

Domesticating the Muslim Other: A Critical Investigation of *Aliens in America*

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The development of TV dramas and sitcoms featuring Arabs or Muslims that are intended to evoke feelings of empathy in viewers is an evolution that is at once deeply encouraging and deserving of critical distance. Following 9/11, in a rush to counter-hegemonic ideological production, some liberal-minded journalists, TV producers, and writers have experimented with “positive” portrayals of Arab and Muslim protagonists. The 2007 teen sitcom *Aliens in America* is a noteworthy attempt at reconciliation between Americans and their foreign, Muslim “enemies,” because it redeploys common stereotypes and grand narratives in innovative ways. Using mythic criticism as a basic critical approach, this study argues that, good intentions notwithstanding, *Aliens* strategically animates and recombines familiar American mythologies about (1) Islam; (2) South Asian or Asian model minorities; (3) otherness; and (4) race in order to create a single, coherent mythology of Muslims in America, thereby demonstrating that the show’s Muslim character — and hence his culture — fits comfortably into America’s emergent post-9/11 mythos. This paper explores the ambivalent, binary oppositions, both overt and covert, present in mythologies about Islam, model minorities, otherness, and race in order to call into question the alleged multicultural purpose of *Aliens* by stressing at least one of the show’s effective outcomes: reassuring the American audience. Although the show would make a case for Muslim inclusion in American multicultural society, such inclusion or more precisely “domestication” — at least on the show’s terms — would be highly qualified. *Aliens* credulously and at times clumsily attempts

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what Evelyn Alsultany (2008) refers to as the ideological work of “staging the national debate” through television productions of drama and comedy (217). Paradoxically, however, the actual “plight” of the Muslim in America and the show’s case for his or her inclusion fades into the background and is superseded by a sense of crisis in the show’s non-Muslim characters, suggesting that the real tension — and hence, space for character development and mythic innovation — originates in the Western viewer-subject’s own feelings of catastrophe and search for identity.

Aliens in America (2007), a sitcom airing on the CW network and co-created by David Guarascio and Moses Port, details the story of an average Midwestern family, the Tolchucks, and their cultural experience with a Pakistani Muslim exchange student, Raja (Adhir Kaylan). Ms. Tolchuck (Amy Pietz) and the school guidance counselor, Mr. Mathews (Christopher Duncan), originally conceive the exchange as a way for her gangly, socially awkward son, Justin (Dan Byrd), to secure a “guaranteed friendship.” However, the Tolchucks’ expectations for a “blond-haired student leader” are scotched as soon as they receive Raja at the airport. Situational comedy ensues. The pilot episode tellingly begins with an aerial view of America from space. The U.S.A. is situated in the center of the globe, and clouds obscure all the other countries. This strategic choice hints at one of the major premises of the series: that America is on a “planet” of its own. Although the series ostensibly centers on the experiences of a Pakistani Muslim in an American high school setting, the alienation felt by Justin provides the dominant tension for each episode, whereas Raja’s cultural otherness serves a merely instrumental role as the stimulus for plot advancement. Despite Raja’s obvious national foreignness, then, Justin is the real social alien in his own high school setting. Justin narrates in the pilot: “The problem was me...and I was a space alien, but no one was coming to get me...yet” (Guarascio and Port 2007).

Aliens drew media attention early on for being one of the first situation comedies to feature a Muslim as a main character, but it was axed in May 2008 due to a confluence of factors, including the writers’ strike and viewers’ overall disregard for the show (Seiter 2008). Despite its relatively short run, *Aliens* is instructive in so far as it seeks to address culturally sensitive issues pertaining to Islam in the comfortable

and innocuous context of a teen-friendly sitcom. Drawing parallels between a socially outcast teen and his similarly foreign Muslim companion, the show seeks to establish common ground for discussion through the familiar teen tropes of isolation, displacement, and awkwardness. Given an overall atmosphere of anti-Muslim sentiment in the post-9/11 world, *Aliens* can be justly characterized as a frank attempt at reconciliation between Americans and foreign (rather than domestic) Muslims as well as an affirmation of the American multicultural ideal. Indeed, Gaurascio himself stated that “as a writer, you can’t help but absorb what’s happening *in* the culture at large, so it makes sense we’re seeing this *in* the material that’s being created” (Frutkin 2007: 1). As a precedent-setting and timely text, *Aliens* merits close scrutiny: what assumptions underlie the show’s caricatures? Which culture, if any, achieves dominance at the conclusion of the story? An examination of American mythology about Islam, model minorities, others, and race in America provides tentative answers to these questions, and will drive this investigation forward.

