



KADIR HAS UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES
PROGRAM OF COMMUNICATION STUDIES

**CHALLENGING THE STEREOTYPES:
RELIGIOUS AND GENDER IDENTITIES IN *RAMY***

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MASTER OF ARTS THESIS

ISTANBUL, FEBRUARY, 2025

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Master of Arts Thesis

2025

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RELIGIOUS AND GENDER IDENTITIES IN *RAMY***

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A thesis submitted to
the School of Graduate Studies of Kadir Has University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in Communication Studies

Istanbul, February, 2025

APPROVAL

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DECLARATION ON RESEARCH ETHICS AND PUBLISHING METHODS

I, SERİM ŞAHİN; hereby declare

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In addition, I acknowledge that any claim of irregularity that may arise in relation to this work will result in a disciplinary action in accordance with the university legislation.

Serim Şahin

Date (03/02/2025)



To My Dearest Family...

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Writing this master's thesis has not been an easy process for me. It was a long and challenging journey where I often felt lost among the texts, struggled to find a starting point, and at times, lost confidence in myself. Throughout this process, I would first and foremost like to express my deepest gratitude to my thesis advisor, Asst. Prof. Esin Paça Cengiz, for her unwavering support. I am sincerely grateful for her patience, her understanding attitude throughout my academic quest, and her insightful feedback, which constantly pushed me to improve. Without her guidance, this thesis would not have been completed in a way that I am truly satisfied with.

I would like to thank my thesis jury members, Asst. Prof. Emre Sünter and Asst. Prof. Ayça Çiftçi, whose valuable feedback allowed me to identify the points I had overlooked during my writing process and provided me with new perspectives.

I am deeply grateful to Efsane and Begüm, who patiently listened to all my frustrations, became almost as familiar with this process as I was, and played a significant role in the completion of this thesis by introducing me to the TV series *Ramy*. I would also like to extend my gratitude to Ramy Youssef, the creator of *Ramy*, for producing such an incredible show. I watched the series countless times throughout the writing process, and with each viewing, I found myself in awe of his sharp intellect once again.

I am deeply grateful to Yağmur, whom I could always count on whenever I needed, to Mehmet, who wholeheartedly supported me during my master's studies, and to İrem, my companion in our pursuit, with whom I worked to bring our dreams to life. I would also like to extend my sincere thanks to all my friends who stood by me throughout this process.

Finally, I am forever grateful to my family for always standing behind my decisions and believing in me.

CHALLENGING THE STEREOTYPES:
RELIGIOUS AND GENDER IDENTITIES IN *RAMY*

ABSTRACT

Identity is a fluid process in social and cultural contexts that includes how people describe themselves as well as how society views them. The media has a crucial role in this process because it actively shapes and constructs identities in addition to reflecting social reality. Western media has often portrayed Muslim identities in a way using specific stereotypes that have their roots in an Orientalist and Eurocentric viewpoint to uphold its cultural hegemony and ideological strategies. This thesis argues that *Ramy* is an outstanding example that criticizes the representation of Muslim identities in mainstream media and offers an alternative representation to the Orientalist and Eurocentric narrative. In this thesis, I examine how religious and gender identities are represented in the series *Ramy* by employing discussions on these concepts within the Third World Cinema, postcolonial theory, and feminist film studies. I argue that the series challenges key stereotypes about Muslim identities and brings much more nuanced portrayals to the screen. *Ramy* introduces the issue of identity representation—often confined to Third World cinema and critically examined there—into the popular realm through digital platforms. By doing so, it creates space in mainstream media for questioning and discussing concepts such as representation, identity, Muslim identities, and the identities of Muslim women.

Keywords: representation, identity representation, religious identity, gender identity, Eurocentrism, Orientalism, stereotypes, *Ramy*

STERİOTİPLERİ ALTÜST ETMEK:
RAMY'DE DİNİ VE TOPLUMSAL CİNSİYET KİMLİKLERİ

ÖZET

Kimlik, sosyal ve kültürel bağlamlarda, insanların kendilerini nasıl tanımladıklarını ve toplumun onları nasıl gördüğünü içeren akışkan bir süreçtir. Medya, sosyal gerçekliği yansıtmanın ötesinde, kimlikleri aktif bir şekilde şekillendirdiği ve inşa ettiği için bu süreçte önemli bir role sahiptir. Batı medyası, genellikle kültürel hegemonya ve ideolojik stratejilerini sürdürmek amacıyla, Müslüman kimliklerini Oryantalist ve Avrupa-merkezci bir bakış açısına dayanan belirli stereotiplerle tasvir etmiştir. Bu tez, *Ramy* dizisinin Hollywood medyasındaki Müslüman kimliklerin tasvirini eleştiren ve Oryantalist ve Avrupa-merkezci anlatıya alternatif bir temsil sunan dikkat çekici bir örnek olduğunu savunmaktadır. Bu tezde, *Ramy* dizisinde dini ve cinsiyet kimliklerinin nasıl temsil edildiğini, Üçüncü Dünya Sineması, postkolonyal teori ve feminist film çalışmaları kapsamında bu kavramlar üzerine yapılan tartışmalardan yararlanarak inceliyorum. Dizinin, Müslüman kimliklerine dair temel klişelere meydan okuduğunu ve çok daha incelikli tasvirleri ekrana taşıdığını iddia ediyorum. *Ramy*, kimlik temsili meselesini -genellikle Üçüncü Dünya sinemasıyla sınırlı kalan ve bu alanda eleştirel bir şekilde incelenen bu konuyu- dijital platformlar aracılığıyla popüler alana taşımaktadır. Bunu yaparak, ana akım medyada temsil, kimlik, Müslüman kimlikleri ve Müslüman kadınların kimlikleri gibi kavramların sorgulaması ve tartışılması için bir alan yaratmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: kimlik temsili, dini kimlik, toplumsal cinsiyet kimliği, Avrupa-merkezcilik, Oryantalizm, stereotipler, *Ramy*

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1.INTRODUCTION

In a social and cultural setting, identity is an evolving process that includes societal views and individual self-perception. The media has a significant impact on this process. In contemporary societies, the media serves as a source of entertainment and information; also, it functions as a platform that constructs identity through repetitive representations. The media has a crucial role in influencing how people and groups perceive their and other people's identities, particularly in the quickly globalizing 21st century. Nevertheless, this influence often operates on an ideological basis, guiding identity construction processes by confining certain communities to specific, frequently stereotypical images. Moreover, media representations impact not only how identities are perceived but also how regions such as the Middle East and the East are perceived; these representations create 'imaginary geographies' (Said 1978).

In this context, representation in the media is not merely about visibility; it is an arena of power, politics, and ideology. Stuart Hall's idea that "identity is a 'production', which is never complete, always in process, and always within, not outside, representation" (1989, 68) offers a critical framework for understanding the dynamic nature of identity construction in media. Representations in popular media not only portray identities but also shape or alter the way these identities are perceived. This mechanism is especially evident in the portrayal of minority groups.

Representation forms not only shape identity categories such as race, gender, religion, and class but also reproduce the power relations associated with these categories. For example, Edward Said's (1978) concept of Orientalism illustrates how the stereotypes used by the West to define the East have created a Western-centered discourse of power, which homogenizes and marginalizes Eastern societies' identities. Today, the representation of Muslim identities in Western media continues to reflect such practices of marginalization (Akabli and Chaddi 2022; Alsultany 2022; Shaheen 2007). Countless articles, books, and conferences have focused on how Muslim identities are represented in Western media. Contemporary reports examining how Muslims are portrayed in US

mainstream media highlight that the problematic aspects of this representation persist today (Khan et al. 2021, 2022; Geena Davis Institute 2022).

Especially in the post-9/11 era, the representation of Muslims in Western media has been primarily confined to a limited framework of terrorism, radicalism, and backwardness (Alsultany 2013; Hirji 2011). During this period, Muslims in US conventional media are often depicted as violent men and oppressed women. These forms of representation not only position Muslims as the "other" but also overlook the complex and multi-layered identities of Muslim individuals.

The "Muslim Ban" imposed by Donald Trump in 2017 caused a worldwide uproar and highlighted the significance of Muslim artists using art as a means of expressing their identities and experiences. Muslim artists responded to the ban's attempt to perpetuate restrictive narratives by using visual storytelling—especially on digital platforms—to oppose Orientalist depictions and emphasize the diversity and humanity of Muslim lives. Some series that can be given as examples of such productions are *Homecoming King* (Netflix, 2017), *We Are Lady Parts* (Peacock, 2021), and *Mo* (Netflix, 2022). Examining series that adopt such an approach would be a helpful study in exploring an alternative discourse to Hollywood's Eurocentric representational practices, which often depict identities as fixed and immutable, create persistent binaries of "us" versus "them," and marginalize minorities through processes of 'othering.' In this context, the *Ramy* series stands out as an extra new ordinary example since it has the potential to develop alternative representations to Hollywood's dominant narrative.

The fact that the aforementioned shows, along with *Ramy*, are streamed on digital platforms and serve as alternatives to traditional Hollywood representation raises the question of whether they have opened a new door for representational diversity in digital content. Whether the stories of films and series on streaming platforms are more inclusive and diverse remains a current topic of debate in media studies today (Asmar, Raats, and Van Audenhove 2022; Christian 2019; Daalmans, Haverkort, and Kleemans 2024; Fraccari and Kerrigan 2024; Khoo 2023).

Representation has expanded, especially since the 2010s, as a result of increasing competition in distribution and production with the rise of streaming platforms. In

particular, shows that embrace intersectionality—those centered on and created by multiply marginalized individuals such as Black and Brown women, LGBTQ+ and trans people of color, immigrants belonging to religious minorities, and poor disabled individuals—have found a place in digital platforms (Christian 2019). In order to support culturally diverse representation and content production, the primary screen entertainment companies—including Netflix, Disney, Universal Pictures, Sony Pictures, and Amazon MGM—have launched original series that have received praise for their culturally diverse representations, increased the visibility of these representations for audiences through their recommendation systems, and introduced new initiatives (Khoo 2023).

