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**Counter-Hegemonic Self-Representation
of Arabs and Muslims in *Ramy*:
A Critical Pedagogical Analysis**

By

Maya Chmaissany

A Major Research Paper
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of Communication, Media and Film
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2020

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of Arabs and Muslims in *Ramy*:
A Critical Pedagogical Analysis**

By

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December 14, 2020

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ABSTRACT

Historically, representations of Arabs and Muslims in mainstream media have been heavily based on stereotypes, orientalist thought, and have not come from Arabs and Muslims at the source. They have resulted in an overly negative and damaging repertoire of depictions throughout various forms of media, including print, film, video games and television. These representations can have damaging consequences for Arabs and Muslims, as well as contributing to the structuring of opinions and views of general audiences.

The primary concern of this research paper is to analyze how self-representation by Arabs and Muslims in mainstream media can impact dominant hegemonic structures. An alternative to the widespread and common negative depictions that have become the norm in the West is necessary in order to work towards the liberation of these oppressed groups and has the potential to contribute to the reshaping of dominant public opinion and discourse. I find that it is important to encourage representations that come from the subjects themselves which should carry greater accuracy and nuance. I specifically conduct analysis of the televised series *Ramy*, which features Arabs and Muslims throughout the cast and crew and measure its potential to act as a counter-hegemonic device through its links to and support of Paulo Freire's models of problem-posing pedagogy. A myriad of connections were found that support the initial research question and outline how a media project can act as a pedagogical tool that contributes to the liberation of the oppressed. Through my analysis of media that features Arab and Muslim direct involvement in the production process, my hope is that the dominant hegemonic discourse can effectively be combatted and even dismantled.

DEDICATION

For those who remain optimists in spite of the doom and gloom,
and young image makers who are tired of apologizing.

And for Rajaa.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to send my deepest thanks to my advisor Dr. Michael Darroch for the endless patience, understanding, guidance and reassurance he has provided throughout this process, particularly at times when I was unsure whether I would be able to finish. I would also like to thank my program reader Dr. Valerie Scatamburlo-D'annibale for her willingness to help me through the completion of this project and all that she did to ensure that would be possible. Thank you to Dr. Brian Brown for the introduction to Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and for the support throughout my journey as a graduate student. A big thank you to Dr. Garth Rennie for encouraging me and especially for the push towards pursuing a graduate degree. My sincerest thanks and gratitude to Dr. Mustapha Hamil who introduced me to the academic world of Arab Studies during the pursuit of my undergraduate degree, which was monumental in helping to guide and shape my research interests. A special thank-you to Bette, Suela, and Mark for their help. Finally, I truly would not have been able to complete this project without my family and closest friends who provided me with support, motivation, and unwavering faith, but also the nagging that much to my dismay is entirely necessary in getting me to complete anything at all. Thanks guys.

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INTRODUCTION

My area of research interest lies in the ways in which Arab and Muslim individuals and groups are depicted throughout the media, with a specific focus on mainstream media including film and television. Historically, representations of Arabs and Muslims in mainstream media have been heavily based on stereotypes, orientalist thought, and have not been derived from Arabs and Muslims themselves. While these have stemmed from a variety of motivations, the overall impact has been less than beneficial for Arabs and Muslims. Overwhelmingly, the result has been a myriad of depictions that are overtly negative; these can have damaging consequences for Arabs and Muslims and in structuring the opinions and views of general audiences.

The primary concern of this research is not necessarily the negative representations that have traditionally been widely studied. My question is: How can self-representation by Arabs and Muslims in mainstream media act as a counter hegemonic device? My focus is on exploring how Arab and Muslim-made media content can provide an alternative to the widespread and common negative depictions that have become the norm in the West, and therefore contribute to the reshaping of dominant public opinion and discourse. Many of these negative depictions stem from Western productions that do not include the involvement of Arabs and Muslims; it is therefore important to encourage representations that come from the subjects themselves, which I believe have the potential for greater accuracy and nuance. I argue that through their direct involvement in the production process of mainstream media through which they are represented, Arabs and Muslims can counter the dominant hegemonic discourse by providing alternatives to these oppressive characterizations.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Studies that focused almost entirely on negative representations throughout various forms of media were found to be privileged throughout the literature and highlight a gap in regards to research on positive self-representations, and furthermore how they can act as counter-hegemonic tools. Many themes were found to be repeated throughout the literature on Arab and Muslim media representations, and these include the Western non-Arab or Muslim production of representations, resulting perpetuation of negative stereotypes, analysis of pre and post-9/11 representations, a general connection between terrorism and Arabs and Muslims, research into representations of Arab women specifically, and less pronounced were studies that highlighted positive representations or self-representation within the media.

A WESTERN LENS

A major theme in much literature about Arab and Muslim media representations in the West today focuses on the fact that the majority of these representations are mediated through a Western lens, constructed by non-Arab or Muslim individuals that result in negative stereotypes which can be damaging to Arabs and Muslims. Much of this discourse links back to the major works of Edward Said, specifically his text *Orientalism* (1979). This foundational text analyzes how the construction of images by Western cultures can have grave implications for the ways their subjects are presented, which warrants research into these representations. Said finds that the West constructs and polarizes the image of the Orient, and consequently it becomes more and more stereotyped, as generalizations about its peoples and its cultures from the Western lens lead to the construction of the 'Other'. Through *Orientalism*, the image formed is presented as fact,

and results in an unchangeable and static representation. Said finds that the impacts of Orientalism are so great that one must take them into consideration in order to understand how European culture systematically constructed and managed the “Orient,” permeating through politics, sociology, military, ideology, science, and relevant to this study, the imaginations of individuals. Said’s analysis also led him to the belief that, “no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism,” and that “because of Orientalism the Orient was not (and is not) a free subject of thought or action,” (1979, p. 3). Furthermore, Said found that through the construction of Orientalism, European culture was able to gain both strength and identity because its image would be set in comparison to the image of the Orient, reiterating a “European superiority” over “Oriental backwardness” (1979, p. 7). Said discusses how the Orientalist relationship between the East and West is one of power, domination, and hegemony. The image of the Orient was not discovered but rather intentionally constructed, and without the consent of its subjects. Asante, Miike and Yin outline how Western cultures tend to approach non-Western cultures from the standpoint of a teacher. In this way, non-Western cultures are analyzed, interpreted, and critiqued from the perspective of a superior, resulting in them being viewed as inferior (Asante, Miike & Yin, 2008). When one culture is approached and regarded by another in this way, it can reflect in the media produced about that culture, and therefore can result in repeated portrayals as being inferior. Similarly, Said addresses the difference between intentions of knowing the “other” for the purpose of control as opposed to coexistence (1979). Shaheen finds that this phenomenon occurs in Hollywood films as well, whereby they have a tendency to elevate the humanity of non-Arab or Muslim Westerners while in the same breath trampling that of Arabs and Muslims (2001). Said also delves deeply into the process of binary constructions, specifically considering

the notion of the Self vs. the Other and the ways in which Westerners use the negatively constructed image of Arabs in order to define themselves positively by comparison (1979). It is quite clear that these inferiorizing instances take precedence in Western media, and repeatedly impact the ways that Arabs and Muslims are represented.

Said finds that the negative images of Arabs in the media is the result of views constructed at the hands of colonizers, which has great implications for the ways in which they are represented (1979). Qutub extends Said's work to conclude that many Hollywood films' depictions of the Middle East are primarily based on negative stereotypes which link back to orientalist thought, and that the image formed of the Orient as a result of orientalist discourse tends to be held to the status of scientific fact (2013). Ramji agrees that this constructed image within the West of the Arab as a dangerous threat is the result of historical conflicts between the West and the Middle East. However, his analysis does not link explicitly to colonialist experiences, but rather to such events as the Gulf war, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the U.S. war on Afghanistan following the events of September 11, 2001, as well as the war on Iraq against terrorism (2016). Nevertheless, he too echoes the creation of the resulting stereotypes that have developed through the hand of the West (Ramji, 2016). The study of the manifestation of these stereotypes in American media is furthered by Shaheen's analysis in *Reel Bad Arabs*, which examines Hollywood films' characterization and stereotyping of Arabs as violent, brutal, evil, uncivilized and anti-Western (2001). Shaheen argues that the stereotyping of both Arabs and Muslims by U.S. filmmakers has been successful to the point that critics and commentators would barely notice it, and that American filmmakers represent only five main "types" of Arabs (villains, sheikhs, maidens, Egyptians and Palestinians) despite a population of over three and a

half million Arab Americans living in the U.S. at the time (2001). This too is echoed by Aguayo who builds on Shaheen's study and finds that the stereotypes within American media construct Arabs in limited roles, despite their real-world diversity (2009). Sina Ali Muscati's analysis of Western media representations during the Gulf War in 1991 also concluded that Arab and Muslim people were depicted as inferior, immoral, and threatening, and that they remain misrepresented partly as a result of Westerners' insufficient attempts at conveying understanding of these groups (2002). The construction of this hegemonic discourse which repeatedly portrays Arabs and Muslims within the confines of stereotypes and tropes has been studied extensively, with many scholars linking back to the works of Shaheen and referring even more so to Edward Said's foundational *Orientalism* text. The discussion of this hegemonic discourse continues in considerations of the roles that the terrorist attacks have played in constructing representations of Arabs and Muslims.

TYPICALLY TERRORISTS

A regular finding among studies of Arab and Muslim media representations is that these people are most commonly depicted in relation to terrorism. Alsultany's 2013 study came to the conclusion that representations of Arabs and Muslims in contexts unrelated to terrorism remain uncommon following the events of 9/11, however other scholars have noted similar findings outside of the September 11 attacks. D'Haenens and Bink conducted a study on the Dutch press and found that there was a general focus on Islam throughout the press, however after filmmaker Theo Van Gogh was shot and stabbed in 2004 by Mohammed Bouyeri, a Moroccan-Dutch individual, negative representations of Muslims grew more pronounced, and stories focused on a negative relationship between Dutch society and the religion of Islam (2007). Similar findings

were reported throughout the United Kingdom surrounding the 7/7 attacks in London (Shaw, 2012), and the 2007 attack on Glasgow International Airport (Ewart, 2012), which resulted in UK media employing stereotypes of Muslims as terrorists and continuing to link Islamic beliefs as a whole with terrorism. Kibria, Watson, and Selod's research into anti-Muslim discourse following the events of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombings found that news coverage contributed to the spread of discourse relating Islam with radical extremism and violence, linked to binaries of good vs. evil and the West vs. Islam, and also perpetuated the idea that Muslims have an intrinsic inclination towards extremist violence (2017). While connections between Arabs and Muslims and the world of terrorism have been widespread throughout various forms of media, many scholars have understandably chosen to focus their analyses on the outcomes of the widely discussed events of 9/11.