Myths, in general, are comprised of the stories that societies tell themselves repeatedly in order to construct a past, calibrate a moral compass for the present, and articulate a vision for the future (Vande Berg, Wenner, and Gronbeck 2004). In this sense, then, mythic criticism is a subsidiary of narrative criticism, because it focuses on a particular kind of story, one which plays out repeatedly and functions as a “meaning-making” mechanism for those who appropriate it. This paper uses basic structuralist and narrative vocabulary in order to better understand the myths at work in *Aliens*. A central aim of the paper is to scrutinize the binary opposition between “good” and “bad” that underlies the mythologies used in the show. One way to explore this opposition is to examine the paradigmatic structure providing support for the polar designations. Here, a paradigmatic structure refers to a set of significations or forms that all have some common stem or theme. The model minority myth, for example, brings along with it a whole cluster of related ideas and implied oppositions. The assimilable model minority is just one “positive” stereotype that sits opposite to much more overtly oppressive and negative ones. The same might be said of myths concerning racial others and Arab/Muslim others.

Given the highly negative associations with Islam many Americans

hold because of terrorist attacks perpetrated by some Muslims, media and movie spectacles involving terror, and rhetoric portraying Muslims as the antagonists to all things wholesome and American, *Aliens* is a breath of fresh air in so far as it seeks to put forward a positive, atypical representation of Muslims that isn't centered on the hackneyed subject of American vulnerability to malicious foreign attackers. This praiseworthy strategy of departing from the norm and discussing Islam within the familiar context of a teen sitcom, however, is most severely undermined by a reliance on unfortunate American mythologies, in particular, those about Islam, model minorities, otherness, and race.

Although in the long run the show fails to deal seriously with the problems faced by minorities in America, as this paper argues, it is only fair to point out up front the few jewels of cultural critique that emerge early in the series. In Raja's first classroom experience, the geography teacher introduces him as "a real live Pakistani who practices Muslimism." She continues by saying, "Dear Raja! You are so different from us...How does that feel?" (Guarascio and Port 2007). This scene draws attention to a general lack of understanding about Islam and even references the feeling of marginalization Raja experiences. The teacher's foolishness is a caricature of the self-appointed expert who engages in the exasperating posturing and rhetoric of multiculturalism, yet remains ignorant. In another scene, Raja asks Justin about the meaning of "fudgepakistan," a name that the popular kids call him. Thus, the show hints that the alienation faced by losers like Justin and religious minorities like Raja parallels the otherness faced by homosexuals. Whether the show's writers do this intentionally, as always, remains unclear, but the gaying of Muslim masculinities is not an uncommon occurrence. Nadine Naber (2008) remarks upon the "conflations between queerness, sexual deviancy, and the monstrous figure of the 'terrorist'" in the prevailing discourse and government policy (297). The "sexual degradation and transformation of Muslim masculinities" into "queer" thus serves as retribution for the castration and penetration of the American/capitalist "homeland" (298). The patriarchal discourse as sanction for violence against Muslims noted by Naber remains just below the surface for most of *Aliens*, emerging only in the more general context of American homophobic practice. Overall, *Aliens* makes an admirable but ultimately cursory attempt at

addressing “otherness” in American society, but perhaps this is better than what would normally be expected from a teen sitcom on network television.

The first and most obvious myths that the show deploys are those having to do specifically with Islam, Arabs, and Muslims. In order to derive its element of satire, *Aliens* purposefully references and mocks as unfounded the prevailing negative myths about Muslims and Arabs. Exposing myths about Muslims — and then refuting them — is an apparent purpose of the show. Although Raja is explicitly *not* Arab, a significant point to which we will turn later, his “character” exists as a clear contestation of (and is in direct opposition to) the negative Muslim/Arab stereotype. An excellent jumping off point for an investigation of representation in media, Tim Semmerling’s (2006) “*Evil*” *Arabs in American Popular Film: Orientalist Fear* reviews six popular films, all of which portray Arabs threatening an American mythos, such as economic supremacy. The basic premise of Semmerling’s book is that in the time from 1975 leading up to and following 9/11, popular films have used visual and narrative tropes to construct a reassuring conception of self and other in times of turmoil and uncertainty. These conceptions typically rely on representations of Muslims or Arabs as evil, violent, jealous of American freedoms, and so on. “Our filmic villains are narrative tools used for self-presentation and self-identity to enhance our own stature, our own meaning, and our own self-esteem in times of our own diffidence. Therefore, are the ‘evil’ Arabs in American film actually oblique depictions of ourselves: the insecure Americans? And while we depict ourselves through them, do we not do so at the expense of the Arab Others?” (Semmerling 1-2). *Aliens*, as a self-reflexive satirical text, shows awareness of these negative portrayals and attempts to counter them by casting Raja in a positive light. Raja’s character is the antithesis of the villainous Arab Muslim character so common in popular film.