Streaming companies like Netflix and Amazon, in particular, are leading the way in embracing diversity in their original content, while traditional entertainment platforms like film, TV, and cable struggle to keep up with changing market conditions. These streaming studios aim to become the main source of content from minority perspectives through both their programming and marketing strategies. They also hire a more diverse group of creatives to produce their original series, ensuring that underrepresented communities' experiences are portrayed and explored. As a result, the content produced by Netflix and Amazon represents an audacious representation of diverse voices (Wold 2017, 3).

Netflix and Amazon highlight their commitment to diversity through reports and policies. Netflix's 2021 diversity report shows it exceeds industry standards in representing underrepresented groups (Sarandos 2021). Similarly, Amazon Studios enforces an Inclusion Policy and a Playbook to guide diverse storytelling across identities for its global Prime Video audience (Adams 2021). These resources offer practical recommendations as Amazon Studios continues to champion diverse storytelling, highlighting voices across various identities—including race, ethnicity, nationality, sexual orientation, age, religion, gender, gender identity, and gender expression.

Digital platforms have moved beyond the conservatism of traditional television, making the representation of more diverse identities possible. The series *Ramy*, which airs on

Hulu, emerges from this context as a groundbreaking show that offers new alternatives for the representation of Muslim identities.

Ramy (Hulu, 2019) offers a unique representation of Muslim identities, distinct from Hollywood media portrayals. The show centers on Ramy Hassan, a first-generation American Muslim whose family immigrated from Egypt to New Jersey. It examines his deep exploration of his identity and his struggles with religious and cultural conflicts. The series is semi-autobiographical, with some similarities to the life of its creator and lead actor, Egyptian comedian Ramy Youssef. It has been nominated for various awards, including Critics Choice Television Awards and Gotham Independent Film Awards. Youssef also won a Golden Globe for his lead performance in the series.

Ramy challenges stereotypes and the dominant discourse by presenting Muslim characters as complex, multidimensional individuals rather than one-dimensional figures. The show distorts the conventional representations of Muslims through humor and nuanced storytelling, offering a more diverse portrayal of their experiences. The search for alternative discourses to representations shaped by the Western hegemonic narrative, typically seen in independent, experimental cinema, makes it significant that *Ramy* creates an alternative to the dominant representations in media and challenges stereotypes within popular culture.

This study aims to analyze the series *Ramy* in the context of mainstream media representations and identity construction, focusing on both representations of religious and gender identities. In this regard, the thesis poses two main research questions: What is the dominant representation of Muslim identities in conventional media? How does the series *Ramy* challenge these representations and stereotypes? In seeking possible answers to such questions, textual and contextual analysis of the characters and narrative of the series acts as the essence of this research.

Eurocentrism is an ideological perspective that centers on Western culture and values, often marginalizing or distorting non-Western identities. Hollywood productions reflect this perspective, and in doing so, they often reinforce colonial and imperialist ideologies. These productions construct identities of non-Western characters in fixed, stereotypical ways, presenting them either as victims in need of rescue or as threats to

be controlled. In Hollywood, identity is ideologically constructed to align with Western values, and the complexities and nuances of minority experiences are often overlooked. In contrast, the show *Ramy* addresses the issue of Muslim representation, portraying Muslim characters' identities in a much more nuanced and multifaceted way. Therefore, this thesis suggests that *Ramy* develops an alternative representation to the dominant narrative in Hollywood media and challenges stereotypes surrounding Muslim representation.

The first chapter, “*Discussions on Identity Representation*”, examines how Muslims have historically been represented in Hollywood media. After identifying the problematic aspects of these representations, it delves into the power of media in shaping discourse, stereotyping as a representational practice, and the principle of identity as an ideologically constructed concept in media, drawing on the works of scholars who study the relationship between media and representation. The concepts of Orientalism and Eurocentrism are explained to highlight the ideological biases of the West in representing the East. Perspectives from Third World cinema and postcolonial cinema theorists are included, as their work centers on representation issues and aims to create alternatives to Eurocentric representational practices produced by the West. Lastly, since this thesis also explores how Muslim women are portrayed in the series, feminist film theory is employed to explain the ideological construction of gender identities.

The second chapter, “*Religious Identities*”, focuses on how Muslim identities are represented in the series *Ramy*. Muslim identity of the character Ramy is explored through the concept of self-orientalism, drawing on the theories of scholars such as Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1991, 2011), Stuart Hall (2006, 2013), and Homi Bhabha (1994). This section introduces the reader to the character of Ramy by focusing on his journey across three seasons. The analysis is not confined to Ramy alone but continues with another section that examines how the Muslim identities of other characters in the series are represented. It argues that the series challenges the one-dimensional and stereotypical representation of Muslim identities in Hollywood media by portraying them in a multidimensional manner. This chapter suggests that the series *Ramy* rejects

the Eastern/Western binary opposition shaped by Eurocentric and Orientalist perspectives and presents identities not as fixed but as highly fluid.

The third chapter, “Gender Identities”, addresses the global issue of women’s representation, drawing on Lauzen's contemporary film and television reports (2012, 2023a, 2023b), highlighting both on-screen and off-screen challenges. This chapter then explains the transformation of the representations of female characters on digital platforms, drawing on *Ramy* as a platform series. The chapter also argues that the episodes of *Ramy* directed by female filmmakers offer a more nuanced representations of women. It does so by focusing on the stories in these episodes that share common characteristics with the identities of their directors. This chapter also examines how women have been represented in Hollywood films.

Then, the chapter examines how Muslim women’s identities are depicted in *Ramy* through both primary and supporting Muslim female characters, arguing that the series challenges the stereotypical representation of Muslim women in Hollywood media by presenting them in a multidimensional way and opening up a discursive space for Muslim female representation. This analysis centers on the intersectionality theory, which examines identity at the crossroads of race, ethnicity, religion, and gender, primarily focusing on Black feminists such as Kimberle Crenshaw (1989, 1991), bell hooks (1984, 1996, 1999), and Audre Lorde (1983, 1984). It also incorporates theories from Western feminists like Laura Mulvey (1975) and Claire Johnston (1999).

In the concluding chapter, I aim to demonstrate that the series *Ramy* offers an alternative representation to the dominant Orientalist hegemonic discourse surrounding Muslim representation and challenges stereotypes about Muslim identities. The series does not portray Muslim identities as fixed or immutable; on behalf, it presents these characters in nuanced, multidimensional, and complex ways. It does not present Muslim identities as a fixed or finalized construct. Instead, it brings the issue of identity into a space open for discussion and negotiation.

2. DISCUSSIONS ON IDENTITY REPRESENTATION

The problematic representation of Muslim identities remains a pressing issue today. Hollywood media, shaped by Orientalist and Eurocentric approaches, often reduces Muslim identities to stereotypes. In contrast, *Ramy* challenges these portrayals, offering nuanced representations and serving as an alternative to these reductive frameworks. Thus, studies that highlight the problematic aspects of identity representation are the main focus of the analysis of the *Ramy*.

First, I will examine the historical depiction of Muslim identities in Hollywood, referencing scholars like McAlister, Robb, and Shaheen to highlight the issues within these portrayals. Next, I will explore the politics of representation through theorists such as Edward Said, Stuart Hall, Robert Stam, and Ella Shohat, addressing how media shapes identities and sustains cultural hegemony. The chapter will also engage with postcolonial and Third World cinema theories, which critique Western media's representations of marginalized groups, providing essential tools for analyzing *Ramy*. Additionally, I will investigate diasporic identities through postcolonial theorists like Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha, and Trinh T. Minh-Ha, who view identity as fluid and evolving—mirroring the approach in *Ramy*. Lastly, I will examine gender identities in *Ramy* through Western feminist film theory and intersectional theory, which analyzes identity at the intersections of race, gender, and class. Since Muslim women's identities are deeply interconnected with intersectionality, these frameworks are crucial for analyzing Muslim women's representation in the series.

2.1 The Problematic Representation of Muslim Identities in US Media

The problematic representation of Muslim identities in the media is an issue that dates back centuries. The orientalist representations of Arabs by Americans began in the 1920s with exotic melodramas related to sheiks. Jack Shaheen, a well-known scholar in this field, analyzed the representation of Arabs and Muslims in US movies and TV

programs. He published a book called *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2003), in which he evaluated over 900 movies released from 1896 to 2001. Shaheen found that nearly all Hollywood depictions of Arabs and Muslims were disrespectful and demeaning to their culture and history. For example, Arab and Muslim men were portrayed with slurs such as "assholes," "bastards," and "camel dicks," while their female counterparts were depicted as "bosomy belly dancers" or "mute and submissive" (2003, 183-84). Meanwhile, Arab children were portrayed as thieves.

Hollywood persistently marginalizes Muslims by portraying them as the 'Other,' depicting their culture as threatening, and framing the Middle East with stereotypical images and exotic terms that evoke feelings of sickness, insecurity, and hatred (Shaheen 2003, 175). This representation evolves with changes in global politics and, at times, becomes even more harmful than in the early years (McAlister 2005; Shaheen 2003). In the post-World War II period, Hollywood was effectively used as a tool for American propaganda (Robb 2004). Hollywood shaped its portrayal of the Middle East to align with US foreign policy, transitioning from focusing on the region's ethnic and stereotypical exoticism before World War II to depicting Muslims as 'Public Enemies' and aligning with US interests in the region after key events like the establishment of Israel, the rise of figures such as Muammar Gaddafi in Libya, the Iranian Revolution, and the US Arab oil embargo (Shaheen 2003, 188; Arti 2007, 1). During this period, Hollywood began to view the Middle East as a growing threat and continued to emphasize their 'Otherness' (Khatib 2006, 10). Middle Easterners were increasingly seen as harsh, aggressive, indifferent, and, most significantly, a cultural and ideological challenge that needed to be addressed militarily and politically.