PRE AND POST-9/11

Many studies into representations of Arabs and Muslims have placed their works in the context of 9/11 and focus on performing analyses that look into representations both before and after the events of September 11, 2001. According to El-Aswad, media portrayals of Arabs and Muslims after 9/11 were overwhelmingly negative, resulting in framing within the context of religious extremism (2013). Contrary to some findings, Spigel found a rise in self-censorship in the television and film industries, with "potentially trauma-inducing content" being pulled from release or replaced with content which featured less violence (2004, p. 235). However, it was also found that individuals independently sought out such violent content, purchasing films centred on terrorism such as *The Siege* and *The Towering Inferno* (Spigel, 2004). Wilkins and Downing's analysis of *The Siege* also found the film itself to represent Arabs, Muslims, Arab

Americans, and Islam as a whole based on Orientalist ideology, which contributed to spreading these representations after 9/11 (2002). Kellner (2004) argues that American media's portrayal of the 9/11 attacks as spectacle was used to promote specific political motives, and Akram (2002) similarly made a connection between the U.S. government's active use of Arab and Muslim stereotypes to advance their foreign policy agenda. However, Akram notes that the demonization of Arabs and Muslims in the U.S. began far before 9/11, tracing back to deliberate mythmaking in film and media, as well as a public which was unwilling to accept the "other." (2002)

Abrahamian found that the media would avoid discussing any possible links or relations between the events of 9/11 and the policies of the U.S. in the Middle East (2003). Other studies have found that the events of 9/11 have resulted in a rise in discrimination against Muslims in both Canada (Poynting and Perry, 2007) as well as the UK (Sheridan, 2006), showing a consistency in findings outside of the United States. Froula's study of media fifteen years after September 2001 found that productions consistently did not bring viewers any closer to understanding the preconditions and reasons behind the attacks, but rather continued to heighten anxieties and trauma (2016), and Alalawi's content analysis of *The Kingdom* and *Rendition* determined that both films showed the concept of Arabs and Muslims as uncultured extremists and prone to violence to be well-entrenched, as well as portraying terrorist activities to be a natural part of their normal daily life (2015). While a vast amount of literature focuses on negative portrayals, some also account for instances of positive representation. Alsultany's findings conclude that following 9/11, there was actually a rise in attempts to portray Arabs and Muslims positively in American television and Hollywood films, whereby negative representations of Arabs or Muslims as terrorists would be offset by more positive representations, including representations as patriotic American citizens, or unjust targets of hate

crimes (2013). Nacos and Torres-Reyna reported similar findings, noting that positive depictions of Arabs in the media increased by eight percent following September 11, and found, like Alsultany, that it revealed a desire to show Arabs and Muslims as victims of hate crimes, and as patriotic (2007).

Almost identical results were reported in studies of news media. Weston's 2003 study of newspaper articles about Arab Americans before and after 9/11 shared similar results, finding that pre-9/11 coverage was largely negative, but that post 9/11 coverage portrayed Arab Americans as doubly victimized by the attacks, loyal, patriotic members of American society, and as targets of government detentions. It was also found, however, that many narratives which sympathized with Arab-Americans as victims of post-9/11 discrimination eventually concluded that these discriminations were unfortunate but inevitable due to the national security crisis, and that these "positive" portrayals were being used to "project the United States as an enlightened country that has entered a post-race era," (Alsultany, 2013, p. 162). Bleich, Nisar and Abdelhamid's study on the effects of terrorist events on media portrayals of Islam and Muslims within New York Times headlines from 1985-2013 also reported that headlines were more positive in the first four weeks following a terrorist attack, but that coverage reverted back towards the predominantly negative tone that was found to prevail in the weeks before the attacks (2015). This reinforces the necessity of being critical with one's findings, in order to draw out the complete truth.

POSITIVES?

While there has been plenty of research performed on the negative representations of Arabs and Muslims in the media, not nearly as much emphasis has been placed on self-representation or positive representations. Shaheen reported that out of the 900 American films analyzed throughout his study, only 5% featured positive representations of Arabs or Muslims (2001). Ramji's research focuses primarily on negative representations, however to finish off the article she discusses a few films that feature more positive representations of Muslims and Arabs (2016). These include *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, *The 13th Warrior*, and *Three Kings* (Ramji, 2016). Positive representations within these films according to Ramji include Arab and/or Muslim characters being shown to have many skills, rescuing protagonists, displaying loyalty and honour, and being intelligent and helpful (2016). However, the majority of these "positive" characteristics were primarily determined in relation to Western protagonists, with the Arab and/or Muslim characters assisting the American or European leads. While the characteristics themselves are on the "good" side, the fact that they exist as assets to Western characters as opposed to being independently worthwhile says much about what and who are prioritized in these films. This sentiment is echoed by Tung Yin, who finds that while some television and movie producers have made efforts to show Arab Americans in a more positive light, specifically through acts of counterterrorism, the so-called "good" Arab roles remain "secondary characters whose contributions, though important on-screen, do not do justice to their real-life counterparts," (2010, p. 104).

Furthermore, oftentimes the characters are portrayed by actors who themselves are not Arab or Muslim. For example, a "positive" character specified in Ramji's study, Ahmad Ibn

Fadlan from *The 13th Warrior* is played by Antonio Banderas, who is an actor of Spanish origin (2016). While it is still important that a person of colour was able to play this role, the lack of inclusion of Arab or Muslim actors shows that a gap still remains in these films, despite some positive aspects. Yin focused on the issue of casting in his study as well, and found that many actors cast to play Arab characters were from other backgrounds, including Lithuanian-Jewish Russian, Greek-American, Greek-British, Israeli, South African, Mexican-American, and Indian American (2010). This phenomenon only contributes further to misrepresentations of Arabs and Muslims, and creates additional confusion surrounding who these people truly are.

SELF-REPRESENTATION

There have been some works that prioritize the study of counter-hegemonic self-representation by Arabs and/or Muslims, however none that focus on the specific subject matter that I am basing my research on. Vali's review of the role of photography in allowing Arabs to represent themselves and displace dominant stereotypes specifically applied theory from Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and provided valuable insight into the role of visuals as a counter-hegemonic tool (2005). Sisler performed another study on self-representation by Arabs and Muslims, but this time the focus was on representations in digital games and how they attempted to subvert dominant misrepresentations, both by exploiting and reversing stereotypical depictions, and by humanizing Arab and Muslim characters (2008). McGinty (2012) also looked into self-representations of American Muslims; however, she focused on representations by nationally prominent Muslim American activists and leaders within a specifically political sphere.

Literature that falls closer towards my proposed research is Oumlil's 2006 study, which focuses on the construction of Arab female identity within mainstream media and looks into

alternative media produced by Arab females themselves. She takes into account both poetic and cinematic contributions; however, her sole focus on female self-representation differs from my approach. Foster, Cook, Barter-Godfrey and Furneaux's look into conflicting representations of both Arab and Muslim Australians within Australian print media took into account media created by Arabs and Muslims themselves, though the findings focused on instances of separating one's Westernized Arab and/or Muslim self from "other" Arabs and Muslims who had not assimilated in similar ways (2011). This is an interesting and important addition to the literature on this topic; however, discourse of this type does not act as a counter hegemonic device, but rather could even potentially be argued to contribute to the alienation of Arabs and Muslims in society. Overall, I found there to be a pronounced gap in the literature when it came to analyzing self-representation of Arabs and Muslims as a counter-hegemonic tool in the television and film industries specifically.

ARAB AND MUSLIM WOMEN: FRAIL VEILED VICTIMS

A gap that has historically existed in the literature on this topic surrounds the study of media representations of Arab and Muslim women specifically, however many contemporary academics have worked to fill this gap. Navarro's study on hegemonic mass media discourse shows that Muslim women are believed to be victims of their culture, suffering consequences of a religion that is portrayed as highly patriarchal and also finds that Muslim women are represented as being a threat to the "modernized" women's identities in developed countries (2010). This is supported by Muñoz's (2005) research which found that Muslim women were represented by newspapers in three ways: as passive women, veiled women, and as victims. Alsultany found that representations of Arabs and Muslims in television finds them to be

portrayed sympathetically, but again falling into three stereotypes: veiled, oppressed, and in need of rescue (2013). Within the literature surrounding Arab and Muslim women, there is also a focus on visual representation of the hijab, or specifically the veil/headscarf, and how it is prioritized throughout the media. Eltantawy's dissertation on newspaper representation of Muslim and Arab women after 9/11 highlights the persistence of U.S. media towards using images of the hijab when representing Arab and Muslim women, even when accompanying stories make no mention of these women (2007). This is supported by Roushanzamir's study of U.S. print media representation of Iranian women, as her research found images of veiled Iranian women accompanied general news stories which did not focus on women in particular (2004). Falah's study on visual representations of Arab and Muslim women in U.S. newspapers post-9/11 also found that visual images used rarely related to the content of the stories, suggesting that the images actually served to project certain cultural judgments about Muslim society, and to advance the political viewpoints of the editors (2005). However, Falah's findings also reported two contradicting themes within the images of Arab and Muslim women that were dominant at the time, which were of the women as both passive victims and active political agents, and yet the author came to the conclusion that the images of active agents actually served to reinforce common stereotypes of these women as victims, rather than challenging them (2005). I found the analysis of women-centred representations was a recurring and regular theme in literature about Arab and Muslim representations in the media. Many authors noted a significant lack of research in this area, and so their contributions have made a positive and necessary contribution. They provide valuable insight into this misrepresentation as well as underrepresentation of Arab and Muslim women in dominant media and allow for important considerations of how these compare to representations of their male counterparts. I will be exploring some women-centred

representations in my case study and find the inclusion of research focused on a female perspective to be an extremely important addition to the literature.