Semmerling’s study demonstrates the stigma associated with being Arab, and indicates perhaps one reason why Guarascio and Port might have been hesitant to use an Arab Muslim as the Tolchuck’s token exchange student. As Ellen Seiter (2008) points out, the production team’s choice of a Pakistani Muslim was also more politically expedient, given the “dangerous” nature of Arabs and Pakistan’s status as an

official U.S. ally. The choice of a South Asian Muslim, even as it suggests that some Muslims can be good, encourages an oppressive categorization of South Asians and a tacit reinforcement of the “radical Arab” notion. The choice sets up a troubling dichotomy between the “good” Muslim and the “bad” Muslim, a false opposition in which Muslims must fit neatly into one category or the other. Naber (2008) further explains that the designation “Arab/MiddleEastern/Muslim” operate[s] as a constructed category that lumps together several incongruous subcategories...[failing to distinguish] persons who are perceived to be Arab, Middle Eastern, or Muslim, such as South Asians, including Sikhs and Hindus” (279). Thus, an amorphous but monolithic evil Muslim emerges in which certain signifiers like dark skin, form of dress, or nation of origin trigger associations with a broader signified: the Arab/MiddleEastern/Muslim other (278).

Throughout the first season of *Aliens*, Raja finds himself in absurd — and for immigrants, all too common — situations where he must establish that he’s not one of the bad ones, or where he faces harsh prejudice, but always in a comically hyperbolic way. This satire is meant to demonstrate the absurdity of assuming that all Muslims are bad (no doubt a good lesson for anyone to learn), but still plays out in a way that leaves the audience insensible to the multidimensional nature of Islam, and hence fails to encourage a more complex intellectual distinction between brands of Islam, nationality, cultural practice, and the intersection of these. In *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim* (2004), Mahmoud Mamdani discusses how the presumption made by the state apparatus (exhibited in racial profiling, detentions, deportations, torture, etc) — namely that two distinct categories of Muslims exist and that the “good” must prove their credentials or risk being confused for the “bad” — is the result of a failure to make the “political analysis of our times,” presumably the ability to view those who adhere to Islam as existing on a continuum rather than being discreetly good or evil (16). Mamdani (2004) further notes that Samuel Huntington, the American political scientist who proposed the clash of civilizations thesis, provides the intellectual backing for the “good” vs. “bad” Muslim notion, and that his line of thinking can even lead to a mandate for the liberation of the good from the thrall of the bad (24). This mandate, which is in fact a kind of “civilizing mission,” manifests in the first

episode of *Aliens* when Raja explains his sad situation in Pakistan, where he was orphaned as a child (Guarascio and Port 2007). The cohesive American family unit thus serves as a liberating apparatus from the ravages of the so-called Third-World. *Aliens* reinforces the notion that this dividing line between the good and evil Muslim legitimately exists by casting Raja in such a way that he is absolutely saintly in his comportment — a fundamentalist do-gooder. At times he seems more like a wise and unassuming guru than a complex character.

The second set of myths that the show redeploys concern the “model minority:” a mythology that has many permutations and ethnic variations. Whereas *Aliens* shows an awareness of myths about Islam and actively fought to counter them, however, there is no evidence of a parallel self-awareness on the part of the show’s writers or actors of the model minority myth. Yet *Aliens* does characterize Raja as a model minority — a minority that is especially or inherently intelligent and successful — in order to argue for the inclusion of Muslims into the “positive” minority grouping that Asians and South Asians are already familiar with. Throughout *Aliens*, for example, Raja’s book-smarts and studiousness suggest to the audience that Muslims can be successful in America. In addition, Raja’s endless supply of aphorisms and cultural critique identify him clearly as a “guru,” or purveyor of Oriental wisdom. The notion of a guru is one with which Vijay Prashad takes particular umbrage. Prashad’s *The Karma of Brown Folk* (2000) addresses the myth of the model minority as it pertains specifically to South Asians, a geographical grouping that includes Pakistani Muslims like Raja.

