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Mary Hanna
Montclair State University

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Abstract

In 2019, writer and director Ramy Youssef debuted his semi-autobiographical television series, *Ramy*. Youssef's series is a coming-of-age story that documents the typical trials and tribulations of entering adulthood all while navigating these issues as a young Muslim Egyptian American. The creation of the show in part serves to address common Orientalist misconceptions regarding religion, customs, and gender roles that exist in mainstream media, especially in a post 9/11 world. Youssef's intention is to derail the trajectory of this discourse by offering an often overlooked first-hand portrayal of a diasporic Arab and Muslim experience in America that defies the predominant image in Western film, television, and news over the past several years. The discursive nature of contemporary mainstream media has contributed to Orientalism in the way that scholarly discourse has done in the past. In his book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said outlines how this discourse originated in the travel literature of the past which detailed the perceived images of the East by the West. As the discourse has shifted from travel books and continues to evolve in modern film and television, it has diminished the space for characters to exist beyond their stereotypical images. Overturning Orientalist beliefs requires an often silenced and underrepresented voice like Youssef's to be heard and acknowledged.

An overview of *Ramy*'s characters and their controversies provide an outlet for understanding Youssef's positioning and approach regarding present-day Orientalism. Having considered the message expressed through his show's characters, it is also important to take into consideration that Youssef does not speak on behalf of all Muslim Arab Americans. I argue that Youssef is only able to capture the essence of a single experience that contributes to the dismantling of Orientalist ideas. In order to completely overturn Orientalist beliefs, it requires additional Arabs and Muslims to directly share their experiences as well. Moreover, it demands

the hegemonic powers in film and television to participate in the accurate representation of these narratives first before systematic Orientalist views and their monolithic depiction of Middle Eastern and Muslim figures can be broken down.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

A Whole New (Eastern) World: Ramy Youssef's Role in the Undoing of Orientalism in Modern-

Day Media

by

Mary Hanna

A Master's Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

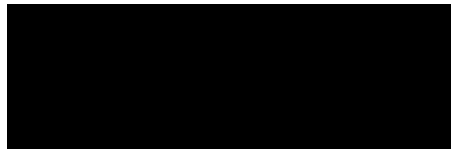
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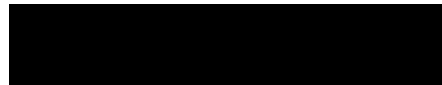
The College of Humanities and Social Sciences

Thesis Committee:

Department of English



Dr. Jeffrey Gonzalez
Thesis Sponsor



Dr. Fawzia Afzal-Khan
Committee Member



Dr. Melinda Knight
Committee Member

A WHOLE NEW (EASTERN) WORLD: RAMY YOUSSEF'S ROLE IN THE UNDOING OF
ORIENTALISM IN MODERN-DAY MEDIA

A THESIS

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It is due to the contributions of a few very special individuals that this thesis has been made possible.

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Mary Hanna – May 2021

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1. Introduction

The opening of Disney's 1992 animated film *Aladdin* displays slow flickering flames on the screen that transform into an image of a barren and desolate desert. In the far distance, a lone turbaned peddler emerges on camelback and nears closer into view as he approaches a lavish palace. In the background, the song "Arabian Nights" emerges along with the full scene (:47).

Oh, I come from a land, from a faraway place

Where the caravan camels roam

Where it's flat and immense

And the heat is intense

It's barbaric, but hey, it's home

Not far from the revised version, the third and fourth lines of these lyrics originally stated:

"Where they cut off your ear/If they don't like your face." The altered lyrics came at the urging

of Jack G. Shaheen, author of *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* and *Guilty:*

Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs After 9/11. The image illustrated here is far from just a superficial

visual. The image and language of the song are a projection of a stereotypical and often racist

mindset publicized to a general audience of mostly young children (*Reel Bad Arabs* 56-57). With

the abundance of media access, the learned attitudes regarding Arabs and Muslims are

introduced during the formative years thereby creating a lifetime foundation for the way Arabs

and Muslims are recognized and even how young Arabs and Muslims recognize themselves.

Viewed as barbarians, turbaned sheikhs, and villainous thieves prior to 9/11, post-9/11,

mainstream Western media has transformed the Arab into a villainous terrorist. Despite the

altered image, the barbaric and violent associations with the image have remained unchanged.

Beyond the recent history that has influenced contemporary representations, in looking back at

events and scholarly literature of the distant past, people of the Middle East, and the broader surrounding regions such as North Africa and Asia, have experienced a longstanding history of being stereotypically characterized. These stereotypes, implanted in the discourse of Orientalism, have segued into a more contemporary category of neo-Orientalism which continues to propagate these ideologies through Western news and entertainment media. Through the scope of this research, I uncover not only how mainstream media propels present-day neo-Orientalist beliefs but also how in certain instances attempts to acknowledge and disprove the flawed perceptions of Middle Easterners and Muslims today.

2. Edward Said's Orientalism

The portrayal of Arabs and Muslims in Western media is deeply rooted in an imperialist discourse that Edward Said, the founding figure in the field of postcolonial studies, theorizes in his landmark book *Orientalism* (1978). Said later expands his research in *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1981) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993)—a trilogy of works addressing aspects of Orientalism. In their anthology which incorporates Said's work, David Lodge and Nigel Wood define Orientalism as “the discourse of the West about the East, a huge body of texts—literary, topographical, anthropological, historical, sociological—that has been accumulating since the Renaissance” (367). Said, who takes a deconstructionist approach, lays the foundation for his theory by first examining how literary discourse guided and shaped Western attitudes about Eastern societies over time. Said describes the body of Western literature on Orientalism as an “archive” whose unifying ideas and descriptions defined the East. Incorporating Europe's historically imperialist presence in the East, Said is able to demonstrate how the literature of the West produced a set of ideologies about the East that were projected as what Said labels “scientific truth,” a concept

based on French poststructuralist philosopher Michel Foucault's idea that power breeds knowledge and that knowledge could reinforce power. Since the West held the power, the knowledge they created could continue to assert their superiority by defining and controlling the East. In describing the colonizer/colonized relationship between the West (the Occident) and the East (the Orient), Said writes: "The relationship between Occident and Orient is a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of a complex hegemony.... The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be 'Oriental' in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European, but also because it could be—that is, submitted to being—made Oriental" (*Orientalism* 5-6). As he describes it, the Orient is a construct conceptualized by European colonizers that was intended to define the people of the East ("the Other") as uncivilized and barbaric—a belief that still holds its ground in the twenty-first century. In defining the idea of the Other, the West was then able to create terms that would define itself as superior and more civilized. In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?," Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who was influenced by Said's work and who is an equally regarded scholar in the field of postcolonial studies, also argues for the case of the Other, typically the individual of East who is defined by the West as distinctly different and inferior. For Spivak, the Other or subaltern can be characterized as the marginalized members of society who have the inability to speak on their own behalf and who are defined in opposition to the elite ("Can the Subaltern Speak?" 254). Both Said and Spivak focus on the idea of representation and the colonizer's ability to speak on behalf of the colonized. Both scholars explore how the discourse of academic thought represents and defines the identity of the Other. The ideas and stereotypes about the Orient serve the purpose of obtaining and consolidating political and economic control particularly in the Islamic Middle East, which is the main geographic location Said references

when speaking about the Orient. As a result of the power structures rooted in and reinforcing Western hegemony, Orientalism is still able to maintain its “durability and strength” today (*Orientalism* 7). Despite Said’s “today” referencing the time of *Orientalism*’s publication in the 1970s, Said’s definition continues to uphold these attributes in today’s twenty-first century world.