DOMINANT METHODS

Overall, I found a tendency for researchers to use critical, textual, and content analysis in their studies. Qutub uses critical analysis to inspect representations of Arabs and Muslims in film and television, as well as in print news media (2013), and Ramji similarly analyzes films critically by employing textual analysis in her study (2016). Roushanzamir's study of U.S. news stories between 1995 and 1998 employed the use of critical discourse analysis that used both textual and visual evidence (2004). Oumlil employs textual analysis, specifically to juxtapose prominent tropes in dominant discourse with responses from selected artists, and draws from postcolonial theory, critical race and gender studies, as well as other research on Arab and Muslim representations in the media (2006). Alalawi (2015) uses content analysis and analyzes two films in particular in order to determine how the American film industry portrayed Arabs and Muslims after 9/11, taking into account the language used, locations of the films, and the use of Islamic symbols to contribute to narration and articulation. Simpson also uses content analysis in her study, however in this case the focus was on newspapers and their coverage of the proposed "Ground Zero Mosque" (2011). Eltantawy employs discourse analysis, and especially the use of framing analysis, citing Van Ginneken's (1998) approach specifically, to undertake a textual reading of news, features, editorials, and images from U.S. newspapers and magazines that represented Arab and/or Muslim women during the four-year period following the September 11 attacks (2007). Weston similarly uses framing analysis in her qualitative study of news media, alongside narrative and stereotype analysis (2003).

COUNTER-HEGEMONIC SELF-REPRESENTATION AT THE CENTRE

A clear focus throughout the literature has been the construction of hegemonic discourses that continue to impact the ways Arabs and Muslims are represented throughout various forms of media, and the implications that these have for the ways these individuals are regarded in the world around us. While much research has been done on negative representations of Arabs and Muslims in the media, I find there remains a gap in analyzing representations that have been created by Arabs and Muslims in the West themselves, and how these can work to reshape the dominant discourse. Some scholars have noted the potential for counter-hegemonic discourse through such mediums as poetry, photography, digital games, and cinema. However, there still remains much to be said about the greater possibilities for counter hegemonic action within the world of mainstream television and film through self-representation with a specific focus on Arab and Muslim contributions throughout the production process. My study builds on pre-existing works, particularly when analyzing the ways in which negative stereotypes manifest in television and film, and the impacts they can have on Arab and Muslim persons. However, I move beyond the focus on the negative representations and stereotypes themselves, as these have largely been exhausted throughout various analyses of mainstream Western media. Furthermore, while studies of negative depictions and portrayals and their effects on individuals is, of course, an absolutely vital contribution to research on media and to literature as a whole, it truthfully can be draining for people of Arab and/or Muslim background to constantly be faced with more and more findings which evidence their misrepresentation throughout media and society, as I can understand personally. The extant literature additionally informs my study of why it is necessary to produce counter-hegemonic media in order to combat the stereotypes that have become rampant throughout the media. I believe that it is the time to move more purposefully towards

change. My hope is that research into the effectiveness of self-representation as a means of counter hegemony will be able to contribute to the re-education of audiences, inspire Arab and Muslim individuals to take control of their narrative, and even motivate Western production houses to give these creators the spaces, opportunities, and resources to do so.

METHODOLOGY

When doing any form of research, it is almost impossible to entirely prevent one's own biases and experiences from impacting their work to some degree, whether the researcher is explicitly aware or not (Giltrow, 2005). As stated by Giltrow, one cannot simply be "a disembodied researcher," but rather we are constantly impacted by our own lived experiences (2005, p. 209). Therefore, it becomes vital to be reflexive and to disclose the conceptual baggage which we carry with us into our research (Greaves, Kirby & Reid, 2017). Much of my interest in my chosen research topic stems from my own life experiences, as I myself am both Arab and Muslim, and was raised in the West surrounded by the negative depictions that I wish to combat. I have dealt with frustration and confusion surrounding my own identity, and much of this has been influenced by witnessing the constant, almost exclusively negative portrayal of Arabs and Muslims throughout various media. The historic appearances of Arabs and Muslims in mainstream film and television have been as barbaric imbeciles, soulless terrorists, greedy oil sheikhs and exotic belly dancers. Growing up with little to no positive representations in the media to look at, I found a desire to increase my distance from these characters that seemed nothing like the person I knew myself to be.

I must disclose that this practice of socially distancing myself from my ethnic and religious identity was easier for me than it would be for many others, as I have been told throughout my life that my paler skin and “ambiguous” features do not point directly to any particular ethnicity, however stereotypical the majority of these standards may be. Therefore, it was ultimately up to me whether or not I would disclose my ethnic and religious identity to the individuals around me. As I grew older, however, I felt a longing to become reacquainted with those sides of myself, and with that came the desire to re-analyze the representations that I had worked so hard to distance myself from. Earlier in my academic career, much time was spent dwelling on the negativity in the media surrounding me, and I grew more and more disheartened by the apparent hopelessness of it all. It was my introduction to Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, however, which helped to shift my point of view (1970). His explorations of the role that education could play in liberating the oppressed as well as their oppressors had a great impact on me and shaped my research goals.

OPERATIONALIZATION

In order to operationalize my research question, it was necessary to provide definitions for some of the terms used. The first of these is “self-representation” which has many assumed definitions, such as the self-representation which takes place on social media profiles, representing one’s self in everyday life, etc. For the most part, these are all focused on the representation of a singular individual. However, the focal point of my research is the representation of entire ethnic and religious groups and the ways in which a single person is constructed and displayed— specifically how characters in mainstream media are depicted. Furthermore, I also consider the Arab and/or Muslim individuals who are involved in the

production process of the media projects, separate from character creation. Therefore, my operational definition involves the representation of one's own cultural and/or religious group in characters through their personal involvement in the production process.

Another operational definition I would like to specify is that of "counter-hegemonic device." Borrowing from the work of Williams, the traditional definition of hegemony is rule or domination that is political in nature, and particularly in relations between states (1977). This definition was extended by Marxism to include relations between social classes, and the work of Antonio Gramsci further expanded hegemony as either "a complex interlocking of political, social, and cultural forces," or, depending on interpretation, "the active social and cultural forces which are its necessary elements," (Williams, 1977, Gramsci, 1971, as cited in Williams, 1977). Hegemony itself is therefore a combination of social, cultural and political factors that result in the domination of one social group over another. Accordingly, a counter hegemonic device is a tool used to combat the dominant hegemony as well as its oppressive effects.

A third factor that requires clarification is how I am using the terms "Arab" and "Muslim." It must be made clear that Arab and Muslim do not mean the same thing, nor should they be used interchangeably. Not all Arabs are Muslim, nor are all Muslims Arab. "Arab" refers to a cultural and ethnic group, whereas "Muslim" refers strictly to individuals who follow the religion of Islam. However, the two are often used interchangeably throughout media-and Islam has largely been racialized, becoming associated heavily with Arabs (Considine, 2017).

Therefore, I find it necessary to include both in my analysis, though it must remain clear that they are separate.¹

It is also important to clarify what is meant by the “dominant oppressive characterizations” in order to help better understand the alternatives. It is quite clear that Arabs and Muslims are portrayed negatively in the media through the repeated use of that can be incredibly damaging as they present these individuals in manners that are not accurate or truthful, but rather are sensationalized, oversimplified, and extremely fixed. Additionally, the utilization of these stereotypes contributes to the oppression of Muslims and Arabs. When non-Arabs and non-Muslims perpetuate these stereotypes, they are speaking for these people as opposed to letting them speak for themselves and attaching characteristics to them which others will judge them by. Furthermore, it is understood that Eurocentric views and thinking can lead to oppressive actions, for example, “[o]ppression often assumes structures and dominant philosophies and stances that contribute to silencing or ignoring various less-powerful groups. These can be in the form of... “white” or “Western” thinking,” (Greaves, et al., 2017).

When it comes to operationalizing the research question itself, a main concern lies in how the ability of self-representation to act as an effective counter-hegemonic device can be assessed. While this could potentially be measured quantitatively through the use of such methods as surveys, or qualitatively through interviews or focus groups, among other methods, these were not feasible options for the scale and timeline of my project. Therefore, I employ an approach informed by Freirean analysis to explore a televised series made in a Western environment—but with Arab and Muslim involvement—in terms of Arab and Muslim self-

¹ It is vital to note that while the two identities are separate, they do overlap within individuals who are both Arab and Muslim.

representation. I link these findings to themes articulated in Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* which demonstrates how education can be used as a tool to aid in the liberation of oppressed peoples (1970). In doing so, I argue that self-representative media may be classified as an effective pedagogical tool for liberation, specifically in the context of Arab and Muslim representation.

This research project is informed by a critical paradigm that “examines societal structures and power relations and how they play a role in promoting inequalities and disabling people while promoting reflection and action on what is right and just,” (Reimer-Kirkham et al., 2009, as cited in Greaves, et al., 2017). The critical paradigm specifically emphasizes the use of theory to explain the structures that influence particular situations, and places issues of power at the centre (Greaves, et al., 2017). This paradigm informs my analysis of hegemonic structures that have resulted in stereotyped and oppressive media as I take a critical stance against dominant representations of Arabs and Muslims. As well, a Freirean-inspired anti-oppressive perspective that explicitly aims to combat structures, dominant philosophies and stances that contribute to the silencing or ignoring of various less-powerful groups animates my work (Greaves, et al., 2017).

ANALYSIS OF CASE STUDY

Ramy is a comedy-drama series produced by A24 Studios and Hulu, and streamed on Hulu’s web-based service. The show was released in 2019 on Hulu, and a second season was renewed in 2019 and released in 2020. The show has been well received, with the second season of *Ramy* receiving 3 Emmy nominations including both outstanding lead and supporting actors

in a comedy series, and outstanding directing for a comedy series. *Ramy* follows the titular character as he navigates life as the child of immigrants, born in the United States to parents of Egyptian origin. The show is based primarily around show creator Ramy Youssef's real-life experiences, as he faces many situations dealt with by other Arabs and Muslims in the Western diaspora. Throughout the course of the show's first season, which this analysis focuses on, various topics and themes affecting Muslim and Arab populations are explored including male and female sexuality, alcohol consumption (Episode 1), experiences with 9/11 and subsequent change in behaviour from peers (4), struggles with porn and masturbation (4), drug use (3), Muslim-Jewish relationships (3), difficulty adhering to Ramadan (5), Arab and Muslim prejudice towards Jewish people (4), diasporic returns home (9-10) and many other topics that have not traditionally been explicitly explored in mainstream media from this specific viewpoint. The honest depictions of Arabs and Muslims involved in these experiences contributes to the media project's potential to act as a counter-hegemonic tool, and links to Paulo Freire's model of a problem-posing pedagogy.