One of Prashad’s aims is to demonstrate that the myth of the “brainy” or wise South Asian is partly the byproduct of state immigration controls (de jure and de facto), which until 1965 allowed only educated newcomers to enter the country as prospective citizens. This educational precondition for entry into the country, in turn, perpetuated the notion that South Asians are inherently successful and bookish, and hence a “model” for other immigrant populations. “[South Asians] are seen as good immigrants, not like those bad immigrants who travel illegally across the Rio Grande” (Prashad 2000: 82). Thus, Mamdani’s good vs. bad dichotomy plays out in the realm

of immigration as well as foreign policy; characterizations of “good” immigrants imply and contrast with opposed brandings of “bad” immigrants (welfare “queens,” non-English speakers, and violent drug lords). The model minority myth, then, acts as a potential exit from the myth of “bad” Muslim otherness. In *Aliens*, the model minority myth is reinforced (and the evil Islamist stereotype repressed) by the producer’s choice of a docile (and slightly cross-eyed) South Asian Muslim as the protagonist, as acts of terror are generally perceived as being perpetrated exclusively by belligerent, turbaned, bearded Arab Muslims. The choice of a Pakistani Muslim as a character in *Aliens* makes mythic sense, because people see South Asians as friendly to American ways, assimilable, and highly intelligent. The show caters to the American audience’s preconceived notions about South Asians, and uses this as a tool for promoting an easy kind of tolerance, the path to which has already been cognitively cleared by other “positive” minority myths.

Yuko Kawai (2005) discusses the pervasiveness of the model minority myth at length, with particular interest in investigating how this myth manifests in mainstream media texts with respect to the “Asian” racial group. One of Kawai’s concerns is to demonstrate that the “positive” model minority myth or stereotype is in fact only one side of a little-acknowledged dialectic having at the other end an opposing “negative” myth: the yellow peril. Implicit in each positive stereotype is an opposed (and often unstated) negative one (Kawai 2005). In the case of *Aliens*, we might replace the implicit threat of the yellow peril with a Muslim and/or Arab peril, perhaps of the kind explored in depth by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1989). Kawai explains that “the model minority stereotype is argued by some to evoke negative implications such as racial hostilities and violence despite the seemingly ‘positive’ image that it creates for Asian Americans” (110). This paradox ultimately leads Kawai to describe stereotypes as ambivalent, because they imply contradictory meanings. Thus, even a “positive” stereotype occasions inherent negativities. Louise Cainkar (2008) believes that the fall of Muslims from “the graces of marginal whiteness is traceable to the emergence of the United States as a global superpower” (47). Cainkar’s suspicion is in keeping with the basic premise of *Aliens*: that Muslims ought to be accepted back into the

“invisible” white fold of “modernity, rationality, and individuality” (51). As Kawai demonstrates, however, positive stereotypes are undermined by implied negative ones, and as a result, Muslims in America remain “white, but not quite.”

A third mythology which *Aliens* makes use of is that of “the other.” This mythology, already touched upon in the discussion of Arab/MiddleEastern/Muslim designations, is relevant to other kinds of religious otherness, model minority otherness, and racial otherness. “Otherness” by itself is highlighted here as mythology that is ubiquitous in minority stereotypes and acts as a tool for plot development and audience self-exploration in the case of *Aliens*. Otherness is especially fascinating from a narrative and mythic perspective, because it has little or nothing to do with actual qualities or traits of “the other” in question and everything to do with perceptions and constructions of the other in a culture at large. Hence, constructions of otherness say something about the myth-producing culture and are fundamentally *about* and *for* that culture.

For example, Raja’s character, in light of his un-American otherness and by way of his noble naiveté, is endowed with clear cultural vision, and so he is equipped to mediate for the audience what American culture is like from a more valid point of view. Gabeba Banderoon’s (2003) paper on media representations of Islam is limited to South Africa, but her investigation is useful to an analysis of *Aliens* because it is a media-studies application of Edward Said’s authoritative work on representation, *Orientalism*. One of the basic ideas she employs throughout her analysis is that Western portrayals of “the other” amount to cultural self-representation by way of “detour” or even negative definition (1). Raja’s “outsider” perspective gives him unique cultural insight, and his character serves as a mouthpiece for telling American viewers more about themselves.

This “Space Alien” plot is not new in American television history — for example, *Mork and Mindy*, *Different Strokes*, and *Perfect Strangers* all follow the same pattern: “alien” character discloses wisdom/truths to oblivious or awkward insider, and insider grows as a result. *Aliens* innovates on this narrative form by using it to achieve a real “multicultural” goal of tolerance and respect. Raja’s role as a “truth discloser” is also useful for the audience in terms of appropriating the

mythology and history of their own culture. Banderoun and Said point out that these kinds of representations of otherness boil down to a kind of negative self-definition; by explaining what the dominant culture is not through reference to an other, the representation circuitously reflects what the dominant culture actually is like. Whereas the traditional Orientalist never realizes that his characterization of the Oriental is a sidelong projection of himself, however, in *Aliens*, the “self by way of other” pattern is a somewhat intentional process with comedic effect. The show knowingly uses Raja to hold a mirror up to the American family’s excesses and to solve the family’s problems.

