10th century Arab traveler Ahmad ibn Fadlan as he embarks on a fictional adventure with a group

of Vikings. Ibn Fadlan is depicted with an unusual amount of nuance for a Muslim character, one which sympathetically highlights both his virtues and his flaws. His faith informs his behavior without overwhelming it, resulting in a character who is identifiably Muslim without being solely defined as such.

As a poet employed by the king's court in Baghdad during Islam's Golden Age of knowledge, Ibn Fadlan comes from an elitist background and as such is initially haughty in his interactions with the Vikings, whose poor hygiene and alien traditions convince him of their essential primitivity. However, the film highlights Ibn Fadlan's arrogance not to affirm it but to rebuke it. For all that he condescends to the Vikings for their supposed savagery, so to do they condescend to him for his physical ineptitude (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjBLuTwT6mM) and ignorance of battle.

And yet eventually the two sides earn each other's respect: Ibn Fadlan by training to become a warrior, the Vikings by learning to read and write. The movie, ultimately, is about how people of radically different cultural and religious backgrounds can enrich one another without sacrificing their original worldviews.

Ibn Fadlan grows from a figure of arrogance and physical weakness to one of humility and physical capability, learning to respect (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XrjELywPPiM)the pagan Vikings without compromising his own faith. All along the narrative highlights both his intellectual strength (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lnnREr8BV24) and religious integrity. While the actual quality of much of the film is questionable, it largely succeeds in its depiction of its central character.

The 13th Warrior walks a delicate line in marking Ibn Fadlan as an observant Muslim without falling prey to stereotypes of religious fanaticism and exaggerated piety. When he first writes a sentence to teach the Vikings how to read, the phrase he uses is the Islamic testimony of faith, an intelligent narrative choice that indicates both Ibn Fadlan's serious religious faith and its relevance to his pursuit of knowledge.

In another scene, he rejects what he believes to be an alcoholic drink from a friend,only accepting it when he discovers its honey. Near the end of the film, before the final battle against the flesh-eating monster, he prays (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UQ1B8XGApTU)to God for a blessed death. These are understated moments, presented undramatically as just another expression of Ibn Fadlan's character. They are as much a part of who he is as when he has difficulty falling asleep due to fear of an enemy attack, or when he nervously watches (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rRVZtmhvkas) a friend duel with a rival, or when he grieves in silence following a friend's death.

The film is also willing to paint Ibn Fadlan as a man not fully consistent in his adherence to traditional Islamic doctrine. After all, in the movie as in real life, Ibn Fadlan was sent away from the Baghdad court due to accusations of having an illicit love affair. As such, although he is strict in abstaining from alcohol, Ibn

Fadlan's relatively loose sexual code means he is willing to sleep with a Viking girl he'd come to like before the final battle, though whether they are intimate is left ambiguous.

As far as portraying well-rounded Muslim characters, Ibn Fadlan is a practically singular creation in the American film landscape. He is only rivaled by what may be not just the best portrayal of a Muslim in American television, but in the entire American entertainment industry in the character of Kareem Said from the HBO drama *Oz*. A nearly forgotten but influential series that aired from 1997 to 2003, *Oz* told the story of an experimental unit in a maximum state-security prison that attempted to rehabilitate an ethnically, religiously, and racially diverse set of criminals. The prisoners form their own factions, with the all-black Muslim faction led by Kareem.

Kareem is a complex character, easily the richest portrait of a Muslim man ever put to the American television screen. He is an advocate not for radical violence but for radical pacifism (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FtZ-LfDQd54), preaching nonviolence in a prison where brutal violence is the norm.

But this deeply spiritual nature co-exists with a forceful (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cg5_dNyqv90) personality that reflects the deep undercurrent of anger (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zlIbD00OHUA)that he struggles to suppress. His belief in Islamic teachings of love and tolerance initially clash with his black nationalist tendencies, such as his blowing up a white-owned warehouse, an act which got him jailed in the first place. Nonetheless, Kareem's experiences in prison (including him falling in love with a white woman) eventually lead him to reject racist ideologies.

Kareem's strong moral compass facilitates both the compassion that allows him to help even his enemies and the self-righteousness that blinds him to his flawed pride and occasional hypocrisy. Like the vast majority of the prison inmates, Kareem sometimes appears slightly unhinged, and he is played with an unsettling undercurrent of barely controlled explosivity. Yet, crucially, the more unseemly aspects of his character do not overwhelm or invalidate his virtues, texturing them instead.

The narrative allows Kareem multiple dimensions: a heroic Muslim, as when he rejects (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JFSpRgIhffM)clemency to critique the corruption of the prison system, all in the name of his faith; depraved, as when he violently beats a man for selling drugs; funny, as when he banters (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fsQdNEk3jjs) even with enemies; and fascinating, as when he debates (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M57ZCvnLUS0) political ideology with his prison warden. He is difficult but ultimately human. His Islamic faith, portrayed as largely responsible for his moral integrity, is central to but does not constitute the entirety of his identity.