SELF-REPRESENTATION AS PROBLEM-POSING PEDAGOGY

In a problem-posing pedagogical model, student participation in the educational process is welcomed and encouraged. The importance of human communication is emphasized, and specifically the dialogue between teacher and learner. Traditionally, Arab and Muslim individuals have more often than not been solely on the receiving end of the media production process rather than being active participants. This is representative of a banking model of knowledge construction. "Banking education (for obvious reasons) attempts, by mythicizing reality, to conceal certain facts which explain the way human beings exist in the world; problem-posing education sets itself the task of demythologizing," (Freire, 1970, p. 83). As outlined

throughout the earlier review of relevant literature, the dominant messages being received by Arabs and Muslims about members of their communities and by extension about themselves throughout mainstream media have been overwhelmingly negative, misinformed, and damaging. These messages are also received by non-Arabs and Muslims and contribute to the perpetuation of misinformation and stereotypical understandings, which have historically led to prejudice and oppression. These can be combatted through media created with a problem-posing perspective, specifically when the perspectives offered are influenced directly by Arabs and Muslims.

Nichols (2000) attests that representation mediates “the relationship between the symbolic form of communication and the social and historical context in which they occur and to which they refer, the term always involves an externalization of inner experience and thought,” (p. 43).

These relationships are constructed within media, deliver messages specific to their content, and the intentions behind that content. Because this intent is so heavily influenced by a person’s identity and subsequent experiences, representations constructed by individuals belonging to specific groups can more efficiently act as counter-hegemonic devices because of their increased accuracy. *Ramy*’s inclusion of Arabs and Muslims in the cast and crew allows for the participation of members of these communities in the knowledge construction process.

The cast and crew in the series *Ramy* contribute to its ability to act as a counter-hegemonic pedagogical tool. As discussed earlier, the issue of casting Arabs and Muslims in media roles has long been a problem. Yin’s study highlighted how many actors cast to play Arab characters come from other ethnic backgrounds, including Greek-Americans, South Africans, Mexican-Americans, and others (2010). This contributes to the ongoing misrepresentations of Arabs and Muslims, adding to the confusion and misunderstandings surrounding these groups.

Within the series *Ramy*, all of the lead characters who are Arab in the show are played by actors of Arab descent, and from dominantly Muslim countries, allowing for more nuanced and knowledgeable representations. Ramy Youssef, of Egyptian descent, plays Ramy Hassan, the titular character of the show. Mo and Ahmed, Ramy's close friends in the show, are played by Mohammed Amer, an American actor of Palestinian descent, and Dave Merheje, who is Lebanese. Ramy's family members in the show, Maysa, Dena, Farouk and Nasseem are played by Hiam Abbass, a born Palestinian, May Calamawy who is Bahraini, Amr Waked, an Egyptian actor, and Laith Nakli of Syrian descent. Side characters include Shadi played by Shadi Alfons, Egyptian, and Amani played by Egyptian-Turkish actress and writer Rosaline Elbay.

Ramy also credits many writers and directors with Arab and Muslim backgrounds, and so we can see how not only the cast but importantly the crew has a more thorough understanding of Arab and Muslim experiences which allows for more accurate and nuanced representations throughout the series. Egyptian-American Ramy Youssef has directing credits for 5 episodes of the series and writing credits for 20. Cherien Dabis is Palestinian-American and directed 6 episodes. Another episode is directed by Jehane Noujaim, Egyptian, and one episode is directed by Desiree Akhavan whose parents came to the U.S. from Iran, a muslim-majority country. Many writers on the show also have Arab and Muslim backgrounds. Sahar Jani who wrote for an episode is also Iranian, like Akhavan. Maytha Alhassen, a writer on the show is Syrian-American, and another writer Adel Kamal is Egyptian. Muslim writers Azhar Usman and Amir Sulaiman also each have contributed to the show. Minhaj Baig who wrote for an episode is Pakistani-Muslim, and notably also created the film *Hala* which follows its titular character as she navigates life as a Pakistani-Muslim-American teenager.

The inclusion of Arabs and Muslims in the cast and crew is vital in creating media that is more accurately self-representative and therefore has the potential to act as a counter-hegemonic device. When Arabs and Muslims have a say in the dialogue and storylines of a series as well as direct involvement in how the characters are portrayed on screen, we can see Arabs and Muslims from their own lens, as they intend. Edward Said's discussions of the historically oppressive Orientalist relationship between East and West finds that images of the "Orient" and its people were constructed with specific intent and did not consider the consent of their subjects (1979). When these constructions are depicted within mainstream media they can develop into imagined norms, which are then imposed upon marginalized groups—in this case Arabs and Muslims—and can result in their oppression. "This imagined norm then functions as a regulatory ideal, positioning certain experiences and persons outside its centre and producing them as lacking in the propensities to be accorded a fully human status," (Blackman & Walkerdine, 2001). This is one of the tactics used by oppressors in order to dehumanize their objects, in that it allows them to determine and declare what is and is not appropriate to be deemed "normal," for the group they are oppressing. This connects to Freire's concept of prescriptions, and the role they play in the oppressive relationship, in that prescriptions are choices that are imposed by the oppressor upon the oppressed, therefore "transforming the consciousness of the person prescribed to into one that conforms with the prescriber's consciousness," (Freire, 1970, p. 47). These prescriptions are creations of imagined norms that the oppressed are forced to adhere to and be represented by, and which contribute to the deepening of their oppression. Through their direct involvement in the production process of media in which they are the subjects, Arabs and Muslims can intentionally construct their own representations, now with their express consent,

and actively work against their oppression. When individuals who are familiar with the realities of Arab and Muslim cultures, customs, lifestyles and mentalities are involved in the creation of these representations, it results in images and dialogue that are more nuanced, multidimensional, and accurate to their experiences. This practice is rooted in reality and “takes the people’s historicity as their starting point,” (Freire, 1970, p. 83). Through their addition to the media landscape, these self-representative productions counteract representations that depict Arabs and Muslims in static identities, built upon outdated, ignorant constructions of knowledge. “Problem-posing education affirms men and women as beings in the process of *becoming* — as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality,” (Freire, 1970, 84). *Ramy* portrays its Arab and Muslim characters as individuals struggling with their identities, their surroundings, and their relationships, and who grow through their experiences throughout the narrative of the series, rather than remaining static and stubborn.

Viewers who have previously only been exposed to representations of Arabs and Muslims constructed from a banking perspective have the potential to reconsider their created knowledge base when exposed to a different perspective. “When learning through problem-posing pedagogy, individuals “begin to single out elements from their “background awareness” and to reflect upon them. These elements are now objects of their consideration, and, as such, objects of their action and cognition,” (Freire, 1970, 83). When experiencing content created in a problem-posing mode, audiences have greater opportunities to reflect on and even deconstruct their previous understandings and this potential is particularly heightened if the self-representative media depictions resonate with the viewers’ own understandings of humanity and human experiences.

HUMANS WITH HUMAN PROBLEMS

In the series *Ramy*, Arab and Muslim characters are presented not as static and one-sided caricatures, but rather as fully-fleshed characters in their living contexts. The series explores their surroundings, upbringings, families, peers; all factors that contribute to the construction of their lived experiences, and how they respond in these situations as a result. “Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world,” (Freire, 1970, p. 81). This exploration of people in relation with the world around them allows viewers to understand the individuals within context, constructing a more well-rounded and nuanced depiction.

Story lines in the series *Ramy* follow characters as they wrestle with conflicts that are universally human. Issues with family, sexuality, career aspirations, personal religious understanding, feelings of exclusion and loneliness. These are all themes and struggles that affect humans across cultural and religious differences, and the depictions of Arab and Muslim characters struggling with these realities aids their humanization in media. It is important that these characters are not portrayed as entirely flawless, holier-than-thou individuals, as this would simply be perpetuating the cycle as the oppressed repeat the mistakes of their oppressor. Rather, they are given time and space throughout the series to explore the struggles of being human, and *Ramy* gives due consideration to the unique issues some Arabs and Muslims face in a Western environment. The show does not shy away from depicting Arabs and Muslims in any kind of negative light, rather the characters’ flaws are often highlighted throughout. Show creator Ramy Youssef has on multiple occasions emphasized the importance of leading *Ramy’s* storytelling with the characters’ problems: “I want to show that we’re human. For me, it leads by showing Muslims with flaws. Because we’re so underrepresented we’re always trying to apologize... I

want to show that we're dealing with real issues. It's not an apology," (Youssef, cited in White, 2019). This shows some of the intent behind the series and what is represented within, and how at its heart is the pursuit of humanization and liberation for groups that, as explored earlier, have been dehumanized throughout history in mainstream media.

In the opening scene of the Episode 1, *Between the Toes*, we see Ramy being dropped off at the mosque by his mother, Maysa. Ramy being driven around is a recurring image in earlier episodes of the show which symbolizes aspects of his immaturity and lack of control, as he is never in the driver's seat. Maysa encourages him to find a partner in the mosque, stating, "The girls in there are high quality," (Bradbeer, Katcher, Welch & Youssef, 2019, 00:00:21). Ramy is uncomfortable with the idea: "You can't just walk up to a Muslim girl and like, start spitting game or something. What am I supposed to say, like, 'Hey, can I get your father's number?'" Here we can see some cultural expectations in place surrounding Muslim relationships. In Ramy's family context, practicing Muslim women are regarded as being "higher quality" than other women as well as less approachable, placing them on a pedestal that can be difficult to live up to, and can interfere with relationship pursuits. We are also introduced to aspects of Muslim dating customs in some communities as well as the involvement of family members in the process. After more discussion Ramy tells his mother, "Just 'cause I'm not with someone doesn't mean I'm gonna be alone forever, okay, I-I, I'm just figuring it out, okay?" This sets the tone for many of Ramy's portrayals throughout the show, as we watch him and other characters work on themselves and their lives, all in the process of "just figuring it out."