A typical instance in which Raja’s unique cultural perspective catalyzes the show’s main action occurs in the episode “Church,” which begins with the Tolchucks making their weekly trip to “Shop World” to check out the specials. Raja observes that the family’s shopping rituals seem analogous to religious practice: the weekly trip to Shop World lifts everyone’s spirits, and Mr. Tolchuck always leaves behind ten percent of his income (Guarascio and Port 2007). After Raja speaks up, Mrs. Tolchuck realizes that their family shopping rites are shallow, and this epiphany motivates the rest of the episode. Again, Raja’s innocent outsider’s observation stimulates the main action in the episode, and his character acts as an apparatus for narrative advancement rather than the subject of that development.

Raja’s role, then, is an extremely paradoxical one. One would suspect that Raja, as the “outsider,” would be the character most susceptible to confusion, culture shock, and change, yet he manages to successfully navigate each social dilemma by sticking faithfully to his Islamic principles, teaching Justin and the audience a moral or lesson along the way. In another example, Ms. Tolchuck nags Justin about his sartorial choices and tries to bring him back into the realm of the “normal,” although nothing noticeably abnormal sticks out about Justin’s clothing. In fact, Ms. Tolchuck hopes her son will become a fashion model who dresses like Ashton Kutcher. By comparison, Raja, who does in fact wear unusual clothes for an American teenager, insists upon wearing his colorful shalwar kameez (light, loose pleated trousers and a matching, knee-length shirt) and traditional kufi (Islamic skull cap). Raja’s resistance to “normalization” in this and other respects teaches Justin to be himself. At the same time, the fact that Raja

dresses conspicuously may even be a strategy for making him more “knowable” for the audience and hence less threatening than the incognito, underground insurgent whose anonymous inscription accompanies most news reports.

Raja’s character, then, is necessarily a caricature or contrivance. As an agent, he rarely faces complex decisions on his own, and the audience gains little access to his inner thoughts or conflicted feelings through voice-over or other possible tools for character development or enrichment. Although the narrative tension of the first and second episodes features Raja prominently, by the end of the season, other narrative problems appear (Mr. Tolchuck’s unemployment, younger sister Claire’s sex life, etc.) and the show becomes more and more the quintessential teen sitcom, losing its perceived edginess along the way. Whether this was the result of poor ratings or unrelated to the audience’s reception of the show is a purely speculative question. Regardless, the show’s need to deal with Justin and his typical teen fixations subsume and even trounce the ostensibly central, implicit goal of encouraging cultural exchange. The show is clearly interested primarily with the social advancement of Justin rather than the social tension or alienation experienced by Raja; the problems faced by Raja are second-order. In the Orientalist tradition, Raja is employed as an instrument (or a means) rather than a person facing difficulties in and of himself, an end worthy of attention independent of Justin and his family.

Toni Morrison’s *Playing in the Dark* (1992) incorporates ideas of “otherness” that parallel Said’s and Banderoun’s and serves as a useful elaboration on how myths about the “other” function in American stories, particularly those involving race. Morrison critically addresses the historical representation of Africans in American literature and the role African characters have played within their respective texts. She comments that “through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work...one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americanness” (6). She calls this area of appraisal the study of “American Africanism...an investigation into the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanlike presence or persona was constructed in the United States and the imaginative

uses this fabricated presence served” (6). As episodes of *Aliens* progress, the show centers increasingly more on Justin and his social advancement/assimilation, and less on Raja and his difficulties negotiating a strange American social landscape. Thus, as a text, *Aliens* falls neatly within the tradition identified by Morrison. The end result of the show is not quite its professed objective — to provoke understanding of the Muslim other — but is instead to help Justin come to terms with his outsider status in the high school setting. Raja’s “fabricated presence” can be viewed as an “Africanlike” apparition of otherness, which serves primarily to further the social goals of the white, American family. Morrison explains one area in need of critical attention:

First, the Africanist character as surrogate and enabler. In what ways does the imaginative encounter with Africanism enable white writers to think about themselves?...Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself not as enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not damned, but innocent; not blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny. (1992: 52)

Raja’s purpose in the grand scheme of the series is to act as a kind of cultural mirror for Justin, a “surrogate” for otherness in general and an enabler for Justin’s social advancement. As even more of a societal nonmember than Justin, Raja’s character has the lack of cultural capital required to make Justin seem like an insider by comparison.