The result: an unflinchingly honest and complete Muslim depiction the likes of which American television has never seen before or since. The fact that he is not even Arab, the ethnicity most associated with Islam in the American imagination, magnifies the significance of his character.

Oz also presents a diverse collection of Muslim inmates not as vividly realized as Kareem but well-sketched regardless. Arif is the sometimes loyal follower of Kareem plagued by doubt and indecisiveness. Hamid Khan rejects Kareem's pacifist teachings in favor of bloodier solutions, sometimes quoting selectively from the Quran to justify his more radical agenda.

Salah Udeen originally faked his conversion to Islam to infiltrate the Muslim faction on behalf of the Neo-Nazis, but eventually genuinely embraced his Muslim identity as a path to personal reform. This collection of characters provides alternate and supporting viewpoints to Kareem's interpretation of Islam, demonstrating in microcosm a sliver of the intellectual and interpretative diversity of the 1400-year-old religion.

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Worth mentioning besides *Oz* are a handful of other portrayals that achieve likeable and intelligent Muslim portrayals without undermining the religion: Morgan Freeman's Ahzeem in 1991's action-adventure film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* is a smart (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fZTgX4UrVdE), lovable (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xmqlmY93dx8), and faithful (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=by9HCGePzRY) sidekick, while Denzel Washington's turn in 1992's docudrama *Malcolm X* conveys the complexity of the controversial black and Muslim (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OFsXYlbzRfw) icon (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iIYC_rcSkAE).

But ultimately, as wonderfully sophisticated as these characters are, they are strangers to the American film and television landscape, exceptions that evidence the rule. More so, most are set in the distant past, far removed from any present-day context.

While their historical nature does not at all diminish their value, it demonstrates the near non-existence of meaningful representation of observant Muslims in a setting recognizable, and therefore more immediate and impactful, to a modern-day viewer. In the case of stories set in contemporary times, as with *Oz,* the extreme circumstances the characters face are so beyond the experience of most Americans that again their impact is dulled.

Each and every single one of the aforementioned films predates 9/11. Besides Scott's *Body of Lies* and *Kingdom of Heaven*, the only two Hollywood films released since 9/11 that feature half-decent Muslim characters are Abu Fatima (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kSAFnPBwnBE)from 2002's historical action drama *The Four Feathers* and the mixed-bag Javed (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnfA8hxCNNU) from 2013's *Escape Plan*, who misrepresents certain Islamic beliefs and is the only one of the three (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FMMyUGo5YWs)protagonists to not survive the film.

Even more troubling is the near-total absence of positive representation for observant *female* Muslims, particularly of women who wear the hijab. To this day, most veiled Muslim women in American media, generally speaking, are presented as faceless victims clad in black burkas and stripped of agency.

Unfortunately, with the notable exception of Robin Hood (http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=robinhoodprinceofthieves.htm), the aforementioned films featuring decent Muslim representation have almost systematically been box office failures. *The Lion of the Desert,* though now critically acclaimed, was a financial disaster (http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Lion-of-the-Desert#tab=summary)with a gross of $1.5 million against a $35 million budget. *The 13th Warrior* landed an unenviable spot (http://thefw.com/the-13th-warrior-movie-flops/)on the list of the worst financial failures in cinematic history, grossing back only $60 million of its $160 million budget. Both *Kingdom of Heaven* and *Body of Lies* underperformed at the domestic box office, as did *Escape Plan* with a low $25 million gross. The list goes on.

Such poor financial performances do not likely encourage Hollywood filmmakers to feature Muslims positively or prominently, especially when sensationalist and fear-mongering portrayals of Islam are so much more profitable. (See *American Sniper,* the highest grossing war film of all time).

The financial failure of these films has also translated to a minimal cultural impact. Thus, the portrayals likelist to engender positive perceptual changes of Islam are the ones that have gotten the least exposure. This public inaccessibility to alternative Islamic media narratives recurs in the case of *Oz* as well, though for different reasons. *Oz's* graphic content and explosive politics preclude a mainstream viewership. Good Muslim characters are therefore both rare and obscure, effectively muting the voices of the aforementioned portrayals.

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Hollywood's poor relationship with Islam is both a cause and an effect of its dearth of Muslim stars. Decent Muslim characters are consistently portrayed by non-Muslims, from Morgan Freeman's Azeem to Antonio Banderas's Ibn Fadlan. The similar absence of Muslims behind the camera, whether as directors, scriptwriters, or producers, does not help produce a film culture amenable to telling better Muslim stories, let

alone recognizing the problems of the ones that already exist. Worth noting, again, is that the most ambitious Hollywood film project on Islam ever attempted, Moustapha Al Akkad's *The Message*, was made possible only by the vision and effort of a Muslim director.