When Ramy finally enters the mosque he immediately grabs a stranger's shoes from a storage cubby, drops them on the floor and replaces them with his own sneakers. He avoids the

lineup of men waiting to perform their ablutions before prayer at the main washing station, instead going to a lesser-known station in the mosque basement. We see some of the lead character's selfishness and impatience displayed through this introduction. He hastily rushes through his ablutions, a ritual for washing oneself that is intended to ensure cleanliness before prayer. For the final step, he quickly pats his still-socked feet with wet hands before shutting off the tap and turning away. He then meets the gaze of a stern-faced man with arms crossed, disappointed in Ramy's rushed performance. The man asks, "Do you want to live a haram life or a halal life?" to which Ramy replies, "Halal?"² (Bradbeer, Katcher, Welch & Youssef, 2019, 00:01:57). The uncertainty in Ramy's voice as he states his intent reflects his character's precarious pursuit. We see that he wants to be "good," but his statement is shaky, reflecting his temptations toward the "bad" around him. The man continues, emphasizing the importance of Ramy washing properly: "If the toes are filthy, the heart is filthy." Ramy asserts that he is clean enough, and states, "I think God knows what's in my heart." Through this statement we gain more understanding into the character's approach toward his religious practice, and his belief that his good intentions are good enough. We can see some of this intent outlined in a statement from show creator Ramy Youssef: "What would it look like to have a Muslim family show, and a show that could get into our details, our nuances? Something that was really exciting to me was, how could we make a story that looked at someone who believed in God, but in a very grounded way, in a way that feels like an everyman, as opposed to what we see a lot of the time, which are these very caricature-ish looks," (Blyth, 2019 b, para. 2). This interaction represents a

² Haram and halal are Arabic terms that refer to whether something is forbidden/harmful or permissible/beneficial with regards to Islamic rulings. This dichotomy is sometimes reduced to an understanding of "bad" and "good," but can be broken down and conceptualized in far greater detail. It is the centre of much debate and contemplation among Muslims. Nader Al Jallad's translational and lexicographical study analyzes the two terms and attempts to provide more thorough and contextual definitions, also acknowledging that the concepts are commonly misunderstood by non-speakers of the language. (2008)

relationship between two Arab-Muslim men at different stages of their lives, and with differing views toward their religious understandings. It provides a more humanized look at Arabs and Muslims as they navigate their own personal relationships with religion, offering an alternative to the more common depiction of Arab Muslims as extremely religion-oriented to the point of fanaticism.

CULTURE AND RELIGION AT THE FOREGROUND

Cultural and religious themes and topics are foregrounded throughout the series *Ramy*. Multiple episodes follow the characters' individual journeys through balancing religious and cultural expectations and lifestyles with more American expectations, as well as their own inner desires and curiosities. It is important that the series does not brush the characters' Arab and Muslim identities under the rug in order to promote a wholesome "American as apple pie" view; this would simply erase the intricacies of their identities. They do not abandon their religion or culture for the sake of assimilation, nor are they portrayed as despising them and the roles they play in their lives. Rather, the story highlights its characters' journeys as they develop their own individual understandings and find balance. From show creator Ramy Youssef: "It's not a first generation story where you're watching a kid try to separate themselves from their culture and their parents and erase it. You're actually watching someone who has a lot of respect for the faith and the tradition, and isn't trying to change it or manipulate it, but is more trying to figure out his place within it, and how he can stay there, while being pulled by his desires and being tested," (Blyth, 2019 b, para. 3). Throughout the show we see the characters as they explore where they stand with regards to their cultures and religion, and in this way the show brings Arab and Muslim identities and experiences to the foreground.

In episode 1, *Between the Toes*, we see Ramy attending a friend's religious marriage ceremony while he and two friends Mo and Ahmed discuss his own prospects for marriage. Ramy's immaturity is symbolized as he appears notably more disheveled than his two friends, a married business owner and doctor respectively. They encourage Ramy to marry soon due to the low number of eligible bachelorettes in their community, and Ramy's receding hairline. When Ramy states that he does not need to be with someone Muslim and mentions a woman he has been seeing named Chloe, the two denounce "white girls" noting cultural and moral differences. Ahmed states, "They even skinny dip. You don't want a wife that skinny dips. You want a wife that swims at normal times, in proper swimming attire. Not this nakedness. You need to find someone who knows where you came from, what you believe in. And someone who's *hot*," (Bradbeer, Katcher, Welch & Youssef, 2019, 00:04:56). Meanwhile Mo encourages Ramy to have his parents "hook it up," and introduce him to someone, as he met his own wife through the intervention of his mother.

In the next scene we see Ramy in bed with the woman he has been seeing, Chloe. One second they are excitedly making out and undressing, and the next, Chloe is sound asleep while Ramy is wide awake and staring at the ceiling, brow furrowed in worry. Ramy gets up to go to the washroom, and we learn that he is concerned about an accidental pregnancy. Chloe walks in to find Ramy holding their just-used condom after filling it with water and inspecting for any holes. Upon discussion, some of their differences in beliefs arise and Chloe questions Ramy's lack of honesty and feels offended by his actions. Ramy: "It's just so that we don't have to worry," (Bradbeer, Katcher, Welch & Youssef, 2019, 00:06:54). Chloe brings up that she takes birth control medication and implies the option of abortion. "Even if like something crazy

happened, you know I'm on the pill. Right? And if the pill didn't work we'd do the responsible thing and like, take care of it." Ramy however is uncomfortable with that option, citing his religious beliefs as the source of his conflict. "Yeah but I-uh-we can't just take care of it, right? I mean we don't even really know what it is. I-I mean look I'm totally pro-women getting to choose what to do with their bodies, I am, but I'm Muslim, so I'm just pro-us not having to make that choice." This then highlights a misunderstanding from Chloe regarding Ramy's level of religiosity. "No, like you're Muslim I thought like in the way that I'm Jewish, like it's a cultural thing. I didn't know that you were *Muslim*, Muslim." "Yeah." Later in the conversation, Ramy attempts to explain why he hasn't been explicitly open with Chloe: "Look, Chloe, I just... I've met girls who seem open minded and then they're... not. ...I just, I thought maybe you'd be into the idea of me being culturally different but hate that I actually believe in... God." However, Chloe is not satisfied, and her concerns are quite valid. She states, "I don't care that you're Muslim. I care that you've been lying to me."

The show cuts to Ramy in the back of a car, being driven home as he leans against the window looking pensive as he considers his encounter with Chloe. Again, he is not in the driver's seat—a symbol for his struggle towards independence at this stage in his life. Once home he lays awake in bed, then gets up, performs his ablutions, and begins to pray. In this scene we see how Ramy's beliefs and actions are full of contradictions, and how his uncertainties continue to impact the people around him and his relationships. Rather than having open conversations with Chloe about his beliefs, limits, and what he is and is not comfortable with, he struggles in silence and avoids direct discussion. He states that some of his behaviour has been influenced by past experiences with women who were not comfortable with his beliefs, and here

we see how negative understandings of Arabs and Muslims can lead to internal struggle and influence a desire to keep certain aspects of themselves hidden. It is important that Ramy's religious and cultural background is portrayed at the forefront, and that he does not abandon his beliefs. However, we see how he hides certain parts of himself in order to avoid some difficult conversations, a flaw on his part.

After their encounter, it is clear that Ramy has given more consideration to the idea that he should be with someone from the same cultural and religious background. We see Ramy at the dinner table with his family, everyone preoccupied with themselves. Ramy's mother Maysa is excitedly playing a game of Candy Crush on her iPad, father Farouk reads through an Arabic newspaper, and Dena laughs at her cell phone while texting. We see hints of the characters through these depictions; Maysa seeks fun in activities to pass time, and later an entire episode is dedicated to her pursuit of fulfillment and socialization outside of her stay-at-home lifestyle. Dena explores her social life throughout the series, including relationships with friends and romantic interests. Farouk as an Egyptian immigrant still clings to his former life and identity, more concerned with news and goings-on "back home" than in his current country of residence. Ramy tries to engage his family with various comments about his friend's engagement earlier in the episode, but their collective attention is not pulled from their independent activities until Ramy informs them that he believes he is ready to pursue an engagement of his own. Maysa is overjoyed, while Dena is instantly frustrated. "Are you fucking kidding me?... You had *one* lonely day at a wedding, and now you want mom to set you up," (Bradbeer, Katcher, Welch & Youssef, 2019, 00:11:35). Ramy quips back, "This has nothing to do with you." "Of course it does. If you get married, they're gonna start putting pressure on me to start a family and stare at

my stomach like it's the answer to their mid-life crisis. I don't need that shit right now." Later in the scene Dena has another criticism of Ramy, noting how he is attempting to fill a void he feels in himself with a woman. Here we see how *Ramy* gives due consideration to including multiple perspectives, and importantly highlights the frustrations some Arab and Muslim women feel when it comes to expectations surrounding marriage. We also see some of the sentiments Mo and Ahmed expressed earlier come up again in this family setting. Ramy's father Farouk expresses the seriousness of being with a Muslim woman, while also denouncing non-Muslim women: "Ramy, being with a Muslim woman is not an easy thing. You have to take her seriously, hm? She's not like, uh, the *others*, hm? Are you sure you are ready for something like that?" Again we see how the series brings to light some unreasonable expectations that are placed on Muslim women, and how they can be perpetuated in everyday situations. It also shows some judgements Arabs and Muslims can hold towards others, again not shying away from showing some negative characteristics at the forefront.

ARAB AND MUSLIM WOMEN IN *RAMY*

Ramy does not focus solely on the experiences of its titular character, which otherwise would have limited the perspectives offered in the series greatly. Rather, multiple episodes are produced which focus almost solely on supporting characters, including Ramy's father, mother, and sister. This allows for insight into varied experiences among first generation Arabs and Muslims across age groups, genders, and social roles. Important perspectives and experiences offered throughout the series are those of Arab and Muslim women, specifically detailing multiple women's experiences with sexuality and dating. I analyze one of these fully dedicated episodes in this section, but first explore representations in Episode 1, *Between the Toes*.

