



Muslim Girls and Short Film Production: Resisting or Affirming Tropes?

Prof. Christina Paschyn and Dr. Mohana Rajakumar

Northwestern University in Qatar, Qatar

Abstract

Portrayals of Muslim women and girls in film and television often rely on Orientalist tropes and stereotypes. Both hijabi and non are frequently depicted as victims of an oppressive and patriarchal religious, cultural, and familial structure. Likewise, Western entertainment hubs have typically employed a Eurocentric lens, where female Muslim characters are seen as sidekicks that are inferior or disempowered compared to more empowered and “free” non-Muslim main characters. However, what happens when female Muslims become screenwriters, directors, and filmmakers? Do these tropes persist, or are female Muslim characters depicted differently? In this paper, the authors examine the films produced by young Muslim teenage girls who participated in a Short Film Lab held in Doha, Qatar, in early 2022. Located in the Gulf, Qatar is home to a cosmopolitan city-state featuring a multitude of Muslim ex-pat groups, as well as several American university branch campuses and Western-model private high schools. The young women who participated in the Lab included Muslim girls from the Middle East and Balkans who were studying at private international schools with Western curricula. Through semi-structured interviews with the participants and employing discourse analysis of their films, the authors will explore how the Muslim young girls in the Lab, both hijabi and non, chose to depict themselves and their peers in their original short films. The discussion will include an analysis of the stylistic and narrative choices used by this first cohort of the Lab. Emphasis will be placed on comparing/contrasting the participants' content with Western portrayals of female Muslim characters.

Keywords: Gender; Hijab; Islam; Media; Middle East; Orientalism