In the 2000s, Hollywood's depictions of Muslims gained a substantial theoretical component, especially in light of the 9/11 attacks. During this time, the idea that Arabs were terrorists—which had already gained significant traction in the 1990s—became increasingly more prominent. The representation of Muslims within Orientalist discourse has transitioned to a neo-Orientalist approach, and the representation of Muslim identity has increasingly focused on the assumption that the roots of radicalism and terrorism lie in Muslim religious fanaticism in this neo-Orientalist discourse

(McAlister 2005, 270). Hollywood movies from this era also showed the impact of George W. Bush's "war on terrorism" declaration. Due to the rise of the "War on Terror" genre in television and movies, both the prevalence and intensity of negative portrayals have increased dramatically since 9/11 (Osman 2022, 372). According to Wazhmah Osman (2022, 369), "...most people's understanding of the "War on Terror" is constructed through the military-industrial media complex (MIMC)." The "War on Terror" genre in film and television constructs narratives that support US military interventions by employing several distinctive storytelling strategies. It simplifies the MENASA region into a stark contrast between heroic US security forces and villainous Islamic extremists, perpetuating a binary view of good versus evil.

Alsultany (2013, 163-65) argues that while post-9/11 American television shows portray Muslims in more 'positive' ways—such as a patriotic Arab or Muslim American, an Arab or Muslim willing to assist the United States in combating terrorism, or an innocent Arab or Muslim American who becomes a target of hate crimes after 9/11—in an effort to avoid negative stereotyping, these representations are often limited and framed within specific patterns. According to her, some storylines depict Arabs and Muslims as victims of discrimination while also framing this discrimination as inevitable due to national security concerns, thereby embedding an ideological justification. Despite strategies like leaving the identities of terrorist characters ambiguous or associating them with other groups, Arab and Muslim identities are still primarily linked to terrorism in American media. Similarly, in her study examining how Muslims are portrayed in the popular TV shows *24*, *Lost*, and *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, Hirji (2011) argued that, despite the good intentions behind these shows, they still ended up perpetuating negative stereotypes of Muslims. "*Lost*" and "*24*" portrayed Muslims in the context of terrorism and tyranny, which only reinforced existing biases. Even "*Little Mosque on the Prairie*," despite its educational intentions about Muslim customs and beliefs, still depicted Muslims as conflicting with Canadian values. In summary, the study concluded that during the time these shows were produced, the representation of Muslims in the media was limited to stereotypical portrayals.

Another series that needs to be considered when researching how Muslims are represented in popular television is “*Homeland*.” Virginia Guarinos and Darío Berciano-Garrido (2022) conducted textual, content, and narrative analysis on the first 7 seasons of *Homeland* to uncover how Arab and Muslim characters are portrayed in the series. The study has revealed that *Homeland*, aside from being a work of fiction featuring a storyline centered around Arab and Muslim characters, is distinctly an ideological and propagandistic cultural creation. This television series can be viewed as a means of exerting cultural influence over the West, particularly the United States. Furthermore, the stereotypical depictions of Arab and Muslim characters in *Homeland* are replicated in online discussions on social networks, emphasizing Islam as the sole religion portrayed in a negative light.

There has been a shift in the representation of Arabs and Muslims in Hollywood since the 2016 elections. Since that time, the entertainment industry has become more aware of the harm caused by the "terror genre" and stereotypical political storylines. Trump's overt promotion of racism, sexism, anti-immigrant sentiment, and white supremacist ideologies sparked a perception of social and political crisis, motivating some writers and creators to embrace more diverse representations as an act of social responsibility (Alsuntany 2022, 545). In 2015, as Donald Trump introduced his proposal for a Muslim ban during his campaign, Hollywood began broadening its portrayal of Muslims to include narratives beyond terrorism. Muslim professionals within the industry are now taking the initiative to create diverse narratives and provide opportunities for new artists. Muslim organizations and their philanthropic partners are actively working to gain greater control over the narratives that impact the Muslim American community and support their vision (Alhassen 2018, 32-34). Both artists sharing real-life stories and activists calling for more positive representations of Muslims in popular culture have contributed to a discernible shift in Hollywood's representation of the Muslim community since the 2016 US election. As an example of this, Hasan Minhaj releasing his comedy special *Homecoming King* on Netflix in 2017; Hulu launching the original series *Ramy* in 2019; NBC's *Transplant* series focusing on Dr. Bashir Hamed, a Syrian refugee doctor; the Netflix series *Mo*, based on the experiences of a Palestinian refugee living in Texas; and the presence of new web series created by Muslims and featuring

Muslim storylines like *Brown Girls* (2017), *Unfair and Ugly* (2018,) can be given. Not surprisingly, these TV shows, where Muslim identities are more positively represented and created by Muslim artists, have emerged on digital platforms, except for NBC's *Transplant*. Unlike traditional television networks, broadcasting services and web platforms provide more creative freedom in storytelling and allow marginalized identities to come together behind the scenes as well. These platforms bring narratives to the screen that offer more nuanced representations of marginalized communities, appealing to a globally diversifying audience.

While there has been a noticeable increase in positive representation of Muslims in Hollywood in recent years, tests and reports on how Muslims are portrayed on screen indicate that these positive representations are still problematic. At this point, it would be beneficial to explain what these tests and reports are and their findings. Derived from Riz Ahmed's 2017 House of Commons speech on diversity and named after the Oscar-nominated actor Riz Ahmed, *The Riz Test* (2018) is the first attempt to assess the portrayal of Muslims in television and film, specifically examining how the media has traditionally depicted Muslims as terrorists, misogynists, and culturally regressive. In order to start a dialogue, increase understanding, and effect change, the test entails asking questions concerning Muslim characters in movies or television shows. It delves into common preconceptions, such as the mistreatment of women or participation in terrorist operations. *The Obeidi-Alsultany Test*, created in the United States in 2020, is another evaluation tool for examining how Muslims are portrayed on television. The test recognizes a discernible departure from prevalent biases in portraying Muslims. However, it also recognizes that preventable errors or insufficient adjustments frequently hold back progress in helping Hollywood improve how Muslims are portrayed in the era of diversity (Obeidi and Alsultany 2020).

Muslim representation in international Hollywood productions and blockbuster films was examined in 2021 research titled *Missing & Maligned: The Reality of Muslims in Popular Global Movies*. Nearly 91% of Hollywood films worldwide, according to the 2021 assessment, did not have a single Muslim character (Khan et al. 2021). They also found that more than 19% of Muslim primary and subsidiary characters in Hollywood

films died by the end of the film, and 54% of Muslim primary and secondary characters were the targets of violence. The report titled *Erased or Extremists: The Stereotypical View of Muslims in Popular Episodic Series*, published one year after this report, also revealed similar findings. Despite the fact that the 1.9 billion Muslims worldwide currently make up roughly one-fourth (24%) of the world's approximately 8 billion inhabitants, this report showed that just 1% of Hollywood TV characters are Muslim nowadays (Khan et al. 2022). The other noteworthy finding of the report was that Muslim TV characters were often accused of being linked to violence; roughly 40% of Muslim characters were either the victims or the perpetrators of violence on-screen, and 31% of Muslim TV characters were the victims of violence.

Another finding highlights the lack of employment opportunities for people of Middle Eastern descent in the Hollywood industry. The *Hollywood Diversity Report*, published in 2023, has focused on television, analyzing TV series from the 2021-2022 period. According to this report, people from MENA (Middle Eastern or North Africa), individuals made up only 0.9 percent of cable-scripted leads, highlighting their underrepresentation that season (Ramón et al. 2023). Moreover, MENA (1.3 percent) individuals were proportionately represented among digital scripted leads.

The newly established Middle Eastern Writers Committee, a subgroup within the Writers Guild of America West, called on the film and television industry to embrace greater inclusivity and move away from relying on stereotypes in its storytelling. The group stated that they established the committee “primarily on the basis of one disappointing fact. As reported in the Writers Guild of America West inclusion report of 2020, Middle Eastern writers are dead last, making up only 0.3% of employed writers” (Robb 2021).

As highlighted in the historical analysis of Muslim representation in Hollywood, Muslims have long been depicted through harmful stereotypes, often portrayed as terrorists, oppressors, or exotic figures, reinforcing their status as the "Other." Recent initiatives aimed at diversifying and enhancing representations have not fully succeeded, as research indicates that such portrayals continue to be restricted and often

problematic, reinforcing existing biases and underrepresentation. Furthermore, these stereotypical depictions have been shaped by Hollywood's political and ideological agendas regarding Muslims. This is directly linked to topics such as the media-representation relationship and the problem of representation. Continuing the chapter, I will address issues of media, stereotypes, and identity construction through the perspectives of cultural studies and postcolonial scholars.

2.2 The Politics of Representation: Identity, Media, and Cultural Hegemony

Stuart Hall (2006) argues that representation is not merely a simple reflection of something but a process through which meaning is produced. Hall analyzes how representation does not reflect a social structure or reality as it is but instead reconstitutes it. According to him, representation processes are ideologically charged. This means that the meanings emerging in media, literature, and other cultural domains are reflections of societal power relations.

Similarly, Richard Dyer (2002), in his book *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations*, which begins with analyzing representations of marginalized groups and examines the construction of dominant social identities hidden within the normality language, argues that representations shape how social realities are perceived. This means that representations play an active role both in reinforcing social norms and in shaping how identities are understood. Although Dyer primarily focuses on film, he also examines words, advertisements, and novels, structuring his analyses around four key ideas. First, cultural representations of social groups shape how those groups are treated in society. Second, representations are constructed presentations that rely on the codes and conventions of existing cultural forms. Third, people interpret these representations through the codes accessible to them, which are shaped by their social contexts. Finally, what is represented is not reality itself but representations of reality.