Episode 1 of the series delves into Ramy's dating life, and details his encounter with Nour, an Egyptian-American Muslim woman who is sexually active and open. She is played by Dina Shihabi, a Saudi Arabian-Palestinian actress. Their outing begins with efforts to evade an awkward older chaperone and leads to a charming stroll as the two exchange ice creams over their discussion of Donald Trump's infamous Muslim Ban (ACLU, 2020). The date ends with Nour initiating their sexual encounter, and she initiates each progression for the remainder of their rendezvous. Nour asks about a goodnight kiss which is met with uncertainty on Ramy's end, stemming from his lack of experience dating Arab and Muslim women. "I just- I wasn't sure if you did that," (Bradbeer, Katcher, Welch, & Youssef, 2019, 00:17:56). She leans in to kiss him initially, and as the intensity builds she presses him against her car, then prompts, "Let's get in the car." They kiss with intensity in the backseat and Nour reaches for Ramy's pants but he slows her down, then Nour initiates having sex, asking if he has a condom. Ramy expresses his discomfort because they are not married, to which Nour offers the solution of a temporary marriage, a custom that exists among some Muslim groups. Ramy declines, stating, "I don't think we should try to like, trick God or whatever, I just think maybe we should, you know, slow down?" Nour agrees that they can take things slow and the two continue to kiss, however the intensity builds once again as she then sits on his lap and tells him, "Choke me while I finger myself." Ramy expresses his discomfort again, to which Nour responds, "God you're so full of shit... It's not the choking that's the problem... what, you don't hook up on the first date? Yeah that's what I thought." Ramy states, "This is just like throwing me for a loop a little bit, I didn't think that a girl like you was gonna wanna like-" and is cut off by Nour: "A girl like me? Look we had this like really nice night and you felt weirded out by the idea of kissing me. I get it if you don't wanna have sex but I'm like in this little Muslim box in your head and I'm the wife, or

the mother of your kids, right? I'm not supposed to cum." Nour calls out Ramy's double standards, as she knows he has less problems interacting sexually with non-Arab and Muslim women; she believes his apprehensions towards her are specifically stemming from the fact that she is Muslim. Throughout the episode we see some of the expectations and standards set for Muslim women in their society, including their glorification by Ramy's friends as they discuss the importance of him marrying a Muslim woman. This scene also does not shy away from displaying flaws or negative characteristics in the characters, which again actually aids in their humanization. Ramy is very clearly treating Nour with double standards, as earlier in the episode he was excitedly engaging in a sexual encounter with Chloe. However, we also see some negativity coming from Nour's character as she does not adequately back down when Ramy is uncomfortable with her sexual advances. Nonetheless, we are offered important context for both characters' actions in the episode which allows for deeper understanding of their shortcomings. In this scene we see Nour's frustrations openly expressed and Ramy's inner conflict surrounding sexual expectations of Muslim women as well.

More representations of Arab and Muslim women and sexuality are found throughout the series. We see some of this in episode 6 of the first season titled *Refugees*, which is the first of two episodes in the season that are dedicated to exploring characters in the series other than Ramy himself. This episode follows Dena Hassan, Ramy's sister, as she explores her feelings towards sexuality and virginity as a young Arab and Muslim woman. She struggles with her lack of sexual experience and pursues an encounter with a barista at a university café she frequents. However, it does not go as she envisioned.

The episode begins with an interaction between Dena in her childhood and her father, Farouk, as he explains the importance of avoiding sex before marriage, and its tie to the worth of a woman in society, rooted in religious and cultural expectations. This sets an understanding for the audience of the foundation behind Dena's struggles regarding sexuality, while also highlighting the absurdity of some of Farouk's claims. It is important to note that he delivers his explanation in Arabic, offering a depiction of the language being used in a casual familial setting. The lecture begins with Farouk explaining the grave sin of sex before marriage; how it will lead to Dena marrying a white guy, "John Smith, or someone like that" who will cheat on her, introduce her to cocaine, and leave her homeless on the streets, ending in Dena's father specifying that this discussion is rooted in his love for his daughter (Bedard, Dabis, Katcher, Welch & Youssef, 2019, 00:01:08). He then switches abruptly to covering the next most pressing issue: their overspending on Pokémon cards. This conversation brings attention to cultural and religious views towards sex in some Arab and Muslim immigrant communities and the taboo nature of this topic, as well as providing viewers with a deeper understanding of Dena's character and Farouk's. It also conveys this with humor, with shots alternating from Farouk's stern parental delivery and Dena's confused and uncomfortable expression, a familiar experience for people across cultural and religious backgrounds. This delivery exposes audiences to the familiarity within these conflicts and offers an inside perspective that unshrouds mystery.

The episode *Refugees* also brings attention to Dena's struggles with gender-based double-standards in her household, juxtaposing the differences in parental reactions when Ramy and Dena discuss their social plans for the evening. Ramy provides nearly no details regarding where he will be or who with, which Dena points out after she is met with further questioning and time

limits regarding her own plans. Ramy is also met with no pushback or prodding for more information on his way out, while Dena is stopped in her tracks to be reminded by her mother not to be late and to be safe while driving. In this scene we also see Ramy's shortcomings when considering his disregard for the double-standards being perpetuated in his own household, particularly as they are benefitting him personally. As explored in the literature review, Navarro's 2010 study on hegemonic mass media discourse showed how Muslim women are often shown as victims of their religion that is portrayed as highly patriarchal and privileging men above women. In *Ramy* we can see how some of these understandings are actually confirmed, but the way they are represented is vital to how they come across to audiences. Rather than portraying the religion itself as the problem, we see that the issue stems from the perpetuation of these beliefs from individuals, and importantly, we see the pushback from women who disagree with their treatment. This combats the common theme of Muslim women being portrayed as passive victims (Falah, 2005; Muñoz 2005). We also see how characters like Ramy who perpetuate this unfair treatment are portrayed as part of the problem.

Later, with friends, Dena discusses her parents' obstruction of her desire to live independently before she is married, or to have sex before then. Her friend, reflecting on her own personal decision to have sex before marriage states, "Look, I was just like, what am I waiting for? All of these Muslim guys are fucking around, and they don't give a shit! Why am I so scared?" (Bedard, Dabis, Katcher, Welch & Youssef, 2019, 00:09:06). We can link this back to the show's representations of Ramy's sexual encounters as he does engage in sex more freely than Dena at the outset, however his own internal conflict with his actions and motivations are depicted throughout the series as well. This shows the humanity of these interactions, as well as

misunderstandings among Arabs and Muslims just as individuals in any other group experience differences in beliefs as well as in their understandings of each other.

Following her reflections with her friends, the next scene of the episode cuts to Dena in her bed with Kyle, the charming barista from her university cafe. Dena's initial attempt to have sex is thwarted after her mother comes into the room, quickly followed by her father, and uncle Naseem. All three react with surprise, disbelief, and anger. Naseem goes so far as to call Kyle a "white animal," and threatens to kill him (Bedard, Dabis, Katcher, Welch & Youssef, 2019, 00:11:52). Ramy then enters the room and is met with a loving embrace from Maysa, and then casually declares that he has to leave to go hang out with a girl. Naseem and Farouk smile, laugh, and pat Ramy on the back, with Farouk declaring how proud he is. Here we see the double-standards clearly represented as the family's treatments toward their two children regarding sexuality are clearly juxtaposed. They guilt Dena and link her engagement in sexual activity to her morals, comedically stating that her actions imply that she does not care about her ancestors, her family, or refugees.

Later, Dena and Ramy discuss the double-standards in their household. Ramy emphasizes that Dena must not let their parents get to her. Rather, let them exhaust their parental duty of telling her what to do, then go do what she wants anyways. Dena decides to approach Kyle once more, this time going over to his apartment, safe from any familial interruptions. He makes dinner for two, including traditional Arab dishes such as hummus. Dena notably shows up with straightened hair and Kyle emphasizes how he preferred her curls, as they made her look "different" (Bedard, Dabis, Katcher, Welch & Youssef, 2019, 00:17:14). In this scene we see

hints of his orientalist views towards Dena arise. After dinner, Kyle shows Dena some of his artwork, including a piece centred around a desert. The two begin to kiss and end up in Kyle's bed as the intensity rises. When Dena moves to remove her shirt, Kyle asks her to instead keep it on. She begins to remove the tights she is wearing beneath her skirt, but he stops her halfway, and comments on the beauty of her olive skin. We get a sense that he is fetishizing her Arab heritage and Muslim background. Kyle asks Dena to speak Arabic, emphasizing how hot he finds it. He then refers to himself as a "white infidel," and says that they can have anal sex so that Dena remains a virgin (Bedard, Dabis, Katcher, Welch & Youssef, 2019, 00:20:31). Dena eventually asks, "Are you just hooking up with me because I'm Egyptian?" Kyle emphasizes how "unknown" her Egyptian identity is to him, and how attractive that makes her, and also implies that her being Egyptian makes her more interesting, and less "normal."

In this scene, *Ramy* highlights the fetishization that many Arab and Muslim women deal with, allowing for a deeper understanding of their experiences. This fetishization is also noted in episode 1 *Between the Toes* when Ramy's friend Steve states, "Ah, I love when they're all covered. From their head to their toe like that? Yo, that mystery is sexy," (Bradbeer, Katcher, Welch, & Youssef, 2019, 00:09:51). To which Ramy replies, "That's disgusting." It is significant that in Dena's episode, her experience is specifically portrayed from her direct perspective, as the series gives precedence to exploring her relationship with sexuality and the expectations and prejudices she faces. Dena does not passively accept a situation she is unhappy with, but rather seeks experiences outside of the boundaries and expectations placed on her. Her negative experience does not reflect badly on her own choices, but rather gives viewers more insight into difficulties Arab and Muslim women can face when it comes to Orientalist and fetishized views.

It is important that the depictions of these stories do not come across as though they carry the intention of spoon-feeding overly positive displays of Arab and Muslim humanity to non-Arab and Muslim Western audiences, or even catering directly to them at all. Rather, the content is produced primarily with Arabs and Muslims in the diaspora for any viewers interested in their stories, be they Arab, Muslim, or neither. It is a project that turns inward and explores self-reflective themes, allowing for a view into some conflicts and struggles faced by Arabs and Muslims in the Western diaspora. The show's creator claimed that he "wanted to make something about a group that people don't know, that is self-reflective instead of something that is trying to project an idea of what you should think of us," (Blyth, 2019 a, para. 3). It creates a space for Arabs and Muslims to see themselves within characters who face similar experiences and hardships in situations that feel close-to-home, while allowing non-Arabs and Muslims the opportunity to see through their perspective; a lens that has traditionally not been prioritized in the Western media landscape. Again from creator Ramy Youssef, "I think people are sick of seeing the same shit, and they want to see something that feels like it's talking to us. I like shows, I like characters that are ugly, and that are messy, and that look like me," (Grobar, 2020, para. 10).