Morrison (1992) also challenges literary commentators with another critical need: to “analyze the manipulation of the Africanist narrative...as a means of mediation — both safe and risky — on one’s own humanity. Such analyses will reveal how the representation and appropriation of that narrative provides opportunities to contemplate limitation, suffering, [and] rebellion” (53). Raja’s story of cultural clash and mismatched ideology is less about the humanity of Raja himself as a Pakistani Muslim and more about that of Justin, who ultimately fulfills the show’s need for a protagonist with whom the white positioned audience can self identify. Morrison (1992) discusses

the example of Huck Finn, the “child-without-status,” someone who is already “othered” by the bourgeois society he loathes, and whose outsider gaze circumspectly critiques slavery and social pretension:

The agency, however, for Huck’s struggle is the nigger Jim, and it is absolutely necessary that the term *nigger* be inextricable from Huck’s deliberations about who and what he himself is—or, more precisely, is not...What is not stressed is that there is no way, given the confines of the novel, for Huck to mature into a moral human being *in America* without Jim. (55-56)

Raja’s role in *Aliens* is similar to Jim’s role in *Huck Finn*; both function as stand-ins for the African “other” writ large and serve primarily to resolve the identity dilemmas faced by the white, American protagonist. Hence, the “East-West,” “White-Black” dilemma may be a debate originating in the Western viewer-subject, an opposition constructed by the culture for its viewer, and an implement for narrative as well as moral advancement.

Racial myths are the fourth and final set marshaled by *Aliens*, and they provide fertile ground for an elaboration of the of binary oppositions and paradigmatic structures already examined up to this point. Stuart Hall’s (1981) *The Whites of Their Eyes* explores the “white” positioning of the audience and mentions three roles traditionally enacted by what Morrison would term the racialized or “Africanist” character: the slave, the native, and the clown. This schematization is useful in understanding how racial myths are unintentionally represented and realized through Raja’s character. Raja enacts the positive racialized qualities of obedience, moral austerity without severity, and comedic nature (inaugurating him into the “positive” minority grouping), while the opposing negative racial characteristics of revolt, moral depletion, and frivolity or severity appear either (inclusively) (1) immanently with an unspecified Muslim “other”; or (2) manifestly with members of the Tolchuck family and American culture writ large. The show derives a satirical bearing with each overt manifestation of a negative characteristic in an American character, yet the uncomfortable, implied “terrorist” opposition lurks constantly below the show’s self-reflexive surface, giving reason for critical pause.

As for the slavish qualities of obedience (good) or defiance (bad), Raja's embodiment of the compliant foreigner contrasts most obviously with the cavalier attitude expressed by Justin's sister, Claire, who often sneaks out of the house, shirks her chores, and regularly defies her parents' wishes. This is the manifest opposition. Immanently, however, Raja's "house slave" civility and eager integration contrasts with the "field slave" or "terrorist" patterns of insurrection and revolt against institutionalized oppression and exploitation. In one scene, for example, Raja sweeps the house with his back sharply inclined and his eyes fixed determinedly on the floor. Meanwhile, Mr. Tolchuck, who is comfortably seated in a lounge chair, leisurely reads a magazine and rests his feet on an ottoman (Guarascio and Port 2007). The route to acceptance, for Raja, is paved with a demonstration of his work ethic. Mr. Tolchuck enthusiastically comments in "Junior Prank" that "Raja has turned out to be a real mule," and Mrs. Tolchuck follows by saying "no pawning it off on Raja, that boy is an honorary member of this family, just like those alpacas" (Guarascio and Port 2007). Mr. Tolchuck even pockets Raja's check from the exchange program for himself, and nobody protests when Raja pulls more weight in the family by getting a job at the convenience store and doing most of the chores. The scenes are clearly hyperbolic and meant to occasion laughter (and hopefully reflection) by pointing to the lazy disobedience of the Tolchucks, yet Raja's over-willing and "comedic" obedience has a rather unsettling element which is reminiscent of racialized portrayals of blacks and immigrants. The show depicts Raja as a hardworking foreigner, who, beyond noticeably contrasting with the flippant, disobedient Claire and lazy Mr. Tolchuck, stands in latent opposition to hostile, aggressive, and shiftless alien immigrants, who perpetrate violent terrorist attacks, break the law, or commit drug- and gun-related crimes. Raja's diligence in completing chores (following house rules) and obeying school rules is tacitly measured against the perceived laziness, insubordination, and sluggishness of the racial other. His passivity with respect to government infringement on his rights and willingness to observe intrusive police investigation surfaces in "Rocket Club," where he caves in to pressure to obey the authorities, saying "I am tired of being looked at as a terrorist, so I am going to give the police my computer" (Guarascio and Port 2007). Thus, instead

of offering a nice compliment for religious and racial minorities, the depiction of otherness in *Aliens* re-animates colonialist forms of exploitation and reinforces the idea that foreign nationals are only acceptable when they are assimilable, servile, or without full rights. This is the path to domestication and “naturalization” for would-be citizens like Raja.