To understand the full scope of Orientalism’s role in the twenty-first century, it is first necessary to understand the historical groundwork beginning with the late eighteenth century which Said examines in his research. Though Orientalism as a study advanced during this time, the origin of Orientalist ideas predates back to the rise of Islam. A predominantly Christian Europe, who in earlier centuries played witness to the Islamic conquests, “had scant interest in the learning, high culture, and frequent magnificence of the Muslims” (*Orientalism* 59). As a result, the spread of Islam was perceived as a violent and merciless conquest. These qualities would become closely associated with the meaning of the religion and would pose as a threat to Christian Europe due to its relatively close proximity to Christianity geographically and culturally speaking. The presumed truth about the East was noted in the literature and written studies on it before the Orient even existed in reality. Even prior to colonization, the earliest works of literature had already started creating what Said terms “imaginative geographies.” The portrayal of a geographic East or Orient through literature “legitimizes a vocabulary, a universe of representative discourse peculiar to the discussion and understanding of Islam and of the Orient” (*Orientalism* 71). This means that the geographical location of the Orient was created and understood as legitimate only after the labels were assigned to it. The idea of “us” (West) versus “them” (East) was enough to create boundaries that would then be actualized and reinforced through colonization (Said 54). Shehla Burney, who has written on Said’s work and

postcolonial studies, explains that the West “not only ‘conquered’ the Orient at its territory, but also its identity, (hi)story, culture, landscape, and voice” (24). The unfolding of these historical events, their documentation in literature, and associated Western understanding continued to shape the formation of Orientalist thought in centuries to come particularly during the rise of colonialism and imperialism.

In their early encounters with the Eastern world, Europeans, particularly the British and French, entered new territory with preconceived notions influenced by scholarly material and travel literature on the Middle East and Islam. Rather than relying on human interaction to formulate their understanding, readers begin to rely on the information given to them in such texts. Even more so, readers have been known to dispute their own first-hand experiences because of their acceptance of the information in travel books as factual. In the event that the Orient does not align with the image of himself, “its foreignness can be translated... the disenchantment that one feels after encountering it, the unresolved eccentricity it displays, are all redistributed in what is said or written about it” (*Orientalism* 103). These texts begin to take on such a great authoritative role to the extent that the perception of a location trumps what actually exists. This is precisely what Said refers to as a textual attitude. Writers, aware of their readers’ interest in such knowledge, are propelled to produce more work aligned with the “textual attitude” on the particular subject matter. Over time, the material produced and reproduced in this scholarly work contributes to the discourse of Orientalism and Orientalist thinking (*Orientalism* 93). As Said notes, the Orient was positioned as an object of study through a Western lens, not as people, but as problems to be examined, analyzed, and reformed. Rather than creating an understanding of Islamic lands and people, Europe’s presence and authority enabled it to erase Islamic history and rewrite it from the French and British point of view.

The viewpoint on Islam would later be reinforced through a different lens beginning in the later eighteenth century and transitioning into the early nineteenth century when the West's world view shifted from religion to science favoring reason and logic over more abstract structures like religion. Thus, Orientalism moved from being religiously based to secularly based as European expansion began to cover more parts of the East beyond Islamic lands such as India, China, and Japan. During the Enlightenment era, European interest was in scientifically based areas of study such as anthropology and philology, and through those bases, the modern Orientalist was able to reshape the Orient (*Orientalism* 120-21). This was Europe's strategic approach in maintaining control by redefining and essentializing the Orient based on race, color, origin, or disposition rather than religion. Connecting these areas of study with their impact on racism, Burney explains that "theories of language based on racial and ethnic origins later developed into subjects such as Ethnology, Anthropology, and Philology, establishing a crucial relation between language and race, leading toward racialization and eventually racism between Europe and its Others" (37). In that sense, language and the composition of language represented a lens at which to examine the people of the Orient in the absence of religion (*Orientalism* 135-136).

Transitioning into the nineteenth century, travel to the Near East by later Orientalists gained popularity. The dual role of the Western writer positioned in the East allowed him to masquerade as an Oriental for research purposes while simultaneously maintaining the authority of an Orientalist in order to capture and report first-hand knowledge ranging in interpretation. Orientalist scholars continued to base their work on essentializing or creating "abstract generalities [and were] neither interested in nor capable of discussing individuals" (*Orientalism* 154). Spivak also sees the dangers of homogenizing subaltern individuals for the reason that it

limits representation and contributes to the oppression of the Other (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 259). For Said, it continued to drive Orientalist discourse. Travel writing resulted in a “restructuring of the Orient, re-vision of it, which restores it redemptively to the present. Every interpretation, every structure created for the Orient, then, is a reinterpretation, a rebuilding of it” (*Orientalism* 158). The result of their work established a legitimate field of study and career on the Orient. The exploitation of the Orient in British and French scholarship was used as a means for justifying their “pilgrimage” to the East. By describing the Orient as a place of pilgrimage, Said denotes that there is also a religious purpose for their colonization. More specifically, Orientalists felt Christian (and political) duty to save the Orient from Islamic beliefs. Acting as the voice of the Orient, the Orientalist would seemingly advocate for liberties of the Orient. Ironically, while claiming to liberalize the Arab, the point Said proves is that the Orientalist, in his political control of Eastern affairs, further contributed to the oppression of the Arab (*Orientalism* 247-249, 254). The scholarly revelations on Orientalism in the nineteenth century would eventually suggest that the imperialistic role of governmental institutions would better serve in controlling the Orient. Approaching the twentieth century, a political shift in Orientalism took place for which Said attempts to provide an explanation. Said explains distinctions that were preserved and reinforced during this time. Skin color and race, institutionally based and scientifically backed, continued to reinforce the superiority of the white Europeans. Furthermore, linguistic differences allowed Orientalists to create essentializing identities out of the Orient into categories like “the Arab,” “the Semite,” “the Muslim,” or “the Oriental.” Though language was the basis for categorizations such as these, they were legitimized by anthropological, psychological, biological, and cultural sciences (*Orientalism* 234). Through this scientific lens, the purpose of race theory, as Said explains, “was always to raise Europe or a European race to

dominion over non-European portions of mankind” (*Orientalism* 232). The workings of this scholarly knowledge in the late nineteenth century would then be transformed into the “instrumental attitudes” of the twentieth century; in essence, knowledge was translated into political action in order to maintain power (*Orientalism* 246).

Following World War I, the competition to occupy space in the Orient between imperialist France and England sparked a politically based division of Oriental territories between the two countries. Also at this time, the fight for independence in the East shifted Orientalists’ previous stance as the West was confronted with threats of Arab and Israeli “barbarism” in the form of nationalism. In an effort to preserve their power, the West continued its reliance on enduring “knowledge” that by nature the Muslim East was inferior and threatening to a more scientifically advanced superior Europe. Since the knowledge historically produced by Islamic Orientalism assumed that Islam was unchanging, any past knowledge generated on Islam would still be applicable (*Orientalism* 260-261). In his analysis of postcolonial theory, Robert Dale Parker explains that “Any hint of changing in ‘them’ must be denied, because it threatens... the binary opposition that allows colonizers to see themselves as essentially different from people they colonize, thus allowing the colonizers to justify their conquests” (314). The United States would eventually replace England and France in their conquest to gain influence over the Middle East. While the first World War was a gateway for the United States into Middle Eastern affairs, the Second World War was an opportunity for the United States to exploit the land for oil (*Orientalism* 294-295). Though the United States’ involvement stemmed out of fear of Arab and Muslim domination, the allure was also in the resources that Arab lands could provide. American concerns are historically connected as Ella Shohat explains that “the campaigns against Muslims... made available a mammoth apparatus of othering for recycling in the ‘new’

continents” (21). When Said published *Orientalism*, anti-Arab sentiments were on the rise in the 1970s due to political and world conflict. The political policies generated by the United States at the time of Said’s writing (and still today) were deeply embedded in Orientalism (*Orientalism* 321).