Whether the American entertainment industry can overcome all the aforementioned problems is an open question. While Trump's ascension has certainly encouraged industry insiders to more strongly champion (http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/ramadan-hollywood-industry-muslims-hold-interfaith-outreach-events-1015236) Islam, such outreach has yet to translate to more layered Islamic narratives. As previously discussed, Hollywood's sudden love for the secular Muslim hardly resolves the issue. Worryingly, film executives and critics alike appear to think that it does.

When Master of None's episode on religion aired, critics cheered it as an overdue "incisive (http://www.avclub.com/tvclub/aziz-ansaris-parents-return-master-none-funny-inci-255363) meditation" on religion and "the (https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/d7ae9a/master-of-nones-religion-episode-is-the-most-honest-portrayal-of-modern-islam-on-tv) most honest portrayal of modern Islam on TV." But as discussed in the first of this article, Ansari's work reproduces and perpetuates the same problematic paradigm that marginalizes practicing Muslims (i.e. most Muslims). And yet the effusive praise "Religion" received indicated that most television critics and viewers, liberals included, believed it to be a genuine counterweight to terrorist narratives rather than a reproduction of their fundamental ideas in more palatable form.

Perhaps the most troubling review, and yet the most representative of the perspective undergirding the episode's positive reception, came from the Guardian's Negin Farsad. He praised it as a "nuanced (https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2017/may/16/master-of-none-muslim-life-aziz-ansari-netflix)portrayal" of Western Muslims that provided a "much-needed, bacon-eating, Tinder-using, liberal-minded antidote to tired terrorist stereotypes."

The nonchalance with which Farsad constructs this absolute binary is remarkable. Certainly, the literal implications of his statement are disturbing: would a Muslim who doesn't eat bacon (myself included) be a "terrorist stereotype?"

Farsad is not alone in this view. Consider Nunjiani's seemingly innocuous explanation for why he produced his film *The Big Sick*:

> "There are very few Muslim characters who aren't terrorists, who aren't even going to a mosque, who are just people with complicated backstories who do normal things. Obviously, terrorism is an important subject to tackle. But we also need Muslim characters who, like, go to Six Flags and eat ice cream."

Notice the way Nunjiani casually mentions Muslims who terrorize and Muslims who pray in the same breath, placing them on the same continuum, and then compounds the problem by suggesting that Muslims "with complicated backstories who do normal things" are mutually exclusive to those who observe their faith. In Nunjiani's words lives the false dichotomy that denies observant Muslims their humanity. Notice further how he quietly codes "normal" as secular, again firmly excluding practicing Muslims from the privilege of normalcy.

The reality is that thousands of Muslims pray *and* eat Six Flags ice cream (literally (http://www.muslimfamilyday.com/cities/?settag=2)). According to the Pew Research Center, most (http://www.people-press.org/2011/08/30/section-2-religious-beliefs-and-practices/)U.S. Muslims (69%) believe "religion is very important to their lives," while two-third pray daily. Nearly half pray five times a day, and a similar percentage attends religious services weekly. Nunjiani, Farsad, and many others appear to miss the obvious: that true "nuance" would be showing Muslims who are both observant and human, who are both religious and American, and whose faith is empowering rather than debilitating.

What makes the supposedly sympathetic portrayals of Nunjiani and the like so damaging is that their prejudice is not self-evident. They can easily be mistaken as forces for representational good, even if they epitomize an ideology as essentially demeaning to Muslims as that which has inundated American television and film with hundreds of terrorists. Hence why portrayals comfortable enough with religion to acknowledge that a presence of faith does not entail an absence of humanity, like those of Ibn Fadlan and Kareem Said, are so essential now more than ever.

Ultimately, change will have to originate both internally and externally. As Hollywood stumbles about in its attempt to understand Islam, Muslims will need to make more of an effort to reach and influence Hollywood instead of deriding it as a lost cause.

The unlikely existence of characters like Ayesha and Azeem in big-budget Hollywood flicks demonstrate that good Muslims can occasionally find their way to the limelight and that a nihilistically cynical perspective on positive Muslim representation is as hollow as one of uncritical optimism. If efforts to bring better Muslim narratives to the big screen are successful, then history may one day view the achievements of people like Akkad not as a prehistoric anomaly but rather a foreshadowing of a kinder film era.

This piece is the second installment of a two-part series on the portrayal of Islam in the media. Read Ahmed's other piece here: The Good Muslim: When Positive Portrayals Fail (http://thepolitic.org/the-good-muslim-when-positive-portrayals-fail/)

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