The representations throughout this series depict Arabs and Muslims as realistic, complex, multifaceted individuals, and this is something that has been missing and, in many cases, intentionally excluded from Western mainstream media. *Ramy* does not shy from presenting Arabs and Muslims as hypocritical or flawed; rather these aspects are often at the forefront of the series' narrative. I found that these are actually the representations which can

function most effectively as counter-hegemonic devices. The dominant discourse which has depicted Arabs and Muslims in such Otherized and damaging ways can be directly challenged through humanizing depictions, and these act as pedagogical tools. These depictions also include humanized displays of being “bad.” Not pushed to the point of the dehumanized “evil,” but rather allowing the characters to simply be regular, flawed humans, as all of us are. Individuals who face internal and external conflicts, struggles and temptations as any other person does, and presented in a manner that gives due time and credit to exploring some of the unique experiences of these cultural and religious identities.

“RAMY” NOT “MUSLIMS”

It is impossible for any single film or description to wholly encapsulate all that it can and does “mean” to be Arab and Muslim. This research was not performed with the intent of finding the most universally accurate or widely inclusive representation in mainstream media. Rather the intention was to explore how a self-representative media project could be found to act as a form resistance. It is not expected to be free of flaws, or to speak for every individual. It should however be an accurate portrayal of individual people, free of the sensationalized and often damaging images that have saturated the Western media landscape.

When considering objects of representation, questions and concerns arise regarding whose voices are being heard. For representation in media to be counter-hegemonic, it must come from the oppressed at the source. However, it cannot be expected for a single production made from unique viewpoints to be able to speak for entire subsets of humanity. We see that this is understood by show creator Ramy Youssef, and that he did not intend to produce a totalizing

representative project but rather speak to his own experiences: “I realized all I can do is really offer my singular point of view, and make sure that it’s as much me as possible, and that will speak to who we need to speak to,” (Deb, 2019, para. 7).

Self-representational works that intend to speak directly for the groups would likely enter into broad generalizations and sweeping conclusions that would not account for the intricacies of human identity and experience. Furthermore, the intention of speaking directly for the oppressed falls back into Freire’s banking model, whereby the oppressor speaks directly to and of the oppressed. Rather, the problem-posing model presents students with problems “relating to themselves in the world and with the world,” then gives them the space to contemplate, analyze, and make their own conclusions (Freire, 1970, p. 81). Freire’s emphasis on the importance of dialogue in the anti-oppressive process is extended here, in media that provides viewers the opportunity to engage in dialogue within themselves as well as their communities. Youssef emphasizes that with *Ramy*, he does not attempt to speak for all Arabs and Muslims, rather that he can only speak to his own experiences and of those around him. “There’s a reason I called the show *Ramy*, because I didn’t want to call it Muslims,” (Blyth, 2019 a, para. 7). And furthermore, “I think part of why we went with my name [for the title] was to make it really clear that this is limited in scope...This is one family and one point of view... I wasn’t elected by Muslims to represent Muslims, it’s not like everyone got together and said ‘Ramy, go!’” (Ramos, 2020, para. 11). The series *Ramy* is not intended to be a representation of the entire Arab and Muslim populations, but rather explores characters in a specific context.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

When walking home after being ejected from Nour's car, Ramy runs into the same man he met at the beginning of the first episode who was frustrated with Ramy's improper ablution technique. Ramy sits next to the man in silence, then launches into a self-reflective mini monologue which does a decent job of summing up his character's perspective and struggles. "I don't know what I'm doing, man. I look at my parents and how strong they are, and how they just know everything's going to be okay. Always. Because they have God. And I believe in God. I really do man. There's too many signs. Like one time this girl texted me two minutes after I jerked off to her Facebook photo. Look, we didn't talk for months and then out of nowhere she texted me, "'Sup?" Like can you tell me this shit isn't all connected? I know it is. And yeah, I have sex even though I'm not married, and I'm probably gonna try mushrooms one day, so what? Is that-does that mean I'm not a good Muslim? Like I- I can't do it 'cause I don't follow all the rules, and the fucking judgments that are always just being put on us. And then... I do the same thing. I put the same fucking judgments on everyone around me... I'm just like trying to be.... Good. Do you really think God cares if I wash between my toes?" (Bradbeer, Katcher, Welch & Youssef, 2019, 00:21:59). We see an honest and unfiltered stream of thought directly from the lead character as he attempts to put into words his lack of direction and struggles with reconciling different aspects of his identity. The audience is shown that this character understands that he is full of contradictions and reflects on some flaws in his own character, but still emphasizes that his ultimate goal is to be a good person, and a good Muslim.

Edward Said found that through Orientalist constructions, European culture gained strength and identity because its image was juxtaposed with negative images of the Orient and its people, projecting ideas of "European superiority" over "Oriental backwardness" (1979, p. 7).

Shaheen found this phenomenon to be echoed in Hollywood films, which tended to elevate Western humanity while attacking Arab and Western humanity (2001) We see in *Ramy* how Arab and Muslim identities are uplifted in comparison to the dominant media landscape, however this is not accomplished by attacking other identities at all. Arabs and Muslims are not portrayed as superior to any other group, which would counteract the pursuit of liberation. As Freire emphasizes, those committed to liberation of the oppressive cycle “Must replace the deposit-making banking model of education with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relations with the world,” (1970, p. 79).

The series does not build a negative image of any particular group in order to promote the images of Arabs and Muslims. This would result in an approach more in line with Freire’s banking model of oppressive pedagogy, where the cycle of oppression simply continues to repeat as the formerly oppressed become “sub-oppressors” (1970, p. 45). Freire emphasizes that in the quest for their liberation, it is absolutely vital that the oppressed do not adopt the same mentality and behavior as their oppressors. “The oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it), become in turn oppressors of the oppressors, but rather restorers of the humanity of both,” (Freire, 1970, p. 44). He explores how this is a common tendency, as the oppressive relationship is the primary model which oppressed individuals have and therefore they can only imagine existing as oppressor or oppressed. Rather the series works towards the construction and representation of authentic images and experiences of Arabs and Muslims in a specific context. These straightforward and unfiltered depictions allow for viewers to understand these characters more intimately than previously possible and in contexts that highlight their humanity, rather than contributing to their dehumanization. They are not portrayed as either

superior or inferior, rather as everyday individuals pursuing their self-fulfillment as anyone else would. This echoes the goal outlined by Shaheen, who was "dedicated to trying to humanize Arabs and Muslims and to give visibility to American Arabs and American Muslims — to have us being projected no better, no worse, than anyone else," (Roberts, 2017, para. 12).

We can see how these representations have the potential to combat the imagined norms produced through otherization, which positions “certain experiences and persons outside its centre and producing them as lacking in the propensities to be accorded a fully human status,” (Blackman & Walkerdine, 2001, p. 24). Representations in the show *Ramy* instead work towards uplifting Arabs and Muslims from dehumanized depictions through their own portrayals as more deeply dimensional and sympathizable characters. In this sense they are no longer explicitly “otherized,” and rather are depicted as they face universally human experiences and struggles. In a banking model, the oppressed are “regarded as the pathology of the healthy society” who must be “integrated,” and “incorporated” into the surrounding “healthy society” (Freire, 1970, p. 74). In *Ramy*, Arab and Muslim characters are not otherized, however they are also not portrayed as exactly like other Americans, which would erase aspects of their identities for the sake of integration and assimilation. Rather their specific and unique struggles with navigating their intersecting Arab, Muslim and American identities are highlighted throughout the series. As discussed by Freire, “The oppressed are not “marginals,” are not people living “outside” society. They have always been “inside” ... The solution is not to “integrate” them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become “beings for themselves” (Ibid). We see throughout the show as the characters grapple with their personal development and it is through their fully human struggles that their “fully human status” is asserted (Blackman

& Walkerdine, 2001, p. 24). Therefore the tactic of employing otherizing depictions to promote Arab and Muslim dehumanization in media is directly countered through humanizing representations.

When working towards liberation, it is necessary to be aware of the simple fact that change is possible. The knowledge that the future is something to be created, rather than passively received, is vital for the furthering of any movement against oppression. Otherwise, one will simply sink further into the belief that there is simply no hope, that nothing can be changed, and that things will always be the way that they are. “In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform,” (Freire, 1970, p. 49). It is necessary for the oppressed to understand the dominant hegemonic process for what it is, and further, to acknowledge how that dominant viewpoint can be engaged with, challenged, and potentially altered. “[Hegemony] is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits... Its internal structures are highly complex, as can readily be seen in any concrete analysis. Moreover... it does not just passively exist as a form of dominance. It has continually to be renewed, recreated, defended, and modified,” (Williams, 1977, p. 112). The oppressed must accost their reality, understand what is truly happening, acknowledge that it is an artificial truth, and identify how to intervene. More so, they must do the work of intervening, by engaging in counter-hegemonic actions which confront the dominant constructed false reality. “A mere perception of reality not followed by this critical intervention will not lead to a transformation of objective reality,” (Freire, 1970, 52). And so of course, it is necessary for the oppressed to recognize their power

and their potential, which is difficult work to go about in the face of one's oppression, but it is necessary work, as noted by Richard Shaull in the foreword to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "This world to which he relates is not a static and closed order, a given reality which man must accept and to which he must adjust; rather, it is a problem to be worked on and solved," (Freire, 1970, 32).

Ramy, then, is counter-hegemonic, in that it challenges the dominant hegemonic processes. Youssef has already independently done the work of coming to a realization that the Arab and Muslim populations have been oppressed, and that the situation is not static or hopeless. "In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limiting situation which they can transform," (Freire, 1970, p. 49). In this way, he has moved through the stages of Freire's model of critical pedagogy, beyond the Magical and Naive stages of consciousness, reaching the Critical stage (1970). Through the series *Ramy*, efforts are made towards that transformation, and towards critically intervening in the previously constructed and established false reality.

Freire also discusses the importance of recognizing differences in approaches to education as well as recognizing the limitations of certain systems. He states that there is a, "...distinction between systematic education, which can only be changed by political power, and educational projects, which should be carried out with the oppressed in the process of organizing them," (1970, p. 54). *Ramy*, as a mass-distributed media series is one of these educational projects, and therefore an effective means of working towards the liberation of the group, in that it allows for the oppressed to take matters into their own hands, bypassing the restrictions of

systematic education, and turning instead to a method which can be carried out more independently. The series provides an opportunity for viewers to become involved in the process of counter-hegemony, educating themselves.