3. Neo-Orientalism

While Orientalism is alive, it has changed in meaningful ways. As Said acknowledges, decolonization did not bring with it an end to colonial and imperial thinking. The twenty-first century has evolved into a new form of Orientalism referred to as neo-Orientalism. Neo-Orientalism functions in the same respect as traditional Orientalism albeit through political policy rather than imperial occupation. Unlike Orientalism which focused on an expansive geographical East, neo-Orientalism’s shift to a more concentrated region of the Orient, the Middle East, is attributed to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 which placed an immense strain on the relationship between Americans and the Arab world. As Mubarak Altwaiji reveals, the events of 9/11 shaped the political climate and outlook reemphasizing the binary between a superior “us” in the West and an inferior “them” in the East who were regarded as radical and violent (313-314). Under these circumstances, the resulting shift to neo-Orientalism is signified by Western Islamophobic ideologies. In *Covering Islam*, Said affirms that the fear of Islamic dominance that marked the Middle Ages once again resurfaces and threatens to destroy “the democratic order in the Western world” (55). The implications of neo-Orientalism now are the same as with traditional Orientalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but this time mainly for geopolitical and economic gain. Shaheen emphasizes that “During times of war, government campaigns and media systems exert an especially strong influence in helping to create and shape public attitudes about the ‘other’” (*Guilty* xii). Since 9/11 and the marked beginning of neo-

Orientalism, the stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims propagated through various forms of media, are much the same or slightly evolved and consistently portray them living in a society with a repressive set of ideologies and structures. Those with a limited view of the Middle East and its people absorb the images being projected, thereby deepening the discourse of neo-Orientalist thinking. Altwaiji concludes that just “as classic Orientalism once served the policies of European colonial powers, neo-Orientalism serves the political hegemony and neo-colonial interests of people who are aware of the need to produce images of aggression and terrorism on the targeted nation” (321). The “need” to relay such images to the general public stems from the need to justify America’s political stance and its actions thereby worsening public perception and contributing to the vilification of Arabs and Muslims. The scope of my research will focus on present-day neo-Orientalism, elements of its anti-Arab and anti-Muslim sentiments, and its essential place in the media.

Earlier, I detailed the opening scene of *Aladdin* to demonstrate the embedded Orientalist undertones in the media. *Aladdin* is, of course, not an isolated example. Classic stereotypes like the barbarian, hedonistic man, or the damsel-in-distress have, inarguably, been replaced by the neo-Orientalist based image of the terrorist which has taken on the greatest role of Arab representation in film. This is a longstanding trope exacerbated by the attacks of September 11th in movies like *Black Hawk Down* (2002), *Tears of the Sun* (2003), *Team America: World Police* (2004), *The Stone Merchant* (2006), and *The Kingdom* (2007) (Shaheen, *Guilty* 184-189). Even a decade or more after 9/11, the image still dominates. In *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) interrogation and torture are featured as “fundamental responsibilities” of the CIA required in delivering justice to terrorists like Osama bin Laden (Brody). *American Sniper* (2014) is marked by its all too common portrait of the American hero with a very impassioned perspective that leads him to

defend his country by assassinating the corrupt Muslim antagonists of an enemy war-torn country. Similar to *American Sniper*'s clichéd plotline, *American Assassin* (2017) is yet another counterterrorist narrative noted for its controversial depiction of a man, who is trained by an American war veteran and is intent on exacting revenge for his girlfriend's death at the hand of Middle Eastern terrorists. On the small screen, *Homeland* has often been criticized for its numerous, yet simplistic, errors when depicting Middle Eastern lands. The Islamic characters, regardless of their individual backgrounds, are questionably depicted with some degree of terroristic association. Shaheen writes that in *Tyrant*, "the characters are backward, barbaric types. Or they are rapists. Or they are warmongers. Or they are rich and spoiled. The show even depicts an Arab child as a murderer....Khaled [a dictator] orders one of his sons to shoot dead a helpless man begging for mercy" (*Reel Bad Arabs* xvi). Producers of *Homeland* and *Tyrant* also developed *24*, which heavily emphasizes similar stereotypes. The short-lived television show, *The Brave*, has also witnessed its own controversial criticism based on the tropes it echoes from shows like *Homeland*, *Tyrant*, and *24*.

These films and television shows, accompanied by an endless list of media entertainment including music, video games, and commercials are all examples of how Hollywood and mainstream media present their understanding of individuals with relation to Middle Eastern culture and Islamic religion. Considering the grand impact of media in the lives of its audience, the messages continually projected about Middle Eastern and Muslim people produce a perception that distorts what is real and what Shaheen describes as "reel"—the image on the screen. In repeating these one-dimensional portraits, Western media fails to see the diverse backgrounds, beliefs, traditions, lives, and politics among Arabs and resorts to categorizing them into simplified and often detrimental personas very much in the same sense that Said describes

the early developmental stages of Orientalist thought based on singular experiences documented in scholarly work. The outcome is the Arab or Muslim “Other” that has eliminated any distinguishing commonalities between individuals of the West and individuals of the East. By generalizing Arabs into one identity, they can easily be set apart from the West and controlled (*Orientalism* 309). As Shaheen describes, the stereotypical production of the Other produces a superior, more “noble” image of the self (*Guilty* xii). Their role is to help reform and liberate the Other in the same way Said describes the role of nineteenth century Orientalists. In making this assumption about the Other, they become silenced and incapable of being heard.

In the past, the Other’s position suppressed his ability to speak up against the Orientalists’ view of him. Consider the hegemony of the Orientalist, historically speaking, “only the Orientalist can interpret the Orient, the Orient being radically incapable of interpreting itself” (*Orientalism* 289). The question of whether or not the Other has the ability to speak (and be heard) is the central question of Spivak’s essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak intended the question to remain unanswered and for its discussion to remain ongoing given the context of when and where in history it is being asked (Parker 318). I take Spivak’s question into consideration when analyzing the current representation of Arabs and Muslims in the media. Has enough awareness regarding the implications of Orientalism been established since Said’s work to finally allow the Other to speak, and more importantly, be heard? I begin first by recognizing that with the ever-growing media platforms and multiculturalism of the twenty-first century only until recently have Arabs, Arab Americans, and Muslims had the opportunities to pave their own path. A combination of media democratization and the changing demographics of the West has made it possible for the subaltern to speak and be heard by the mainstream in order to reshape the discourse and bring attention to still existing neo-Orientalist beliefs. While for the most part

their intention is to represent their own individual stories, they risk becoming tokenized identities. In exploring these newfound avenues and their associated risks I also call into the equation the possibility of a marginalized individual sharing multiple perspectives and voices as a way to combat tokenism.