The “Noble Savage” portrayal (wise, charmingly simple, morally “closer to god”) is one, no doubt, that many media scholars are familiar with, but *Aliens* employs tropes of “primitive” moral austerity in innovative ways that hint at romantic ideas of Christian redemption. Mrs. Tolchuck, who seeks to impose moral stringency on her children, in particular the promiscuous Claire, appeals to Raja in the episode “Church” for advice. No doubt Raja’s strict upbringing serves as a kind of example for Justin and Claire. Indeed, Justin — who distorts the purpose of prayer by asking for sex with Liz Sherman — receives Raja’s approbation and quickly reforms his behavior. In “Purple Heart,” Raja is infuriated when a boy dumps Claire, and this motivates Justin to vandalize the boy’s locker. “Claire’s honor must be avenged!” Raja yells. Even Mr. Tolchuck, who is a lax worker and remains unemployed for at least three episodes, learns to adhere to a more austere (and distinctly Protestant) work ethic when Raja sets the example by contributing to the family income with a part-time job. Raja’s strict religious observance and principled faith, in sum, is more Protestant and hence American than that of any member of the Tolchuck family. Raja, the noble alien savage, serves as a kind of moral exemplar who prods the Tolchuck family closer to its authentic, American roots. Said (1989) explains the overtones of romanticism and post-enlightenment thinking common in this line of reasoning: “the regeneration of Europe by Asia was a very influential Romantic idea...it was Indian culture and religion that could defeat the materialism...of Occidental culture. And from this defeat would arise a new, revitalized Europe” (115). In this case, however, it is not the anti-materialistic “Indian religion” which saves Europe, but the Muslim immigrant’s religious inflexibility and enterprising determination to succeed which revitalizes the effete and sluggish American value system, bringing America back from post 9/11 feelings of powerlessness. *Aliens* redispenses the Orientalist’s fiction in a creative way by recasting the fundamentals of Islam as

good, fundamentally. Raja's character, although explicitly "other," takes on this regenerative force of a quasi "guru" or semi-"primitive" moral guide. As Said notes, however, "what mattered was not Asia so much as Asia's *use to* modern Europe" (115). The same might be said of Raja with respect to the Tolchucks and the Arab Muslim other with respect to American hegemony.

Thus, the overt contrast between Raja's religious observance and the Tolchucks' zombie-like indulgence acts as a rooster-call that awakens the family, provoking a kind of self-discovery. The implied religious opposition, however, is between the "good" South Asian Muslim (and his more moderate brand of Islam) and the fanatical Arab shaykh who takes religion to the extreme. The difference between Said's latent and manifest Orientalism is similar to that between Hall's latent and manifest racism; it is the difference between what is implied or assumed and what is stated outright. The essential, value-laden qualities of an Arab/MiddleEasterner/Muslim, for example, are what the "discourse" forces us to say (manifest) and think (latent) in conjunction with a signifier of group membership. The "Arab" or "Oriental" essence typically includes the qualities of sensuality, terror, feminine penetrability and conquerability, aberrant mentality, irrationality, and tyranny. When Raja gets upset about the "violation" of Claire's honor, the hinted opposition at work is one between Raja and the unspecified yet infamous "bad" Muslim, who, rather than being an upholder of women's rights (by denouncing sexploitation), lives in a harem with multiple wives, rapes whomever he wishes, and sensuously indulges in every way imaginable. According to Said (1989), these basic tropes are derived from inherited Orientalist structures that are redeployed and reinforced by Orientalist disciplines like philology, social science, and area studies; no doubt media play an important role in re-vivifying Orientalist structures as well.