According to Dyer, representations function as ideological tools. Television, movies, and other media channels integrate people into the social order by assigning them to particular roles and standards. Stereotypes are frequently used in these representations to uphold and maintain the status quo of power. The imposition of what is considered normal through social norms and stereotypes reflects the tendency of dominant groups to mold society based on their own worldview, values, sensitivities, and ideologies (Dyer 1977, 30).

Edward Said's book *Orientalism* (1978) is regarded as a foundational work in academia. In his book, Said examines how Western imperial discourse shapes stereotyped images of the East. Said contends that the hegemonic strategies used by Western powers during the colonial era include how the West represents the East. He contends that Western academic discourse has fashioned the concept of the Orient (loosely encompassing North Africa, the Middle East, and Asia) as a means of “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Other” (1978, 3).

Orientalism is an intellectual framework integrated into the Western projects of controlling and colonizing the East. It serves as an illustration of what Said referred to as “imaginative geography,” representing a social construct that aligned with colonial ideologies in various ways. For Said, *Orientalism* is a process through which the West shapes the East and its culture through its own dominant ideologies and values, using a discourse that enables Europe to politically, ideologically, sociologically, scientifically, and imaginatively control and even produce the East. Said argues that the division between the West and the East is a method used by the West to define its own identity. The West defines itself through values such as reason, science, civilization, and progress while associating the East with the absence of these values, darkness, and backwardness. This division constantly casts the East as the “other” and presents the West's superiority as a natural fact. This discourse, positioning the West as positive and superior and the East as negative, exotic, primitive, and backward, reinforces colonial structures while creating a basic dichotomy between East and West.

In *Orientalism*, Said also makes passing references to movies and the media. He observes that the spread of Orientalist tropes in popular culture has been "intensified" by the modern mass media (1978, 26). He also points out how, in films and television, Arabs are often portrayed as either lustful or deceitfully bloodthirsty (1978, 286).

Shohat criticizes the discussion of Orientalism without taking gender into account. She emphasizes the intersectionality of imperial and gender discourses in Hollywood's representation of the Orient with her statement: "Hollywood's view of the Orient is not simply symptomatic of colonialist imagination but also a product of the (Western) male gaze" (Shohat 1990, 40). She states that Hollywood's representation of colonized geographies and peoples, mainly through gender and sexuality, is constructed to serve the interests and ideology of the West (2006, 32).

Robert Stam and Louise Spence (1983), in their article *Colonialism, Racism, and Representation*, argue that the colonial past has played a significant role in shaping cultural representations and that Western cinemas have been instrumental in reproducing the ideologies of the colonial era. According to them, media and cinema play a key role in constructing identities, particularly in the context of colonialism and racism. These representations support a cultural hegemony that reinforces Western superiority, perpetuating stereotypes and prejudices. Stam and Spence state that it is unsurprising that European films often depicted colonized peoples in a negative manner, given that the emergence of cinema overlapped with the peak of European imperialism. Many stereotypes about Third World populations can be traced back to the long-standing portrayal of lazy Mexicans, deceitful Arabs, savage Africans, and exotic Asians that have dominated the screens (Stam and Spence 1983, 6).

In their book called *Unthinking Eurocentrism Multiculturalism and the Media*, Shohat and Stam (2014) argue that modern media play a significant role in shaping identity, and they are now central to the very process of identity construction. They state that historically, mainstream cinema has often misrepresented distant civilizations, and media have the potential to "otherize" cultures. According to them, the media absorb and reorganize the same colonial discourse that permeates diverse fields such as

philosophy, literature, and history, and they examine this approach through the lens of Eurocentrism. Eurocentrism, serving as an ideological foundation shared by colonialist, imperialist, and racist discourses, persists as a residual mindset that continues to shape modern practices and representations, even in the postcolonial era. Within this Eurocentric perspective, the "East" is categorized into "Near," "Middle," and "Far," positioning Europe as the authority in defining spatial relationships. It "...organizes everyday language into binarism hierarchies implicitly flattering to Europe: our 'nations,' their 'tribes'; our 'religions,' their 'superstitions'; our 'culture,' their 'folklore'; our 'art,' their 'artifacts'; our 'demonstrations,' their 'riots'; our 'defense,' their 'terrorism' (2014: 2). According to Shohat and Stam, the Hollywood film industry embodies Eurocentric ideals by implying that "one name for eurocentrism is Hollywoodcentrism" (2014, 29).

The theoretical framework I have referred to so far explains how identities are constructed through media and culture and how they are connected to hegemonic structures. It reveals how media representations shape the ideological reflections of social power relations, showing that Western-centered discourses often present "other" identities through stereotypes, thereby reproducing discrimination. The series *Ramy* deals directly with these stereotypes and the problematic representation of Muslims in the media. Therefore, this literature is highly relevant for analyzing the series, as while *Ramy* exposes these media-created stereotypes to the audience, it simultaneously challenges them throughout the series. In my literature review, it is also necessary to engage with Third Cinema theory and postcolonial cinema theory, as these frameworks focus on developing alternatives to the representations produced about marginalized cultures by the West and critically address the problematic aspects of the representation of these marginalized people.

2.3 Postcolonialism and Third World Cinema

Postcolonial theorists state that a consequence of colonization, specifically the eradication of the colonized people's culture and the withering of their roots, and the

subsequent cultural devastation highlights how the imposition of colonizers' cultures harms the cultural heritage and identities of colonized communities (Fanon 1965; Memmi 1974; Thiong'o 2013). This process manifests in the gradual erosion of language, traditions, beliefs, and other cultural components. In his book, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon (1965) contends that those who colonize try to depict the precolonial history of the colonized as "barbaric, degrading, and bestial" to rationalize the supremacy of Western civilization.

... colonialism is not simply content to impose its rule upon the present and the future of a dominated country. Colonialism is not satisfied merely with holding a people in its grip and emptying the native's brain of all form and content. By a kind of perverted logic, it turns to the past of the oppressed people, and distorts, disfigures, and destroys it. (Fanon 1965, 210)

Filmmakers from the Third World, such as Fernando Birri, Octavio Gómez, Ousmane Sembene, and Garcia Espinosa, expressed discomfort with Hollywood's control of distribution networks and its habit of oversimplifying the cultures, identities, and histories of Third World countries. In the 1960s, a transnational movement known as "Third Cinema" emerged, aiming to challenge the dominance of "First Cinema" rooted in corporate Hollywood, both in terms of ideology, aesthetics, and economics (Espinosa 2000; Solanas and Gettino 2000).

Third Cinema is a revolutionary film movement that challenges the dominant structures of film production and exhibition by rejecting commercial, profit-driven narratives and advocating for politically engaged, socially conscious storytelling. It opposes Hollywood's escapist entertainment and European auteur cinema by using guerrilla filmmaking techniques, documentary-style realism, and non-professional actors to highlight issues like colonialism, imperialism, and class struggle. Rather than serving as passive entertainment, Third Cinema aims to mobilize audiences, inspiring political action and resistance against oppressive systems. By challenging the way films are produced, distributed, and exhibited, Third Cinema disrupts the passive relationship between viewers and media. In this thesis, I will not focus on the production conditions, exhibition, and distribution of films but rather on the themes addressed by Third Cinema, specifically in the context of how it engages with the issue of identity. Third World filmmakers have attempted to recreate their long-suppressed histories and

identities, take responsibility for their cinematic images, and speak with their own voices in opposition to Hollywood's misrepresentations and distortions of them. These filmmakers have made films with this understanding. Such experiments in Third World and postcolonial cinema are often independent and experimental films, outside the mainstream. On the other hand, the *Ramy* series is a show about representation and is significant for showcasing its resistance to the misrepresentation of Muslim identities on a popular platform like Hulu. At this point, it is worth emphasizing once again that digital platforms have introduced a more comprehensive approach to representation by making space for stories that challenge dominant portrayals and explore marginalized identities with greater nuance. Additionally, they provide more opportunities for marginalized individuals not only in front of the camera but also behind the scenes. This shift allows productions like *Ramy* to bring new perspectives to issues of identity and gender representations—topics also discussed in Third Cinema theoretical debates—on a popular digital platform and enable marginalized individuals to have their voices heard. At the same time, it helps them reach a broader and more diverse audience.

In his article *The Language of African Literature*, in which Thiong'o (2013) discusses the role of colonial language practices and Western languages (mainly English, French, and Portuguese) in African literature, he notes that when colonized people encounter representations of their own world through the written languages of their colonizers, their native language comes to be linked with low status, shame, physical punishment, lack of intelligence, or even stupidity, and barbarism in their susceptible minds. (2013, 443). Speaking of imperialism and its effects, Thiong'o asserts that the ultimate victory of a system of domination is when the oppressed begin to speak the values of their oppressors. Thiong'o states that "Africa's natural and human resources continue to develop Europe and America: but Africa is made to feel grateful for aid from the same quarters that still sit on the back of the continent. Africa even produces intellectuals who now rationalize this upside-down way of looking at Africa" (2013, 451).

His view underscores how the superiority of the West and Africa's dependence are accepted as natural by its people, emphasizing how this leads Africa to define its own identity through a Western perspective, thereby relating to the concept of self-

orientalism. Self-orientalism refers to Eastern societies sometimes portraying or reproducing their own cultures and traditions in a way that aligns with Western perspectives or Western expectations. (Çiftci and Tekin 2013, 6). Self-orientalism occurs when Eastern cultural creators define themselves using the labels that the West assigns to the East. This phenomenon involves the creation of orientalist narratives by Eastern individuals rather than Westerners (Bezci and Çifci 2012, 146). That is, this phenomenon is often characterized by Eastern cultures internalizing the exotic or highly stereotypical representations of the West and incorporating these representations into their own identity and cultural narratives. In this context, in her article *Outside In Inside Out*, Minh-ha (1991) argues that the problem lies not only in the West's exploitation but also in the fact that the colonized people carry an internal colonizer within themselves, which also creates a significant issue.