4. *Ramy*

In the wake of 9/11, Arabs and Muslims often turned to comedy as a form of alleviating the stigma from the West that all too often labeled them as terrorists and threats. As journalist and author Robin Wright notes, “an edgy blend of humor and mockery has become a popular means of rejecting extremism and reaching out to heal the cultural chasm with non-Muslims” (190). Notably, in 2005, comedians Ahmed Ahmed, Maz Jobrani, Aron Kader, and Dean Obeidallah found the space to speak and be heard when they launched the *Axis of Evil Comedy Tour*. As entertainers, they had all shared similar stories of being typecast as terrorists or sheikhs in Hollywood films, and together they set out to rewrite their own narrative through comedy (Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs* xxiii-xxiv). In an act of what Wright describes as counterterrorism, these comedians use humor as a “weapon” to defend against “ideologies, autocratic politics, and outdated social practices” (190). By welcoming a Western audience, these comedians were able to use humor to humanize their position as the Other in order to destabilize the perception of them as threats (Wright 193). Comedians like Ahmed, Jobrani, Kader, and Obeidallah have paved the way for comedians of diverse backgrounds (Arab Muslim, African American Muslim, Indian Muslim, Muslim convert, and Jewish too) that would follow in their path. Although comedy in this respect has remained a predominantly male-oriented field, Wright also acknowledges female comediennees like Maysoon Ziyad who introduces not only an Arab woman’s perspective but in Ziyad’s case, her experience with a disability as well. Since the early

years following 9/11, comedy has continued to be a platform for Arabs and Muslims to share their voices and be heard.

In 2019, stand-up comedian, creator, writer, and director Ramy Youssef debuted his Hulu television series self-titled *Ramy*. As a Muslim Egyptian American himself, Youssef's aim is to bring awareness about the complexity of Arabs and Muslims to American audiences. In Sopan Deb's *New York Times* article titled "'Ramy' Is a Quietly Revolutionary Comedy," Youssef explains that his motivation for creating the show was inspired by his frustration that the narrative surrounding Arabs and Muslims is guided by what the world sees in the news (qtd. in Deb). The comedic tone of the show allows for openness regarding topics that are often met with fear or intimidation based on the image of the terrorist presented in the media. However, the show still maintains its quality as a drama to reflect the seriousness of the subject it is addressing. The content of the show centers around the main character, Ramy Hassan, modeled after Youssef himself. Despite Ramy being the main character, Youssef delivers a thoroughly developed storyline that presents the wide-ranging obstacles of other characters as well. In examining the impact and message of *Ramy*, I propose that Youssef is not just *the* voice speaking on behalf of the collective, but rather through his show he creates an outlet for others to have their own voice. In doing so, Youssef introduces viewers to Ramy's family, the Muslim community, and the New Jersey environment he grows up in. Set in Youssef's home state of New Jersey, the show captures the personal conflict faced by many Arab and Muslim Americans affected by the political climate post 9/11. In his coming-of-age tale, Youssef attempts to bridge the gap between the Orient and the Occident by showing recognizable humanistic struggles. While Youssef may not address the subject of Orientalism directly, his purpose and intention, as he emphasizes in several interviews, are to address the ongoing anti-Muslim biases that still prevail today and

continuously contribute to the generalized portrayal of Arabs and Muslims as patriarchal, oppressive, or backward. As the characters in *Ramy* navigate aspects of Islamic religion in the Western world, they also attempt to navigate relatable issues associated with family, friendships, relationships, careers, and personal identity.

Ramy's immediate family consists of his hardworking father Farouk Hassan (Amr Waked), nurturing mother Maysa Hassan (Hiam Abbass), and obedient turned rebel sister Dena Hassan (May Calamawy). Ramy and Dena's uncle, Uncle Naseem (Laith Nakil), is a constant presence in their lives. Ramy's family is often depicted sitting down at the dinner table together where conversation varies from day-to-day business to Ramy's career and dating life. Ramy and Dena have a friendly sibling rivalry often bickering about privileges one gets over the other. Ramy's close friends include Ahmed (Dave Merheje), who closely adheres to traditional and religious ideals, Mo (Mohammed Amer), the realist who places situations in perspective for Ramy, and Stevie (Steve Way), Ramy's real-life white friend who was born with Muscular Dystrophy. Speaking on the unique quality of the show, Youssef adds, "'I didn't want to give the Muslim family the same treatment that is given to the Asian family show and the Hispanic family show. There are almost kind of tropes of how an immigrant family is treated on television, and I felt like, 'No, this needs to go even further than that'" (qtd. in Deb). While some elements of the show do in fact lend themselves to immigrant tropes, beneath the surface of the immigrant storyline are more conventional themes. The portrayal of Ramy's family and friendships sets the tone that regardless of origin or religion, East or West, the dynamic of many families and friendships are similar.

4.1 *Ramy Hassan*

Youssef also brings a sense of normalcy to what are often the feared and unknown aspects of the Islamic religion. Within the first minute of the entire show, Youssef welcomes the outsider into the mosque. He shows Ramy's interaction with a Muslim elder as he guides him on the importance of washing-up in order to prepare for prayer. Following prayer, Ramy is invited to witness a *katb al kitab* or Islamic marriage ceremony. In a later episode titled "Do the Ramadan", Ramy is among a group of Muslim associates when they gather for Ramadan prayers outside of his friend Mo's diner. The side of the diner, where they kneel to pray, remains vandalized with the words "ISIS Fags." In prayer, the phrase "Allahu Akbar"—God is great—is repeated several times ("Do the Ramadan" 7:19). The repetition of the phrase uttered in a nearly non-threatening whisper is a far cry from its association in American films where for a few short minutes a terrorist enters a mosque, shouts "Allahu Akbar," and proceeds to detonate a bomb. This misconception surrounding the word "Allah" is something that Shaheen touches on in *Reel Bad Arabs*:

Producers fail to recognize that "Allah" is an Arabic word for God, that when they pray, Arab Christians and Muslims use the word "Allah." When the producer shows Jewish and Christian protagonists contesting Arab Muslims, the Western hero will say to his Arab enemy in a scornful and jeering manner, "Allah." The characters' disrespectful "Allah"s mislead viewers, wrongly implying that devout Arab Muslims do not worship the "true God" of the Christians and Jews, but some tribal deity. (17)

As Shaheen implies, there is no distinct Muslim God, but rather a greater higher power who operates in the same effect as the God of other monotheistic (mainly Christian Western) religions. Since the start of Orientalism, however, the Islamic religion and its predominantly

Arab demographic has been the greatest factor in creating the Other. To counter this divide that is still in existence today, Youssef shows the commonplace prayer practices that are part of religious institutions whether they be Muslim, Christian, or Jewish. Conversely, Youssef's choice to stage this prayer scene outside of a diner is uncommon and demonstrates that even within the religion, individuals have their own distinctive experiences.

The concept of religion in Ramy's life is not only shaped by the internal influence of his family, but also by the external judgment of his religion from the West influenced by the aftermath of 9/11. In a flashback episode titled "Strawberries," Youssef shows the amalgamation between 12-year-old Ramy's preteen woes and surrounding political events. There is a sense of uneasiness about how the days surrounding this world-altering event just so happened to coincide with Ramy discovering his sexuality. On the way to school that day, Ramy and his friends engage in a discussion about their experiences with masturbation or "jerk-off" in which Ramy lies about his own experiences in order to fit. His friends would later question him about his truth. In school, Ramy excuses himself to the bathroom, and when he returns, he is greeted by the surrounding silent panic immediately following the news of September 11th. In a chatroom later that night, Ramy is privy to the thought of others blaming Muslims broadly for the attack. The next morning, his father is compelled to hang an American flag outside their home as neighbors gaze on in disappointment. As he walks to school, his friends confront him about the number of times he said he masturbated in one day and ask him if he is lying about anything else including being a terrorist. Horrifyingly, they tell him to "jerk off on this leaf. Show us you're not a terrorist" ("Strawberries" 14:27). He obliges and walks off into the woods. He re-emerges to discover that his friends have walked off without him. He arrives at school alone only to find out that his friend's "canceled" pool party still went on without him. While the

most tragic events of recent history unfold, Ramy's day-to-day shows him experiencing trials and tribulations of any young adult, this time exasperated by other's Islamophobic views stemming from the news. The way his peers (and media) view his religion and Arab background contribute to the stigma of how he views his own religion and identity.