Self-education must also be employed by the oppressed in order to combat the internalization of one's oppression. Freire finds that through the oppressive relationship, the oppressed internalize their oppressors. "The oppressed suffer from the duality which has established itself in their innermost being. They discover that without freedom they cannot exist authentically. Yet, although they desire authentic existence, they fear it. They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized," (Freire, 1970, p. 48). When one internalizes their oppressor, they begin to think in the ways of their oppressor, and to behave in the ways that their oppressor wants them to, all the while struggling with the duality of at once being both themselves and their oppressor. Hegel labels this the "unhappy consciousness," defined as the intrusion of one form of consciousness into another (Hegel, 1807/1977, p. 202). Alongside this internalization comes the common side effect of self-depreciation, leading to feelings of being convinced that you yourself are in fact unfit in the same ways that your oppressor believes (Freire, 1970). This in itself is a subtle and yet extremely detrimental aspect of oppression, as stated by James Baldwin, "You must understand the nature of oppression; the most subtle effect of oppression, is... what it does to your mind, what it does to the way you think about yourself. The whole cornerstone rests there," (Baldwin quoted in Ové, 1968, 00:20:28).

The self-education of the oppressed is a key factor in their liberation, and this education is not limited to only one topic. The oppressed must educate themselves about their oppressor, and about the environment surrounding them which certainly played a role in the development of the oppressive relationship. It is easy to demonize an oppressor, and to dismiss them as being inherently evil-minded and with ill-intentions. However, oppressors themselves are individuals who have been dehumanized, whether by other oppressors, their environment, or other factors. It is likely that an individual may have become an oppressor as a result of their surroundings or upbringing. For example, we can consider the cycle of oppression whereby an oppressed individual may eventually escape that role, however rather than becoming liberated, they themselves become oppressors, following the model they are familiar with. “The very structure of their thought has been conditioned by the contradictions of the concrete, existential situation by which they were shaped. Their ideal is to be men; but for them, to be men is to be oppressors. This is their model of humanity,” (Freire, 1970, p. 45). Another example is that of the media environment, which is often saturated with stereotyped and bigoted representations of specific groups including but not limited to Arabs and Muslims. This is especially evident in situations where individuals are not raised around members of these groups, as they would have no means of learning about them through firsthand experience, but rather rely on the opinions and explanations of others, which includes those circulated within the media. They will absorb the stereotyped images and narratives, and in doing so, may adopt these views. This creates a new generation of individuals who will carry forth the false history which has been perpetuated by oppressors in the past. What notions are the public meant to carry regarding Arabs and Muslims if one of the primary forms of contact and exposure they have with these groups is through their consumption of media rife with stereotypes and misinformation?

When one becomes familiar with and understands the various factors which may have contributed to the dehumanization of their oppressor, it gives insight into what areas they may explore and potentially work towards changing. For example, an understanding of the role of the media can lead to a desire to create one's own media, effectively providing alternative content which is a more accurate representation of the oppressed group. This provides an opportunity for the public to see and hear from various Arab and Muslim individuals in their own personal environments, and on their own terms. We can see examples throughout a history of social movements where they have been strengthened through the sharing of experiences. For example, Willis explores a process used by feminist groups known as consciousness-raising whereby groups would meet in order to share and analyze their individual experiences, and this was their primary means of coming to understand their lived conditions as women (Willis, 1984). Also emphasized is the importance of this tactic, as it "uncovered an enormous amount of information about women's lives and insights into women's oppression, and was the movement's most successful organizing tool," (Willis, 1984, p. 94). Additionally cited by Willis are the historical influences of this importance on shared personal experiences as found in the Chinese revolution's "Speak pains to recall pains" as well as the Black power movement's "Tell it like it is" (1984). We see this importance of communicating shared experiences echoed in James Baldwin's recount of slavery tactics, whereby individuals were strategically paired with others who spoke different languages in order to prevent conversation and furthermore action; "if we could have spoken to each other, we might have been able to figure out what was happening to us, and if we could figure out what was happening to us, we might have been able to prevent it," (Baldwin quoted in Ové, 1968, 00:03:00). It is clear that throughout history, the process of sharing experiences in order to raise a general consciousness and create a stronger movement as

a group has been a key tactic in the organizing of social movements, and *Ramy* follows this model as Arabs and Muslims can speak directly to their own experiences. Media projects like *Ramy* that centre Arabs and Muslims as the sources of the content allow viewers a chance to learn about conflicts which occur within Arab and Muslim communities, allowing for a diversification of their representation. As Freire states, “People educate each other through the mediation of the world,” and *Ramy* is just one form of this kind of mediation (Freire, 1970, p. 32).

MOVING FORWARD

Show creator Ramy Youssef has reflected on some changes in the entertainment industry environment that helped lead to the show’s creation in 2019, and how a series that featured an Arab and Muslim family as the main characters was previously unlikely: “When I tried to talk about this show, in 2014, 2015, any person who was anywhere near the industry told me to make [Ramy and his family] Arab neighbors, or make it just one character and put him with a white friend, or adopted. You know, random shit...And now, we get to be doing this,” (Gobar, 2020, para. 12). While steps have certainly been made towards progress, and much of this is at the hands of series’ such as *Ramy*, Youssef also notes that the work must continue, and creators need to keep pushing to see the content they want reach the forefront of the media landscape. “I think that obviously, these are really cool early steps, but we’ve got to flatten the curve, dude. We’ve got to keep going...I think there’s a bit of a narrative that Hollywood pushes social change. But I really do think that social change is what pushes Hollywood. Hollywood is just like any other corporation, and so we can’t really let up,” (Gobar, 2020, para. 13). Furthermore, he notes the importance of ensuring that creators’ voices are heard, and stories are told: “It doesn’t matter

who they come from, but we want to make sure that everyone's getting a chance to talk," (Ibid.). This idea is also found within a sentiment shared by Jack Shaheen: "In spite of the doom and gloom, I remain an optimist... I do have faith in the young image makers. To do nothing means the situation will continue. You've got to continue moving forward," (2016, Allam, para. 19).

We can see evidence of this desire to produce more accurate and nuanced representations of Arabs and Muslims in efforts such as open calls for screenplays. During the period from June 14th 2020 to November 14th 2020, the Canadian Arab Institute based in Toronto, Ontario held an open call for short film screenplays related to the topic, "Arab Stories: Debunking Arab Myths." This initiative provided the opportunity for the winner's screenplay to be produced, and two runners-up to have the chance to be considered for production as well. The Institute's call for screenplays brought attention to the decades of mainstream stereotyped representations in Western media and the common tropes that Arabs have been depicted as, even specifying how this degradation leads to their dehumanization. As the interim executive director of the Canadian Arab Institute at the time Shireen Salti noted: "It is time to correct this narrative and dispel the various myths and stereotypes that have long unjustly followed this rich and diverse community," (Canadian Arab Institute, 2020, para. 3).

I believe that when it comes to countering and combatting the negative representations of Arabs and Muslims that have historically dominated the Western mainstream media landscape, shows like *Ramy* can have a great deal of impact on educating and effectively changing the minds of the general public for the better. Much of this can be attributed to the cast and crew of the show, which features heavy involvement of Arabs and Muslims themselves. Individuals with Arab and/or Muslim backgrounds can be found throughout the show's creators, producers, writers, directors, cast and crew. Their personal perspectives and intimate knowledge of the

realities of Arab and Muslim existence contribute to the quality, accuracy, and nuance of representations throughout the series, and work to combat the history of inaccurate depictions that have stemmed from ignorance. The show *Ramy* gives due time, attention, and space to the important stories and struggles of Arabs and Muslims in the Western diaspora and allows for an inside look into the intricacies of some of these specific relationships and dynamics. The series does not shy away from portraying Arabs and Muslims as flawed individuals with negative characteristics, but rather highlights these throughout the narrative and places them in the foreground. This contributes to the show's ability to act as a counter-hegemonic device, as these realistic and unfiltered depictions are precisely what allow audiences to relate more deeply and authentically with the characters' humanity. *Ramy* also brings some of the struggles faced by Arabs and Muslims in the diaspora to the foreground including racist and bigoted interactions, fetishization, religious and cultural expectations, and difficulty reconciling sides of themselves that seem to be contradictory or even hypocritical. It allows Arabs and Muslims a place in mainstream media to be works in progress, and importantly, to simply be themselves. Without having to justify who they are or what they believe, or to prove their worth through good deeds and better behaviour. Rather, they can just *be*, and in this series, their simple existence is justification enough for their worth and humanity.

All of this combined is what places *Ramy* in line with Freire's ideas of liberation, and effective ways of going about this process. It is through education that the cycle of oppression can be combatted, and I found *Ramy* to be a suitable pedagogical tool. While it may not be known at the time of creating and releasing a series like *Ramy* whether or not its message will reach its intended audience, whether it will shake up and wake up the oppressed or find a home in the oppressors, what is most imperative about these media projects is that this work is being

done, and that this effort is being made. When it stops, when the oppression is passively endured and no efforts are made to either work against it or even to simply understand it, that is when the movement dies, and when hope is lost. The effectiveness of a project such as *Ramy* as a counter-hegemonic pedagogical tool should not be measured solely by whether it reaches the ultimate goal, or by statistics analyzing how many people have been changed and what resources were expended to achieve that. Rather, it is important that we also analyze the effectiveness of the media project in terms of how it contributes to keeping the struggle alive, and actively moving forward. It is not necessary to solve every issue immediately, as these things take time. The history of oppression is a long one, and these relations have deeply woven roots. It cannot be expected for the oppressed to gain awareness, rise up, organize, and liberate themselves and their oppressors by educating the entire world all at once. Small steps are still steps forward, and any step forward is progress made. Whether it is accomplished by educating a classroom, a country, a friend, or one's own self, these are all victories and it is still effective, worthwhile, and valuable to strive towards a future that is even a little bit less hateful, and a little bit more accepting. I find *Ramy* to be effective not because it completely solves the problem, which it does not accomplish nor does it claim to, but because it is an attempt at reaching out to people, to educate all parties involved, and to help make a change. Through the depiction of Arabs and Muslims as lead characters and providing stories from their perspectives as they navigate life's obstacles just as anyone else does, an alternative to the dehumanized common depictions is presented. The dissemination of that message allows audiences to be exposed to these more accurate and nuanced representations. In this way, self-representation in media can act as a counter-hegemonic pedagogical tool through which the oppressed can resist their oppressor.

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