In my thesis, I argue that the *Ramy* challenges static and stereotypical representations of Muslim identities, and this argument is directly in line with the critique of fixed identity discussed within postcolonial theory. Therefore, to show how *Ramy* works within the framework of postcolonial discourse in presenting a nuanced portrayal of Muslim identities in the diaspora, I will continue my literature review with postcolonial theorists discussing the issue of identity and, specifically, diasporic identities.

2.4 Representation, Diasporic Identities in Postcolonial Thought

In Eurocentric perspectives, identity is frequently viewed as one-dimensional or oversimplified, usually concentrating on a limited range of social, historical, and cultural traits that conform to Western standards. This viewpoint generally marginalizes or ignores the variety of identities that exist outside of this framework to the benefit of European or Western ideals, beliefs, and experiences. On the other hand, postcolonial and cultural study scholars such as Stuart Hall, Homi K. Bhabha, and Minh-Ha provide

more nuanced, fluid, and dynamic approaches to understanding identity, particularly in contrast to the one-dimensional, Eurocentric perspectives.

Stuart Hall argues that cultural identity is a representational problem that is intimately tied to the positions and opinions of those who articulate it. For him, a person's place in different historical and geographical circumstances shapes and changes their cultural identity. Hall (2013, 392) challenges the notion of a fixed or stable self by arguing that identity is essentially contextual. This positionality underscores identity as an evolving, dynamic process constructed through representation. Hall suggests that identity cannot be discussed in terms of a single, unified experience without acknowledging the “ruptures and discontinuities” within it (2013, 394). While shared history and a sense of unity are important aspects of identity, they alone do not capture its fluid and shifting nature.

In his second definition of “cultural identity,” Hall emphasizes that identity involves both “becoming” and “being” and is connected to both the past and the future. Rather than existing as a static essence beyond time, place, and history, cultural identities are shaped by their origins and histories yet are continually transformed. Hall points out that identity is continuously influenced by history, society, and power rather than by being locked in a fixed, idealized past. Through material, social, and cultural practices, the past actively engages with the present in this dynamic process influenced by various forces and settings. This past is not passive; it plays a dynamic role that can be empowering or constraining. In his concept of cultural identity, Stuart Hall emphasizes the role of both historical experiences and current negotiations in shaping the cultural identities of immigrants. The cultural identity of immigrants emerges from the interaction between the past and present of the diaspora. In this regard, Hall conceptualizes the formation of immigrants’ cultural identities as a combination of “being”—comprising shared historical experiences and cultural practices—and “becoming,” which involves contemporary interactions. Reflecting the diversity within the diaspora, Hall describes the diasporic experience as “defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a

conception of 'identity' which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity" (2013, 402).

Similarly, Bhabha argues that identity is never fully complete; it is constantly in a state of "in-betweenness," shaped by different cultures and historical influences. Homi Bhabha expands on his concept of the third space within the political framework of hybridity, ambivalence, and in-betweenness, drawing connections to the colonial context. This perspective is also valuable for interpreting the cultural identities of immigrants residing in the cross-border, geo-cultural spaces of the diaspora. Bhabha (1994) frames coloniality and postcoloniality within a political discourse centered on hybridity, mimicry, liminality, in-betweenness, and the third space. His concepts challenge the traditional binaries of self versus other or East versus West, instead suggesting an in-between, transitional space where diverse cultures intersect, creating ambivalence.

Bhabha suggests that a new, hybrid identity or subject position emerges through blending elements from both the colonizer and the colonized. He argues that all social groups—whether nation-states, cultures, or small ethnic communities—are engaged in a continuous process of hybridity, making claims of a singular, pure origin or history untenable. Instead, these identities are in a state of constant interaction and negotiation, which Bhabha terms the "Third Space of Enunciation" (1994, 54). This "third space" is a place where cultural identities are contested and renegotiated, characterized by ambivalence and contradiction. The lines between established categories of culture and identity are blurred as cultural meaning is constantly redefined within this dynamic area. Bhabha's third space is thus an ambivalent realm where cultural meanings and representations lack "primordial unity or fixity" (1994, 55), allowing for the emergence of new cultural forms and meanings.

Therefore, Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha define diaspora as a dynamic space where cultural identities are continuously negotiated. Both thinkers emphasize that the diasporic experience has a multi-layered and hybrid nature, highlighting that identity is not fixed but rather a constantly evolving process. Diaspora is viewed as a venue where

different cultural interactions occur, and new meanings are produced. Postcolonial cinema addresses the historical and cultural characteristics of diasporic, political, religious, and ethnic minorities. This postcolonial perspective is more explicitly focused on the goal of de-Westernizing film studies and challenging Eurocentric universalism. Drawing on poststructuralist ideas, prominent scholars have posed critical questions regarding the ways in which the Other is represented. (Bhabba 1994; Fanon 1965; Gilroy 1987; Hall 1989, 2013; Said 1978; Spivak 2013).

According to Minh-ha, understanding the ethnic Other involves continually revisiting core issues related to science and art, documentary and fiction, universal and personal, objectivity and subjectivity, and masculine and feminine perspectives (1991, 65). From her position as a Vietnamese intellectual residing in America, she highlights the challenges of identifying diverse voices for the Other, emphasizing that all subjectivities are constructed through discourse and influenced by discursive power and knowledge. Her groundbreaking work is intricately connected to postcolonial discussions regarding the complexities of subject formation and the ongoing process of identity development. For Minh-ha, the subject shaped by the experiences of navigating and transcending borders—such as those of dominant white culture, patriarchal ideologies, and geographical and colonial boundaries—challenges the validity of dominant narratives that seek to define the Other. This emerging subject highlights the discomfort that arises as their existence blurs and disrupts the rigid binaries of self/Other and subject/object that uphold Western knowledge, which relies on these distinctions to understand the world and assert its authority.

Positioned at the colonial periphery and from a patriarchal standpoint, alternative rules and non-totalizing strategies exist "to suspend meaning and resist closure" (1991, 74), effectively preventing the dominant center from categorizing subjects strictly according to its ethnocentric criteria (1991, 17). While Minh-ha asserts that stable identities do not exist, she also argues that the postcolonial subject must actively resist, challenge, and displace Western hegemonic viewpoints that normalize and generalize the dominant Western perspective, thus pushing other cultures into the unknown realm of the Other (1991, 74). To disrupt the hegemonic hold of Western concepts, Minh-ha suggests that a

new understanding of subjectivity, which she refers to as a “subject-in-process,” needs to be developed. This “subject-in-process” is inherently unstable, constantly forming itself from a diverse array of identities, truths, and voices that, while distinct, are interdependent and challenge straightforward classification within traditional categories of race, gender, and national identity (1991, 48).

Postcolonial theorists like Hall, Bhabha, and Minh-ha define identity not as essential or fixed but as a constantly evolving and shaping process. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, identity is ideologically constructed, and these postcolonial theorists critique the fixed, unchanging identity structures that the West defines through its own ideologies. The multidimensional approach to identity and its representation in *Ramy* provides an important theoretical framework for analyzing how Muslim identities are depicted in the series. *Ramy* engages with issues of representation, presenting Muslim identities in a multifaceted manner that challenges stereotypes. The show portrays Muslim characters not as monolithic but as complex individuals who navigate their faith, culture, and personal experiences in ways that confront and disrupt typical clichés. The issue of identity becomes even more complex when discussing female identities. Since my thesis will explain how the stereotypes in the representation of Muslim women are dismantled in the series *Ramy*, the continuation of this literature will focus on the representation of gender identities.

2.5 The Ideological Construction of Gender Identities: Feminist Film Theory and Intersectionality

The concept of gender identities has long been debated and examined through various feminist theoretical lenses. In this chapter, I explained that identity representation in the media is an ideological construction. When it comes to the field of cinema studies, feminist film theory emphasizes that the image of women on screen is also an ideological construction (Haskel and Dargis 2016; Jhonston 1999; Mulvey 1975; Rosen 1975). In their works exploring the historical roles of women in cinema, Molly Haskell

(2016) and Marjorie Rosen (1975) emphasized a connection between film and ideology. They contended that Hollywood does not portray women as sophisticated but rather as stereotypical representations of womanhood shaped by ideological constructs. For Johnston, Hollywood cinema's representations of women are based on the male gaze as she asserts that "within a sexist ideology and a male-dominated cinema, woman is presented as what she represents for man" (1999, 33). Women are frequently portrayed in Hollywood and mainstream cinema in general as passive roles and stereotyped. These portrayals are influenced by patriarchal systems and supported by ideologies that uphold women's status in society. This classic cinematic format frequently reflects women's identities and social positions narrowly and limitedly. Clare Johnston's seminal essay *Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema* (1999) critically explores the idea of women's cinema as a challenge to mainstream, patriarchal cinematic norms and its dominant ideological functions. Johnston's essay positions women's cinema as a radical departure from established norms, offering a space where women can express their autonomy. It rejects the passive, objectified role women are often assigned in mainstream films and offers alternative representations of women that are complex and empowered.

Similarly, Laura Mulvey (1975) argues that classic Hollywood cinema reflects and reinforces patriarchal ideology. Men are portrayed as active, powerful, and the drivers of the narrative, while women are depicted not as independent subjects within the story but as figures that support the desires and authority of male characters. Female characters are represented either in a "voyeuristic" manner (as objects of covert observation) or a "fetishistic" manner (exalted yet still objectified). Although Claire Johnston and Laura Mulvey have discussed the absence of women in the signifying processes of mainstream (patriarchal) cinema as Western feminists, they have not focused on race in their work. While they have noted that women are represented in cinema according to an ideology, they have addressed this ideological structure through the lens of patriarchy. However, the race and ethnicity of women are also crucial in the formation of such an ideological construct.