The stigma and judgment haunt Ramy. At night, he dreams that he is having a conversation with Osama bin Laden at the kitchen table. Bin Laden asks, "How do you feel here, in New Jersey, America? Do you ever feel like you don't belong?" ("Strawberries" 20:13). Ramy admits he feels like he does not. "That is because you, Ramy Hassan, don't belong here. You can hear it in your name, can't you?" bin Laden explains ("Strawberries" 20:30). He too wishes he had friends he could trust, like America before they turned his back on him. He says to Ramy that he must also understand what that feels like. "You are just like me," bin Laden says to him. "I'm not like you. 'Cause I don't want to kill people. I'm not a terrorist!" Ramy shouts back at him ("Strawberries" 22:56). Ramy feels a lack of belonging as a Middle Easterner in America after 9/11 despite the degree of separation from the Middle East as a first generation American. Struggling to fit in, Ramy searches for something relatable and sees it in bin Laden as both of them are treated as outsiders by America. Ramy's initial connection to bin Laden, however, makes him question elements of his own identity given bin Laden's terroristic actions. As Vikram Murthi writes in *The Nation*, "*Ramy* sympathizes with anti-American resentment and understands the roots of radicalization but still condemns the resulting terrorism from those valid emotions" (Murthi). The conflicting elements of Ramy's connection to the Middle East and America continue to manifest in his adult life. At the end of this episode, Youssef marks the beginning of Ramy's otherness. As he walks to school alone, he crosses paths with another lone student in a wheelchair who suggests they accompany each other on the trip. It is at this point

that his friendship with Stevie develops. Like Stevie, Ramy's identity is shaped by his treatment as an outsider.

The proximity and interaction with hegemonic powers that Ramy experiences differ from the proximity with hegemonic powers from which Orientalist ideas historically emerged. In the early centuries of Orientalist discourse, perceptions of the East were based on distant observation by the West and in later centuries by the West's occupation in the East. For Ramy and many immigrant families like his, having an Eastern background while living in the West means being confronted with neo-Orientalist ideologies in a different capacity. In this sense, Ramy's struggle means having to balance between both Muslim expectations and his surrounding Western world. In the aforementioned episode "Do the Ramadan," Ramy partakes in the holy month of fasting in an attempt to connect to the faith of his religious upbringing. He discovers that even those around him who practice faithfully find some flexibility in their practice. When he joins his family wearing traditional attire and suggests that they partake in the nightly prayer together, his parents comment on his choice of clothing and silence him so that they can continue watching their television show. Later, when Ramy kneels down to pray in a prayer group, he is wearing his Mets snapback cap. In both scenes, the contrast between his two worlds creates an openness or a set of overlapping practices; it is not intended to show a divide, but rather a blending or an illustration of hybridity. Although Said does not acknowledge this dynamic of "cross-cultural multiplicity" in *Orientalism*, Homi K. Bhabha, a postcolonial scholar influenced by Said, describes hybridity as an exchange between the colonizer and the colonized wherein each adapts elements of the other's identity "so that... the supposedly separate cultures are no longer separate or distinct" (Parker 309-311). Youssef shows Ramy integrating Western world ideas into his identity without completely dismissing his family and religious heritage. In doing so, Youssef

also shows that Ramy, like others around him, is not the perfect Muslim. His friend, Mo questions his dedication: “You really gonna be one of those Ramadan Muslims, okay? You can’t be jerking off all year, then all of a sudden turn into Malcolm X” (“Do the Ramadan” 5:07). Later, an old acquaintance sees him praying and afterward, asks him to pray for his sick mother on the spot. Even though Shawn may not have a complete understanding of Islam, his belief in the power of Ramy’s prayer demonstrates a common tie linked to spirituality that can be a shared experience between Muslims and non-Muslims. Reluctantly, having to do it right at that moment, Ramy goes to pray, and it appears by his hesitation that he does not know the words of the prayer as he intersperses lines of the original prayer with his own blessings for Shawn and Shawn’s mother. Ramy clings to aspects of the religion that speak to him demonstrating that Islam is not a singular experience for all Muslims.

The way in which Ramy grapples with his faith is evident in his romantic relationships too. In the first episode titled “Between Your Toes,” Ramy’s white girlfriend, who later breaks up with him, is shocked to discover that Ramy does not drink and that he has been hiding his views on unplanned pregnancies. This moment reveals that he hides aspects of himself that would be considered too Muslim for the Western world. This inner conflict is made worse by external expectations like when his Arab Muslim friends question why he dates “white girls.” This is the catalyst that causes him to ask his mother to set him up with an Arab Muslim girl. On their date, he is taken back when the Arab Muslim girl makes sexual advances toward him. Sensing his hesitation, she asks if he typically “hooks up on the first date.” His continued hesitation suggests that he does, but not with “a girl like [her]” (“Between Your Toes” 20:39). In frustration she explains, “I get it if you don’t want to have sex, but I’m like in this little Muslim box in your head, I’m the wife or the mother of your kids, right” (20:59). Following the date,

Ramy expresses his internal struggle with his Muslim identity to a respected religious member:

“And, yeah, I have sex even though I’m not married, and I’m probably gonna try mushrooms one day. So what? That means I’m not a good Muslim? Like, I can’t do it ‘cause I don’t follow all the rules and the fucking judgments that are always 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” (“Between Your Toes” 22:46). In the same way that people have preconceived ideas about him based on his religion, Ramy also has preconceived ideas about people of his own religion. The West’s hegemonic powers have influenced Ramy to see Muslim people in a different light, even though they are just like him and surround him.

A large part of Ramy’s identity are his diasporic experiences. In an interview on the topic of multiculturalism with Sneja Gunew, Spivak stresses the importance of recognizing that “diasporic cultures are quite different from the culture that they came from originally, and that sort of distinction – an elementary distinction, and also one, of course, that history teaches us is not made, and needs to be made” (“Questions of Multi-Culturalism” 599). Diasporic cultures are shaped by the dominant culture that they are immersed in creating an almost entirely different identity, but of course, the existence of a diaspora indicates some distance from full assimilation. Much like Said who, as a Palestinian living in the United States, documents his personal experiences in *Out of Place: A Memoir* (1999), Youssef, and by extension, Ramy, relay the perspective of a person with Middle Eastern heritage living in the West (Lodge and Wood 367). In his own personal experiences as well as in his work on Orientalism, Said addresses the Palestinian human rights struggle for self-determination resulting from colonial occupation. Said writes:

In my memoir *Out of Place* (1999) I described the strange and contradictory worlds in which I grew up, providing for myself and my readers a detailed account of the settings that I think formed me in Palestine, Egypt and Lebanon. But that was only a very personal account that stopped short of all the years of my own political engagement that started after the 1967 Arab–Israeli war, a war in whose continuing aftermath (Israel is still in military occupation of the Palestinian territories and the Golan Heights) the terms of struggle and the ideas at stake that were crucial for my generation of Arabs and Americans seem to go on. (*Orientalism* xvi)

Ramy highlights the relevancy of this struggle that present generations of Arabs and American face regarding identity. While in a sense, Ramy's identity is shaped by his Muslim religion and Egyptian heritage, it is different from what it would be had he grown up in Egypt. There is a difference between being a Muslim Egyptian and a Muslim Egyptian American. In an attempt at self-discovery, Ramy travels to Egypt to better understand his identity at its origin. The catalyst for his trip is a conversation he has with his father, Farouk. In Farouk's lecture to his son, he details the events that transpired between Farouk and his father (Ramy's grandfather) when Farouk moved to America. Farouk and his father would send cassette tapes to each other—Farouk to detail his experience; his father to express disappointment. When Ramy sits down to listen to the tapes after his father leaves, he hears his grandfather telling his father that it was a big mistake to move to America. Ramy's grandfather explains that what Farouk sees in the movies is a fantasy. He tells him to think of his children who will grow up confused. They will lose touch with their origins. They need to know their land, they need to know the roots of their Islamic heritage, or they will lose their path. Ramy's grandfather's fear is that Ramy's diasporic experience will negatively influence him and will dilute his authentic Middle Eastern identity.