Hall's (1981) base image of the clown, or entertainer, is that of an unwitting "performer" who occasions laughter and delight in an audience because of eccentric physical expressivity, exoticism, or endearing stupidity. Opposed to this friendly "clown" stands an entirely different figure: the ill-humored, calculating ideologue who seethes with hate and maleficence — in other words, the angry shaykh. In order to blaze a path towards acceptance of Muslims in America (by

using a distinctly American idiom) the show portrays Raja as a kind of entertainer. Appearing goofy or foolishly different allows Raja to navigate the Wisconsin town without arousing too much suspicion. Raja rarely stands up straight or asserts control/dominance; instead, he often has a hunched posture or puts his hands up unthreateningly — a quintessential fool. At first glance Raja, because he is type cast in the “model” minority mould, appears “serious” and highly cerebral — in a breath, un-funny. But his extreme school-smarts (“It’s a Muslim thing”) are more often subsumed by a kind of noble and entertaining naïveté with respect to Western “evils” like lying, teen sex, deception of authority figures, and immodest attire and images (Guarascio and Port 2007).

In “Rocket Club,” Raja tells his first lie; he explains, “I have never lied before, and I just lost all sense of scale, and I kept going and going in the vain hope that I would stumble upon that one lie that would make sense of all the others, but I never did!” (Guarascio and Port 2007). The Muslim’s inability to lie, in this case, is endearing and clownish. The funny “I don’t know how to lie” idea, moreover, makes Raja even less of a security concern. Later, Raja suggests that “freedom” (to lie, to cheat, etc.) is perhaps too great a moral burden for someone as simple minded as he: “this whole freedom thing is so wonderful, but it is such a headache!” His Muslim mind just isn’t wired for democracy or freedom, the show suggests. Raja’s moral fundamentalism is an object of ridicule and his Islam a source of entertainment — his moral standards are “positive” only so far as they (1) promote the religiosity of the American family or (2) suggest an unblinking obedience to American authority, simple-mindedness, and ascetic subservience. Moreover, his ethnic dress — for all intents and purposes a colorful Pakistani jester’s costume or clown suit — marks him out for special attention, signifying to the audience that they should expect radical otherness to practically *explode* from his character. His clothes occasion much comedic dialogue, and his rhythmic articulation, quirky gesticulations, and “queer” vocabulary are a main wellspring for the show’s situational comedy.

In discussing the role media plays in shaping opinion, especially with regard to minorities, Ashgar Engineer (1999) and other media scholars remain largely skeptical about the potential for positive

discourse: “minorities are often stereotyped as ‘fanatical’ and fundamentalist,’ and [the] acts of a few individuals belonging to the community are seen as approved by the entire community” (2131). Gabeba Baderoon (2003) agrees with Engineer’s characterization of the media landscape and explains the power of media to divide us:

In the neighborhood mapped by media, we are circumscribed by a geography that pits us against one another. As audiences and citizens of an interconnected world, we are left with the massive intellectual and political challenge of *locating* ourselves; reading the maps that would position us, and telling other stories, in which our words and contexts count equally. (21)

With this in mind, then, *Aliens* seems remarkable for its genuine concern for ending discriminatory practice (both institutional and social) directed against Muslims. The show certainly encourages audience members to transcend the “us versus them” mentality by demonstrating a willingness to critique American culture and drawing parallels between Justin and his sidekick Raja. Edward Said himself concedes that the problem is not Orientalism per se but representation, which is “*eo ipso* implicated, intertwined, embedded, and interwoven with a great many other things besides the ‘truth,’ which is itself a representation” (272).

Ultimately, then, the portrayals in *Aliens* rely on a simplified representation of the Muslim in America and make a weak case for his or her inclusion. *Aliens* ultimately fails to achieve inter-cultural understanding, because the show becomes less about Raja’s plight (the putative purpose of the show) and more about Justin’s (and the audience’s) social development. The show’s ambiguous referencing of some positive aspects of the “Muslim domain” and disquieting joking about its negative aspects (such as stonings and suicide attacks, etc.) construct an unintentional dialectic between good and bad Muslim. The model minority myth is deployed as an argument in favor of Muslim inclusion in multicultural society, but is similarly based on implied oppressive categorizations and conceptual mistakes. In addition to these mythologies, the overarching theme of otherness paradoxically places the focus on narrative and character development of the American characters, thus bringing to fruition the true purpose

of myth: to allow the myth-producing culture to give the latest account of itself and construct a coherent narrative from existing mythic fragments. Racial myths, the final set of myths examined here, provide a framework for show's most striking but unstated oppositions and provide perhaps the most familiar and deeply ingrained notions of good and bad minorities. The satirical aspect of *Aliens* mitigates the negative, implied oppositions by making some of the American characters embody the unfavorable stereotypes in a jocular way, thus calling into question the cultural practices of consumerism (indulgence), shallow morality, extreme preoccupation with ephemera, and general ignorance about the rest of the world, practices that Raja demurs. *Aliens*, then, is an intricate and timely text, which contributes to a dynamic and problematic mythic narrative about Muslims and their relation to America.

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