As bell hooks (1999, 119) notes, white women critics in feminist film criticism tend to atomize issues of gender and race, rarely considering the intersection of race and gender

in relation to the construction of the category of 'woman' in film as the object of phallogentric gaze. Black and third-world women's struggles have become visible, especially with the third wave of the women's movement. Black women scholar-activists, along with others, advocated for a fresh perspective to examine the experiences of Black women and they argued that these experiences were influenced not only by race but also by factors like gender, social class, and sexuality (Davis 1983; hooks 1999; Lorde 1983, 1984). According to them, oppression cannot be understood fully through a single-axis lens, as the interplay of identities produces complex social realities that demand nuanced analysis and responses.

With the third-wave feminist movement, the concept of *intersectionality* has entered the feminist literature since the 1990s. Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) first discussed the intersectionality theory in her article "*Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*." In this work, she argues that the experiences of black women cannot be fully understood only in terms of race nor only in terms of gender and that it is necessary to analyze the discrimination they experience at the intersection of these two identities. In her study called "*Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color*", Crenshaw (1991) explores in depth how *intersectionality* is determinant in issues such as violence against women and how it draws attention to the invisibility of marginalized groups. Also, Patricia Hill Collins (2002) analyzes not only the overlaps between identities in intersectionality but also how different systems of oppression and privilege (race, gender, class, sexuality) interact with each other and function within social power structures. According to her, individuals are simultaneously subjected to multiple systems of oppression and privilege, and these systems operate both in individuals' lives and within societal structures, oppressing some groups while granting privilege to others.

Intersectionality theory is essential when examining how Muslim women are portrayed because it enables an understanding of how several elements, including race, gender, religion, and ethnicity, interact to influence their experiences and identities. By incorporating intersectionality, we can better understand how Muslim women face

unique forms of oppression and marginalization shaped by both Western ideologies and patriarchal structures.

In my thesis, I will analyze how religious and gender identities are represented in the *Ramy* series within the framework of this literature. By providing examples from the series, I will demonstrate how these theories operate in relation to *Ramy*. In this context, the next chapter will focus on how *Ramy* represents Muslim identities and challenges stereotypes.



3. RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

Ramy, which debuted on Hulu in April 2019, is a semi-autobiographical series that follows the experiences of Ramy Youssef, a first-generation Egyptian American Muslim living in New Jersey. The show represents multiple identities, including those of millennials, Muslims, Black Muslims, Arab Americans, and people of diaspora, with a combination of humor and nuance. The series centers around the common themes of young adulthood, such as navigating family expectations, careers, relationships, and faith. In the series, Ramy's efforts to understand his Muslim identity in the modern world serve as a significant theme. The show not only tells Ramy's story but also highlights the perspectives of his family members and other characters around him.

Ramy presents representations that approach Muslim identities in a multidimensional way, refraining from reducing them to fixed positions and instead portraying them as open to negotiation and part of an ongoing process. In this context, this chapter will examine how religious identities are represented in the series *Ramy* and argue that the show challenges stereotypes about Muslim identities.

The first section, titled “Ramy as a Self-Orientalist and Diasporic Identity,” introduces the character Ramy, examines his connection to the Muslim faith, and analyzes his self-orientalist attitude and diasporic identity through theorists like Stuart Hall, Homi Bhabha and Trinh T. Minh-ha. At this point, it is worth stating that while the character Ramy has a tendency towards self-Orientalism, the show *Ramy* critiques the self-Orientalism performed by the character. The series portrays Ramy’s self-orientalist tendencies in his encounters with similarly marginalized characters, positioning him as a mediator and critiquing the Western gaze through his character. I argue that the series dismantles the Hollywood-constructed binary of Western/Eastern identities, offering a pluralistic approach to identities. This section focuses on Ramy’s character development from seasons one to three, providing a foundation for understanding his journey. The second section, titled “Multidimensional Muslim Identities in *Ramy*”, explores how the series challenges stereotypes of Muslim identities in Hollywood media by analyzing

Ramy and other characters. It examines scenes that emphasize the media's role in shaping Muslim identities, focusing on Hollywood's negative portrayals.

3.1 Ramy as a Self-Orientalist and Diasporic Identity

Both internal and exterior interactions are depicted in the series as contributing to Ramy's character development. Ramy's battle with cultural identity is entwined with themes of individuality, faith, belonging, and moral decision-making throughout the series. Living as a Muslim in America, we see the duality in his own identity and his efforts to cope with this duality. However, in his attempts to do so, he constantly finds himself in situations he does not want to be in. For example, the episode "Do the Ramadan," Season 1, Episode 5, presents Ramy's struggle to embrace his Muslim identity and act accordingly, yet ultimately highlights how this effort ends in failure. When the month of Ramadan comes in the episode, for Ramy, this Ramadan is extra important because he thinks he is lost. For this reason, he believes that he will find peace in Ramadan and takes all his worship very seriously. Ramy wears a traditional dress at home or when going to the mosque. However, Ramy's journey of purification during Ramadan ends with him having sex with a Muslim married woman with children whom he met at the mosque.

In episode 8, season 1, called *Saving Mikaela*, Ramy's father, Farouk, learns of this relationship and converses with Ramy. In this talk, we learn that Farouk came to America at Ramy's age to give his children a better life. Farouk maintained his communication with his family in Egypt through tapes. Then, Ramy listens to the tape his grandfather recorded for Farouk. His father tells Farouk that he made a mistake by going to America, adding: "Your kids, Farouk. Think of your kids. They will grow up confused. They won't know who they are because they won't know their land. They need to know their roots. They need to grow up learning Islam, or they won't be on the right path!" As a Muslim living in America, Ramy occasionally experiences an identity crisis, and his grandfather's tape recording has deeply impacted him. Ramy decides to

visit his relatives in Egypt because he wants to reach his roots by spending time with his relatives, touring the Islamic fabric of Egypt, and talking to his grandfather.

The 9th episode of the first season, where Ramy visits his relatives in Egypt, holds a significant point in Ramy's personal journey and can be analyzed through the concept of self-orientalism as Ramy navigates his identity in both American and Egyptian societies and the conflicts between these two different cultures.

Ramy believes that with his visit to Egypt, he will return to his roots, and he has an idealized image of Egypt in his mind where this visit can erase all the confusion and bring him closer to becoming the good Muslim he desires to be. Ramy's idealization of Egypt in his mind is in dialogue with Naficy's explanation that "That of the image of the homeland tends to emphasize boundlessness and timelessness, and it is imbued with fetishization and nostalgic longing for the homeland's natural landscape, mountains, monuments, and souvenirs" (2001, 5).

However, Ramy is faced with a very different picture than he had in mind: a cousin who is obsessed with Ashton Kutcher and seniors who admire President Trump and believe that Obama is Muslim. This encounter expands his world and shows the gap between Ramy's romanticized ideas about his roots and reality. On his trip, while Ramy wants to eat traditional Egyptian dishes, speak Arabic, visit mosques, and pray with his cousin, his cousin Shadi desires to introduce him to the "real Egypt" by offering him the experience of eating chicken wings and creating associations with America in Egypt.

Shadi takes Ramy to a party where drugs are being used. Shadi believes that Ramy, living in America, would not want to have a trip following Egyptian traditions, and he cannot comprehend Ramy's desire to visit the village where his grandparents lived. Shadi has assumptions about Ramy's American Muslim identity and tends to define Ramy more through his American identity. Similarly, Ramy reduces his Egyptian cousin to a stereotypical image of a young Egyptian in his mind. Ramy, through the character of Shadi, falls into self-orientalism. He judges Shadi for using drugs and not praying. Ramy wants to talk to Egyptian youth at the party about the revolution.

However, Egyptian people who have experienced the traumas of the revolution do not want to discuss this topic. This situation is brought to light by Shadi's line to Ramy: "What do you think of us here? You're comin' in here, talkin' to people about the revolution and shit. Bro, we saw people die in front of our fuckin' eyes. You think we wanna keep talkin' about that shit? Man, Todi, his sister went to jail for holding up a sign, and she fuckin' died. And I see you being all spiritual and shit and trying to make meaning of all of this? Look, I don't know where God is, but I sure as fuck know he's not here right now. I'm lost, man. Everybody's lost. I'm like fuckin' Ashton Kutcher, but I'm like, Dude, where's my country? I don't know. I don't fuckin' know." This dialogue serves as a political critique of Ramy's gaze on the West, and Shadi criticizes Ramy for seeking a superficial meaning in Egypt.

The dialog between Ramy and Shadi reveals that Ramy has an image of Egypt with Western codes. In fact, he does not know the real Egypt at all. Shadi criticizes Ramy for looking for a superficial meaning in Egypt. In fact, with this dialogue, the series itself criticizes the character of Ramy. As I discussed in my previous chapter called *Discussions on Identity Representation*, Hollywood represents the East from a Eurocentric perspective (Shohat and Stam 2014). In the case of films representing Egypt, this is evident in the Orientalist narrative filled with tropes of barren deserts, mummies, and pyramids. Egyptian artifacts and tombs are portrayed as sites for adventure rather than as cultural heritage, feeding the Western fantasy of exotic lands meant for conquest and exploration. On the other hand, contemporary Egypt is much more complex than such representations. However, these complex and realistic representations do not find a place in Hollywood narratives. Shaheen (2003, 186) states that the deep history, modernization efforts, and intellectual achievements of the Egyptian people are not reflected in Hollywood media, which instead portrays them as deeply religious and emphasizes their warm hospitality. In *Ramy*, Egypt is portrayed in a way that highlights the disconnect between diasporic idealizations and the realities of life in the country by emphasizing urban spaces, youth culture, and the complexity of individual experiences. Thanks to this representation, the series sets itself apart from Eurocentric depictions of Egypt. This juxtaposition allows the series to critique both the

Orientalist stereotypes propagated by Hollywood and Ramy's self-orientalized expectations of Egypt as an Egyptian American.