When Ramy embarks on his trip he tells his friends, “I wanna be somewhere where I’m surrounded by Muslims. You know? It’s like none of this confusion that we have here” (“Dude, Where’s My Country?” :44). Listening to the tapes convinces Ramy that his grandfather’s words hold truth, but as he soon discovers after his arrival in Egypt, cross-cultural limitations do not exist simply because of geographical boundaries. Even though Ramy has Middle Eastern roots, as noted previously, living in the West has shaped his general perception of the East.

When Ramy arrives in Egypt, he discovers that his views, or what Said would call his textual attitude contradict what he sees in person. His cousin Shadi speaks English fluently, talks about American movies and actors, smokes marijuana, and offers to take him to dine at Chili’s. When Ramy expresses interest in seeing all the mosques, Shadi calls him “crazy.” Instead, Shadi says that he will show Ramy “the real Cairo” (“Dude, Where’s My Country” 8:40). Ramy begins to realize that his imagined idea of what the real Cairo is is much different from the real Cairo that Shadi wants to show him. Ramy and Shadi come to terms with their different expectations of each other when Ramy witnesses Shadi snorting cocaine at a party Ramy reluctantly went to with him. Fed up with Ramy’s judgment of him, Shadi says, “I thought you were cool man, from, New York.... I didn’t know you were so judgy, bro. You judged me earlier for not praying.... What do you think of us here? ... I see you being all spiritual and shit I’m trying to make meaning of all of this. Look, I don’t know where God is, but I sure as fuck know that he’s not here right now. I’m lost, man. Everybody’s lost” (“Dude, Where’s My Country?” 21:57). Shadi’s character supports Bhabha’s concept of hybridity where particularly in the twenty-first century technology and media have allowed for sharing and overlap of cultures. Shadi also disputes the unchanging Orient—it does change, and in some ways become Western. While those living in the East have adopted Western culture, Ramy’s diasporic experience makes him

feel like he has to cling to traditional ways of thinking and behavior in order to maintain an authentic Middle Eastern identity coinciding with beliefs expressed by his grandfather. This also proves his grandfather's notions about location determining identity to be false. On the second day of his trip, Ramy sets out to the village to see his grandfather in hopes that he will find something that confirms his way of thinking about Egypt and its culture. "In America, I don't know myself," he admits to his grandfather ("Cairo Cowboy" 10:49). Ramy's confusion stems from the fact that Orientalist scholarship and politics then and now has always been shaped by what the West has to say about the East. The discourse proposes that the East is "over there" but does not acknowledge the diasporic experience of the East "over here" and its "in-betweenness" (Shohat 23). Orientalism and neo-Orientalism centers around the Others of the East. However, as Spivak suggests, awareness of the complex cultural politics regarding the immigrant experience is essential when attempting to understand *all* Others ("Questions of Multi-Culturalism" 599).

4.2 The Female Voice: Dena & Maysa

While his sister Dena grows up in the same household as Ramy and is up against many similar struggles, her diasporic experience contains something Ramy's character does not. She is both a Muslim Arab American and a woman. The episode titled "Refugees" opens up with young Dena having a conversation with her father about male/female relations. Spoken in Arabic with English subtitles, Farouk lectures, "There is no greater sin in this entire world than having sex before marriage. If you have sex before marriage, you'll get pregnant. No one's going to marry you. You'll have to marry any man that comes along, most likely a white guy. John Smith, or someone like that. Then he'll cheat on you and make you take cocaine and then he'll leave you homeless in the streets, rummaging around, just you and your baby and no one will help you" ("Refugees" :49). Although "the talk" is not a unique scene in many American coming-of-age

films and shows, in this particular case, it is the certain points Farouk makes regarding the “white guy” that has to be called to attention. Farouk’s impression of the Western man stems from the ideologies that the West themselves created. By dividing the world into “us” and “them,” the West is identified as more liberal in contrast to a more oppressive East. However, in the eyes of the East, a more liberal West ideology is viewed negatively as lacking certain standards or qualities. When binary divisions are created, both sides see each other in generalizing extremes that may not hold much validity. Furthermore, Said’s focus on the binaries between East and West fails to take into account the intersectionality of gender and race when speaking of the Other. However, Spivak extends Said’s argument by focusing particularly on the Othered subaltern woman (Parker 308). The intersectionality of gender and race in a subaltern woman means that both of these aspects of her identity operate in unison to silence her voice. The struggle of the subaltern woman, who Spivak describes as “doubly effaced” is often overlooked. This is applicable even more so for the subaltern woman living in the West. The conversation that Dena has with her father exposes how her role in romantic relationships is subject to Eastern standards, while later in the episode, the show demonstrates how Dena is subject to Western standards as well. When Dena visits her friend Fatima, she laments about her parents’ rules, how she cannot have sex, and how she cannot move out until she is married. Later in their conversation, Fatima reveals that she had sex, shocking Dena. Fatima explains that the guy was white. A Muslim guy would not sleep with a Muslim woman, but will sleep around with other women. To the Western outsider looking in, this is confirmation that the patriarchal Middle East holds a set of oppressive values when dealing with women. Youssef acknowledges that this is a double standard that may contribute to the Middle East being viewed as traditional to a fault. This is not to say that everyone of the Eastern world resembles what Youssef is portraying here,

but it does suggest that there are traditional norms that some may adhere to. Said believes that the sense of one individual standing in for all others is the result of the historical “essence” of Orientalism, which defines all associated “beings” as “objects of study” (*Orientalism* 97). The objects of study then lead to generalizations about an entire group. The Western perception is that all Middle Eastern men are the same. Dena, being that she is in disagreement with the more patriarchal point of view, participates in this problematic generalized way of thinking. By giving credence to these stereotypes, Dena’s actions demonstrate her rejection of specific elements that appear oppressive especially toward women. In defiance, Dena follows Fatima’s advice and goes on a date with a white man named Kyle. As they are getting intimate, Kyle makes seemingly innocent comments that begin to escalate. At first, he comments on her straightening her hair out, asks her to speak Arabic in bed, and compliments her olive skin. From there, he asks her if it is ok with her that she is with a “white infidel” (“Refugees” 20:36). Kyle makes assumptions about her sexual status based on her background considering she had never disclosed that information to him. He continues: “I accept you. You don’t have to wear a fucking headscarf” (“Refugees” 21:26). The Western world view suggests that Eastern women must be saved from the oppressive ways of their society. As Spivak indicates, “Imperialism’s image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as object of protection from her own kind” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 271). Instead, “White men [who believe they] are saving brown women from brown men” end up speaking on her behalf which only reinforces her oppression and can actually, perversely, make her a fetish object (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 268).