In the episode, Ramy's encounter with his cousin Shadi reveals a profound tension between Ramy's romanticized view of Egyptian identity and the reality of contemporary life in Egypt. As Ramy longs to reconnect with his roots—through traditional dishes, Arabic language, and prayer—Shadi introduces him to a "real Egypt" that starkly contrasts with Ramy's idealization. The disconnect between Ramy's idealized Egypt and his cousin Shadi's more Americanized lifestyle reflects the evolving identity of modern Egyptians. This clash reflects Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity, where identities are not fixed but are constantly negotiated in cultural encounters. Bhabha (1994) emphasizes that these interactions create a "third space" where new meanings and identities emerge, often challenging essentialist views of culture. *Ramy* dismantles simplistic dichotomies such as "traditional vs. modern" or "Eastern vs. Western. Through Ramy and Shadi's encounter, the series challenges these binaries constructed by Eurocentric understanding. It presents much more nuanced and complex identities. This approach also relates to Hall's definition of cultural identity. Hall (2013) argues that cultural identities are not static. They are formed through an ongoing process of historical and cultural negotiation. The *Ramy* series makes issues such as cultural identity and representation open to question, bring them into conversation and debate, and challenges stereotypical views. By presenting characters who represent inconsistencies and complexity, the series distorts essentialist depictions of Egypt and Muslim identities. *Ramy* rejects the rigid classifications imposed by the Eurocentric perspective and instead represents more fluid and nuanced identities. By doing this, the show presents identities as complex, influenced by a range of historical, cultural, and individual factors.

The *Ramy* series is a series about representation and challenging stereotypes. This situation is also evident in the statements made by Ramy Youseff in an interview he gave. Ramy Youseff, the creator of the series, said in an interview about the theme of homecoming in episode 9 that people have an expectation of where they came from and that this is the place that should provide all these answers and nourish them. Then Ramy

Youseff goes on to say the following in the interview: “And really, what you're memorializing is your parents' version of what that was, the realization of you. But you go there and it's not that. So to me, it was really all about the expectations that we could put on our home countries and how that's our own form of stereotyping” (Idato 2020). In a parallel way, Ramy’s assumptions about Egypt as a static and profoundly traditional society reveal his own form of stereotyping. He romanticizes Egypt through a lens influenced by Orientalist perceptions of the country. He went to Egypt to strengthen his connection with his faith, return to his roots, and develop closer relationships with his Muslim relatives. However, neither Egypt nor his relatives align with Ramy's expectations. Ramy looks at the life of his relatives and community in Egypt from a Western perspective, interpreting their cultural values and traditions and the social dynamics of Egypt through a Western lens. He has embraced some stereotypical representations of his own culture through an American perspective, and this has created a simplified or romanticized image of the East in Ramy. However, his real-life experiences in Egypt have conflicted with this romanticized image. The *Ramy* series confronts the character Ramy with an Egypt that contradicts his beliefs and expectations.

In the continuation of this episode, the first season of *Ramy* concludes. In episode S01E10, titled “The Cairo Cowboy,” Ramy fulfills his reason for coming to Egypt and visiting his grandfather in his village. He tells his grandfather that he cannot recognize himself in America. After listening to the voice recordings his grandfather sent to his father, he conveys to his grandfather that talking with him could provide answers to Ramy's identity crisis and the questions he has been seeking. However, his grandfather passes away before Ramy can get these answers from his grandfather. After his grandfather's funeral, he spends time with his cousin Amani. Unlike Shadi, Amani takes Ramy to places related to Egyptian traditions. Ramy and Amani sit and chat in a traditional Egyptian venue. Ramy says to Amani, “I feel like the problem's really that I just don't know what kind of Muslim I am. Like, there's Friday prayers, and then there's Friday night, and I'm, like, at both, you know, like, I wanna pray, I wanna go to the party, and I'm breaking some rules, I'm following others, and I thought coming here would give me some clarity and help me figure it out, just being in this country, seeing

Grandpa... But I don't know, obviously that hasn't really... worked.” Ramy's identity dilemma and his motivation for traveling to Egypt are highlighted in this phrase. It can be seen that this scene marks an important turning point in the in-depth examination of Ramy's identity and religious struggles. The moral and cultural tensions of a contemporary Muslim person are shown in Ramy's oscillation between "Friday prayers" and "Friday night."

Ramy presents a complicated, imperfect, inquisitive Muslim character rather than a stereotypical Muslim one. Ramy is not someone who follows religious laws; instead, he transgresses them, experiences regret, and sets out on a quest for knowledge and purpose. The Muslim identity of Ramy is not limited to being wholly traditional or wholly modern in the series. Instead, *Ramy* presents identity as fluid and subject to ongoing negotiation. The show deals with Hollywood's stereotyped depictions of Muslims, which frequently reduce them to one-dimensional characters, by providing a multifaceted representation of Muslim identities.

I think it would be helpful to provide a general framework of the show's second season to understand better how Ramy's Muslim identity continues to evolve. In Season 2, Ramy appears as a porn addict who has barely left the house since returning from his trip to Egypt. He does not see his friends and spends most of his time watching porn and masturbating. Ramy wants to escape this situation. On the advice of a friend, he meets Sheikh Malik at the Sufi Center. Ramy tells the Sheikh that his spiritual quest during his trip to Egypt failed and asks Sheikh Malik to educate him. He honestly tells him what he has been through, even mentioning that he slept with his cousin Amani. I would like to quote from Ramy's conversation with the Sheikh because this quote will help to understand Ramy's feelings and underscore how he evaluated his visit to Egypt. “I feel like I have this hole inside of me that's always been there. Just this, like, emptiness. And I'm always trying to fill it with something. Like sex and, and porn. And I feel like the more people I'm with, the more alone I feel. And I've tried to fill it with God. I have. But I just don't know how. Like, I went to Egypt, and I tried to find something, and... I couldn't.” That is, when Ramy believed he had filled the void inside him, he ended up being with his cousin, and his spiritual quest during his trip to Egypt failed.

Wanting to reconnect with God, he asks Sheikh Malik to mentor him, and throughout the season, spectators watch Ramy's journey of integrating what he learns from the Sheikh into his life. At this point, Ramy continues to experience failures. He is dishonest with Sheikh Malik and his daughter and continues lying to them about some issues. Sheikh's daughter, Zeinab, is attracted to Ramy, and they get married. However, this marriage only lasts one night, and Ramy and Zeinab end it the day after they get married because Ramy makes an irreversible mistake: the day before they are supposed to get married, he sleeps with his cousin Amani again. He confesses this to Zeinab on their wedding day because he wants to cleanse himself of his sin and also desires to be with Amani. He tries to convince Zeinab by mentioning that Islam permits polygamy. However, Zeinab naturally does not accept this, and she leaves Ramy that night. The next day, Sheikh confronts Ramy, expressing his anger and listing Ramy's many mistakes. He confronts Ramy with the reality of how selfish he is and how he hurts the people around him. The second season of *Ramy* ends with Ramy parting ways with Sheikh and Zeinab.

In the third season, we see Ramy with a completely different motivation and character. Ramy has distanced himself from establishing a connection with God and seeking spiritual help. This is even reflected in his physical appearance. Unlike the first and second seasons, Ramy is no longer bearded; he has shaved his beard and only left a mustache. Therefore, Ramy's departure from his Muslim identity and closer approximation to his American identity are also physically evident to the audience. Additionally, Ramy adopts a different approach to living his life than in previous seasons. What matters to him now is not spirituality but materialism. Previously, Ramy was unhappy temporarily working as a jeweler for his uncle because he was unemployed. However, he continues to work as a jeweler for his uncle and expands his business. He forms a partnership with Israeli business people in the jewelry industry, who are believed to be mafia in the sector, and goes to Israel to finalize a deal with them. Ramy is in a situation where he is so distant from spirituality and so close to materialism that he does not consider developing a business partnership with Israelis and visiting Israel as an issue at all.

To better explain the focus on Ramy's Muslim identity and self-orientalism in this chapter, I would like to provide a more detailed account of the second episode of the third season, where Ramy travels to Israel to meet Ayala, the boss of the business he intends to partner with Israelis. This episode reveals Ramy encountering non-Western characters, such as a Palestinian woman and children, and sheds light on his attitudes towards them, providing important insights into Ramy's identity.

Ramy's visit to Israel carries quite different characteristics from his trip to Egypt. As I explained at the beginning of this chapter, when Ramy went to Egypt, he was on a quest for discovery and spirituality. He sought to establish a connection with his Egyptian relatives, visit his grandfather, and escape the conflicts created by his dual identity. However, when Ramy comes to Israel for business, he sees it purely as a business trip. Visiting Palestine or establishing a connection with his religion is not on his agenda. When they meet the Israeli boss they will be working with, the woman asks Ramy to draw a picture of Prophet Muhammad to ensure she can trust him and be confident that Ramy's beliefs will not influence his decisions. This request is against Islamic beliefs, yet Ramy agrees. Before he can draw the picture, Ayala, the boss, reveals that it was just a joke.

In the continuation of the scene, Ayala introduces Ramy to her mother, revealing that she is a Holocaust survivor. Ramy responds with "Congratulations." This choice of words is found sarcastic by Ayala, who thinks Ramy is mocking. However, Ramy explains that surviving the Holocaust is indeed a remarkable achievement and that saying "Congrats" would be a sarcastic response. In this context, Ramy expresses his belief that some words can be misunderstood when used in the wrong context. As an example, he mentions "Allahu Akbar," stating that people often misuse it, but he says it is actually a beautiful phrase. Through Ramy's character, the series criticizes the media's association of "Allahu Akbar" with terrorism and the emptying of its meaning. Ramy reowns the phrase "Allahu Akbar," and this scene becomes one of the rare moments throughout the third season in which he embraces his Muslim identity. Ramy's reown of this word will be seen again in the third season finale, which I will explain later in this

chapter: The third season ends with him yelling Allah Akbar in the USA as he prays for Palestine.