Although Spivak makes this claim based on attitudes at the time of colonization, it still holds true in the modern climate. Dena asks if he is only sleeping with her because she is Egyptian to which he replies that he thinks it is “cool” “interesting” and that it is “so unknown.” In this scene,

Youssef is confronting a stereotypical image in Western film and television that fetishizes Middle Eastern women and portrays them as exotic precisely because of their submissiveness. Kyle says that being white means being nothing. If he were Indian or trans, as he says, he would have a voice and his art might get noticed more. Disturbed by his insensitivity and ignorance, Dena abruptly leaves. This scene provided viewers with Dena's perspective on the stereotype as her reaction demonstrates the absurdity of the statements made towards her. Witnessing her reactions and actions speaks volumes in a situation where the subaltern woman would have otherwise been silenced. The irony here lies in what Kyle says about his own voice considering that the predominant voice in Western media is the white male voice. If Kyle is a representation of the Western world view, it was, metaphorically speaking, Kyle's voice that silenced the voice of the Arab and especially the Arab woman who is doubly impacted. As she sits in the car contemplating the events that transpired, she checks her phone to see that she has seven missed calls from her mother. As an Arab American Muslim woman, Dena must "navigate the myriad hazards of being—and being seen as—a Muslim woman within and outside [her] culture" (Murhti).

Like Dena, Maysa, Ramy's mother, is conflicted between Eastern and Western standards that dictate what a woman's position should be. As an Arab woman living in the United States, Maysa serves as another example demonstrating the tension between the more seemingly traditional roles of an Eastern woman in comparison to the more seemingly progressively feminist role of a Western woman. With her husband Farouk working late and her children occupied with their own lives, Maysa begins to seek her own purpose eventually getting a job with a rideshare company. Youssef dedicates the season one episode titled "Ne Me Quitte Pas" to the telling of Maysa's story. More importantly, he invites director Cherien Dabis, a Palestinian

American woman, to relay Maysa's experience. The decision suggests that Dabis's own background, in addition to her directorial acumen, validates her position and ability to share Maysa's story. In her own films, Dabis has shared the stories of an Arab living in America and Arab American living in the Middle East reflecting similar diasporic experiences that Youssef does in *Ramy*. Speaking to *Bustle*, Dabis highlights her own outlook more specifically from the perspective of an Arab American woman: "'My experience as an Arab woman is very different than what people generally expect,' she says. 'So I wanted to portray the kind of Arab women that I know—the strong, feisty, survivor-type women that I know and love in the Arab world'" (qtd. In Simon). Dabis's involvement in the show demonstrates that Youssef wants someone with different experiences than him to play a role and have a voice. Youssef and Dabis work together to offer an overlooked perspective sharing not only the challenges of an Arab American woman but also giving her agency to act on her own accord. Maysa's story shows that she does not allow herself to fit into East or West, but instead makes choices that bring more purpose into her life. Dabis continues to help develop Maysa's character in season two directing the episode titled "They" where Maysa works on obtaining her citizenship. Dabis is also responsible for directing the episode titled "Refugees" (season one) and "3riana grande" (season two) which highlights Dena's storyline. Speaking on the element of female representation, in an interview with *Vulture*, May Calamawy, who plays Dena, shares that women especially "need that representation to feel seen and accepted and to let go of a lot of their shame" (Hasan).

Dena faces more of a similar type of treatment regarding her professional career both from the Western society she lives in and her family. In the episode "3riana grande," Dena's car breaks down, and as she rides home with a Mexican American tow truck driver their conversation centers around Dena's Arab Muslim American identity which is also the broader

focus of the episode. Grappling with religion and heritage (and partially hair loss), for a brief time, Dena chooses to wear a hijab which the driver takes notice of. When Dena shares that she is in school studying law, the driver asks if she is the first woman in her family to study law and comments that in her homeland she would have been too oppressed to even consider studying law. The driver attempts to sympathize with Dena revealing that even though he is a Mexican immigrant, he feels no need to defend illegal immigrants or “celebrate their criminal activity” because they “didn’t do it right” while he came to the United States legally (“3riana grande” 19:21). Seemingly wanting to free her from her oppression and the driver encourages her to stop wearing her hijab. He tells her that America is a melting pot and therefore, she should “melt” (“3riana grande” 19:38). Youssef and Dabis offer a different angle showing that even members of other marginalized groups living in the West can equally attempt to silence the subaltern Arab Muslim woman and be capable of shaming her. The Western world’s position is powerful enough to convince marginalized groups to conform. What Bhabha calls mimicry is the colonized person’s attempt at taking on the persona of the colonizer albeit with limitations that do not include the same type of authority (Bhabha 122). Though Dena is once again faced with stigmas from the West, she is once again not left without a voice to speak. She lashes out at the driver explaining more that she should need to about her personal struggle with religion. This criticism is not limited to a Western perspective as Dena also faces criticism within her own community. When Dena gets accepted into law school, her excitement is quelled by the fact that her mother, although proud, does not want her to discuss her success with others for fear of being jinxed by the evil eye. In the subsequent episode “They,” Maysa admits to Dena that she is tough on her because she is also often hard on herself, particularly questioning her decision to get married to Farouk instead of finishing her degree. Speaking to Dena, she admits, “I am very

proud of you, habibti [my love]. You are a lawyer. You are independent” (“They” 23:09). Maysa attempts to uplift Dena as they both share the desire to find high aspirations for themselves but often face criticism from the Western men and from men within their own Arab and Muslim societies because of their gender.

4.3 Toxic Masculinity: Uncle Naseem

As a young woman, Dena is under even more scrutiny by her Uncle Naseem whose misogynistic views are evident in his interactions with her. When Uncle Naseem comes over for dinner, he praises Dena’s role in serving him food and scorns her for her choice in attire questioning whether she was going to the beach. When Dena, engrossed in the content of her cell phone, seems out of sorts at the dinner table, Uncle Naseem questions her behavior. Highly aware of Uncle Naseem’s narrow-minded views, she blames her behavior on her period. At which point, Uncle Naseem matter-of-factly educates her: “Your brain is not working because of the period. It’s very natural” and encourages her to get fresh air (“Princess Diana” 12:47). As evident, both Western and Eastern cultures are capable of gender oppression of the subaltern woman. Youssef places Dena in numerous scenarios where she interacts with various individuals, particularly men, of different backgrounds including Arab men (her father and Uncle Naseem), white Western men (Kyle), and ethnic minority men living in America (the tow truck driver). In all instances, Dena has to fight against assumptions made about her as a woman by men who feel they have to speak on her behalf and protect her or criticize her behavior. Later on, when Ramy drives Uncle Naseem home after dinner, they witness a couple arguing on the street. Ramy pulls over and Uncle Naseem gets into an altercation with the man telling him not to hit the woman. As they stand in the street conversing following the argument, Ramy questions whether Uncle Naseem’s actions even made a difference considering the woman still went home

with the man. Uncle Naseem sheds a different light on the situation by explaining that “We [Arab and Muslim men] protect women not because we don’t trust women. We protect women because we don’t trust men” (“Princess Diana” 19:22). What the Occident sees as oppressive, may be defined as protective to the Orient. Without justifying Uncle Naseem’s outlook, Youssef simply offers an alternative perspective to explain the actions of the Other that are often criticized by the West without full understanding, and in some ways, advocates that men in patriarchal societies can be predatory.

At first glance, Uncle Naseem is less than an ideal character for Youssef to include if he wishes to break with stereotypical perceptions. In addition to his treatment of Dena, Uncle Naseem is a clear anti-Semite often disparagingly discussing the Jews he conducts business with in the diamond industry. To add, he unabashedly reveals aspects of his homophobic attitude. When a man purchasing a ring from his jewelry shop asks for his partner’s name engraved on it, Uncle Naseem openly admits to charging him more after finding out he was gay. Uncle Naseem’s persona is grossly exaggerated and shows the absurdity of his traits in a comical light. Ramy’s attack on Uncle Naseem’s behavior and views indicate that not all Arabs and Muslims are accepting of this intolerable behavior which is limited to only certain individuals. Uncle Naseem’s character “illustrates that people like him exist in the orbit of otherwise reasonable people. Representation isn’t a zero-sum game. The worst selves deserve to be seen as well” (Murthi). Furthermore, the inclusion of Uncle Naseem’s character in the show serves the purpose of showing Youssef’s refusal to essentialize every Arab or Muslim character as progressive as a sort of response to the way Orientalism cannot and should not generalize all Others as close-minded. This essentializing view, whose relevancy was previously acknowledged in Dena’s conversation with Fatima, is made relevant again in the instance of Uncle Naseem. Earlier,

Youssef acknowledges why certain generalizations may exist, but in the instance of Uncle Naseem, Youssef challenges the essentialist perspective. As a minor character Uncle Naseem plays a largely pivotal role in offsetting any expectations regarding stereotypes. By the second season, the root of Uncle Naseem's misogyny, homophobia, and hypermasculinity becomes more apparent. When Dena seeks Uncle Naseem's advice in "3riana grande" he asks her if she is "feeling things [she] doesn't want to feel" and confesses that he once was feeling confused, but no longer is after a visit to a psychic who removed the curse ("3riana grande" 12:54). For the observant viewer, Uncle Naseem's confusion implies his own homosexual feelings and identity which Youssef provides more context for in the episode titled "uncle naseem." The revelation of Uncle Naseem's homosexuality makes him a more sympathetic character showcasing his hate as a product of repression. As Uncle Naseem continues to struggle with his sexuality, he makes a choice to revisit a former relationship. The man, now married with a wife and child, imparts the following advice to Uncle Naseem regarding the confusion he has about his sexual identity: "You just have to make a choice at a certain point. I made a choice. I chose to be how they said Allah wants us to be. I know a way that I can be, but I chose to stop myself from living that way" ("uncle naseem" 10:40). Shedding light on this dichotomy between religion and self, Shamira Ibrahim writes in *The Atlantic* that Uncle Naseem is "crippled by the perception of the absolute binary of haram and halal—what's forbidden and what's permitted" (Ibrahim). It can also be said that Uncle Naseem battles between what is acceptable in the East and what is acceptable in the West. When searching for a sense of self, the true self can be lost in the defining characteristics assigned by other people as in the case with labels and stereotypes; this form of oppression is often internalized.

The common connection between Uncle Naseem, Ramy, Dena, and Maysa is that for all of them, living in the United States complicates any connection they have to their Middle Eastern roots. As they each go through their journeys of self-discovery, they face the added pressure of what it means to be Muslim within their own communities and generalizations made about them based on the greater Western understanding of Islam. However, as often thought to be, the adversity they face is not monolithic. They each have complex and diverse experiences that at times may overlap—Ramy with his diasporic identity; Dena with her diasporic identity, role as a woman, and sexuality; Maysa with her role as a woman; and Uncle Naseem with his sexuality. As a result, the responsibility of critics, scholars, Hollywood, and the general public is to engage with the varied representations and to understand the intricacies of Western marginalized figures.

5. Conclusion

Although it would appear that *Ramy* is a show about the Arab American experience, it is in actuality a show about the human experience which Said notes was what “Orientalism failed to identify with” in the first place (*Orientalism* 328). In humanizing the experience of Arab Americans through his characters, Youssef shows people who are conflicted, complex, and those who have to contend with complex situations. On the surface, the show presents the issue of race and religion, but the layered intersectionality of conflicts including age, gender, sexuality, and disability addresses all forms of Otherness. The show may not combat all of the stereotypes or misconceptions, but the matter of the fact is that it should not as that would not be believable. There has to be some degree of accuracy in the travel literature and scholarly work of Said’s *Orientalism* and the media in today’s world, but what is true for some is not true for the whole.

Even though Youssef includes a diverse number of characters, the nature of the show, as with any story, only allows room for singular experiences. The show is not about Arab

Americans; it is about the experience of a single Arab American family. It is not about the experience of all subaltern Arab American women, but about the experience of a couple of subaltern Arab American women. It is not about the experience of gay Arab American men, but about the experience of a gay Arab American man. These are the voices that do not often get heard and represented, and when they do, they may fall into specific categories, but they are not representative of the entire group. These characters are, therefore, what Spivak refers to as “token figures” who provide a single representation of the massive amount of people who share similar identities with them (“Questions of Multi-Culturalism” 595). Recognizing the problematic nature of tokenized individuals, Calamawy discloses that “with *Ramy*, a lot of people did not feel represented by it and had problems with it.... The more angry people get that they don’t feel represented by *Ramy*, the more I’m like, *oh, this is a hunger for you to share your story, then...* I want Arabs and Muslim Arabs to have that experience, because there’s not one way to be Muslim” (qtd. in Hasan). Changing the perception of Arabs and Muslims based only on these individual characters is, therefore, not a solution as generalizations cannot show groups in an entirely positive or negative light. Echoing Spivak’s point, Youssef says “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). At the moment, because Youssef and his characters are single tokenized individuals, there may not be enough material to change Western beliefs. Progress is being made, but the effort must remain continuous. If the discourse determines the representation, Youssef takes a step in the right direction by changing the discourse.

Youssef is a pioneer and advocate, but it requires others to break with the bonds of silencing the Other or subaltern. For now, *Ramy* is an exception to Orientalist and neo-Orientalist

stereotypes where the character or individual is viewed as “first an Oriental, second a human being, and last again an Oriental” (*Orientalism* 102). While the West may see *Ramy*’s characters for who they are, they will for the moment be seen as an exception to the rule, and therefore, it will require more people of Arab and Muslim backgrounds to be represented. When discussing representation, “the real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything” (*Orientalism* 272). If we are to ask that Arabs and Muslims be represented, I believe it may be necessary to look at the group before looking at the distinct experiences of individuals that make up the group in order to break boundaries from the inside out. Consequently, as I return to Spivak’s question I posed earlier on whether the subaltern can speak, I am aware of my own essentializing by using the term subaltern. In responding to Spivak’s question, it has become evident that in today’s modern world, the platform for the subaltern to speak exists where it may not have existed before. With the advent of popular streaming services like Hulu (the platform for *Ramy*) the chance to be heard has been made possible. It is most effective when marginalized groups can send a message via the same arena they have been silenced in. Speaking, however, is not enough. Just as with all issues concerning marginalized groups, the responsibility to listen comes from those with the most authority. In order to listen, one must cease to speak in assumptions for a moment and allow marginalized voices to speak for themselves. The result of *Ramy* and the direction it takes is Youssef’s attempt at speaking up and inviting the West to listen. In accepting his 2020 Golden Globe award, Youssef jokingly remarks, “I know you guys haven’t seen my show.” However, a Hollywood reception and the acknowledgment of being heard signifies the beginning of a dialogue that *Ramy* has created. For now, Youssef might serve as a tokenized example of what the West understands until more Arabs and Muslims are

represented, but he has undoubtedly brought the conversation one step closer to where it needs to be.

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