I believe this "congratulations" scene is significant in many ways. One of the important aspects of this scene is that it has been echoed in the media as a difficult experience to watch. The article on the online magazine *Slate* that discusses this episode uses the title "Inside the Making of the Year's Most Uncomfortable Scene" (Ismail 2022). Similarly, Deena ElGenaidi (2022), who writes about every episode of the series on the website *Vulture*, commented on this scene by saying: "I could barely watch it because it was so cringey but also so funny." The episode's co-writer, Maytha Alhassen, emphasizes the actual tension of the scene with her words: "We're watching the effect of a child in America who's in the diaspora who is only given two extremist choices: be a fundamentalist or be an assimilationist" (Ismail 2022). Maytha Alhassen's words highlight the complex identity struggles faced by individuals in the diaspora, particularly in the context of cultural and religious expectations. In this scene, we see Ramy agreeing to draw a picture of Prophet Muhammad, which is entirely against his religious beliefs, yet later in the scene, he speaks words that reaffirm his faith. The *Ramy* series showcases a revolutionary approach that moves away from the clichéd representations of 'good Muslim' or 'bad Muslim.' It continuously challenges these stereotypes by presenting a nuanced representation of a Muslim character and bringing cultural and Muslim identity representation into an ongoing space of negotiation. The series does not settle these representations but opens them up for conversation and discussion.

While in Israel, Ramy arranges to meet with a Palestinian woman through one of the online dating apps. However, for Ramy to be able to meet the woman, he needs to cross to the other side of the wall. Therefore, he must wait at the checkpoint with a long line. Before long, to better understand the significance of the concept of borders and checkpoints, I believe it is important to explain how these concepts hold significance for the Palestinian people and Palestinian cinema. Borders and border areas have become particularly prominent after the first Intifada, marked by the increase of roadblocks, checkpoints, and concrete barriers. These structures are visible canvases for Palestinian

directors and authors to express their creative visions or interpretations (Ball 2012, 175-95). In fact, this phenomenon is so significant in cinema that critic George Khleifi (2005, 320) has coined the term "roadblock movies" to describe a genre that centers its plots and settings around checkpoints, exploring the dramas that arise from them. According to Anna Ball (2017, 105), a broader examination of different literary and cinematic genres shows that borders signify more than simply oppression and division; they have come to represent places where the politics of identity and selfhood are complexly negotiated. It can be said that while their significance is so evident in Palestinian cinema, these checkpoints and the Apartheid wall are not commonly encountered in popular culture. *Ramy* brings a topic that remains within independent cinema into the mainstream.

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, the American media has represented the Middle East in a way that suits its own political and ideological interests, justifying its colonialism over the region. The conflicts and wars in the Middle East have been portrayed in its media with images that suit this purpose. In light of this, Palestine is often represented through a lens heavily influenced by political and ideological frameworks, frequently overshadowed by narratives that prioritize Israeli perspectives or broader Western ideologies. The struggles faced by the Palestinian people are often overlooked. Hollywood does not depict Palestinians as innocent victims or Israelis as villains. Images of Israeli soldiers destroying olive groves or killing Palestinian civilians are not shown. Additionally, scenes portraying Palestinian families enduring hardships under occupation or fighting to obtain their own country or passports are not represented (Shaheen 2003, 186-87). On the other hand, *Ramy* brings to the screen a challenge faced by Palestinians in their daily lives—the necessity of using checkpoints. These borders reflect not only a physical barrier but also a psychological and emotional burden. While highlighting the experiences of Palestinian characters and the impact of obstacles on their daily lives, it also opens up questions about the concepts of borders and identity and brings the resistance depicted in Palestinian cinema into the popular realm.

Ball describes the unique nature of borderlands as "its identity as a space where the authority of all cultural and social constructs is called into question" (2017, 117). Not wanting to wait at the checkpoint, Ramy asks the officer if there is a separate line for those with American passports. Here, it is seen that Ramy wants to take advantage of his American identity and the authority of his American passport when crossing the Israeli border. In response to this question, Palestinian children mock Ramy. After passing through the checkpoint, Ramy meets the Palestinian woman at her house. The woman works at a restaurant in Ramallah and will establish her own lingerie brand with the slogan 'Everyone has the right to be sexy.' Ramy is surprised by this situation because he thinks her family would oppose the woman establishing a lingerie brand due to religious reasons. This scene is significant in demonstrating how Palestinian cinema resists stereotypical images and portrays everyday life as resistance. In *Dreams of a Nation*, Hamid Dabashi (2007) emphasizes how Palestinian cinema serves as a vehicle for resistance by portraying the intricacies of daily life. He contends that filmmakers portray everyday life, emphasizing the Palestinian people's dignity and tenacity in the face of continuous violence. The films counter prevailing narratives and stereotypes that frequently reduce Palestinian identity to victimhood by emphasizing personal stories. This representation of everyday life becomes a form of cultural resistance, asserting a distinct Palestinian identity and promoting solidarity within the community.

The series *Ramy* brings the resistance discussed in Palestinian cinema into the mainstream with this scene. As I explained in the introduction chapter of this thesis, digital platforms' ability to go beyond traditional television's constraints and conservatism creates a space for the representation of diverse identities as it is demonstrated in *Ramy*. This enables the series to portray Palestinian experiences beyond one-dimensional victimhood narratives and stereotypical representations, offering alternative perspectives.

This scene also has a dialogue with the Western view of the East as backward, exotic, and unable to catch up with the West, as Edward Said (1978) mentions in his book *Orientalism*. Similarly, the character Ramy adopts an Orientalist attitude towards the women living in Palestine, which resonates the Western perception of Palestine and

Palestinians. He thinks that the family of this woman living in Palestine might be conservative and reactionary. Ramy perceives them as a backward people. The woman responds to Ramy as follows: "Muslims in the West are so fucking uptight. You act like no one ever kissed before. It's lingerie. Everyone wears it." Ramy has the codes that the conventional view of the West has taught him. As I explained earlier in this chapter, when Ramy meets a Palestinian woman, he adopts a self-orientalist attitude. He evaluates her through the Western gaze, just as he did to Shadi. Ramy's conceptions about their identities are shaped by a Western mindset. Ramy is stereotyping his own community the same way West stereotypes them. Ramy's stance is in dialogue with Minh-ha's thoughts. According to Minh-ha (1991, 74), a person can have two perspectives at once by projecting their internal viewpoints outside or incorporating other viewpoints inside, creating a more complex and multidimensional representation. Ramy, too, consciously or unconsciously resorts to self-orientalist representation by internalizing the orientalist traits that the West imprints on Orientals and attributes to the East. Minh-ha also emphasizes the reality of living in different worlds, both in the West and the East, and within our inner worlds, all of which come together in a single 'place.' This 'place' is the individual itself and their current state; in Minh-ha's own words, "the place each one of us is here and now" (2011, 56). According to Minh-ha, the named "other" is never to be found merely over there and outside of oneself, for it is always over here, between Us, within Our discourse that the "other" becomes a nameable reality" (2011, 45).

Minh-ha's views blur the distinction between Self and Other and draw a more nuanced structure, as can be observed in the character of Ramy. Ramy is a Muslim living in America, and when he meets the people living in the East, he often falls into a position of being less Western than Shadi and Palestinian women. He constructs a sense of representation based on the stereotypical images the West has created for the East. That is, Ramy cannot get rid of the mindset of the colonizer inside him. The series critiques the West's discourse on the Orient by positioning Ramy, the character, in a self-orientalist stance. The show presents glimpses of daily life in Egypt and Palestine, highlighting how real life differs significantly from Ramy's Orientalist views. It emphasizes that his perception is not rooted in reality. Through the character of Ramy,

the series undermines the Western representation of the East and challenges the Eurocentric representation.

Returning to the second episode of the third season of the series, after he meets with the Palestinian woman, Ramy tries to rush to a dinner with his Israeli business partners. This dinner is quite crucial for Ramy to solidify his business ties with them. However, he is almost late for the dinner. Therefore, he tries to use a bicycle he sees to get to the checkpoint and starts riding it. However, this bicycle belongs to a Palestinian child who mocked him at the checkpoint. A group of children, including this Palestinian child, follow Ramy when he starts using the bicycle and catch up with him. They then punch Ramy, take the bicycle and Ramy's jacket, and walk away.

When Ramy arrives at the checkpoint, he notices he does not have his papers to pass because they are in his jacket pocket. He tells the policeman at the checkpoint that he is American. However, Ramy says that he does not have his passport with him and that the Palestinian kids made fun of him and took his jacket. He says that they attacked him, that they were like a gang. The policeman then informs the other police units and calls them to help, saying that he has an American with him who has been attacked. Ramy gets into the police car and the police ask him to tell them everything he knows about these Palestinian children. Ramy says that he cannot remember them at all. The policeman tells him, "Listen, I know you're in shock. But it's common after a terrorist attack to be in shock, you know?" The Israeli police considered the action of the Palestinian children as a terrorist attack. However, Ramy says that it was not a terrorist attack; it was just a moment of argument. The policeman tells Ramy that he is safe and that they were trained by Ramy's people, the Americans, and continues as follows: "When we arrive there, stay in the car for your own safety. They might throw some rocks, you know."

Stone-throwing has become a symbol of Palestinian civil resistance; the media has frequently shown these scenes, and the image of the "stone-throwing Palestinian" has become widespread in the media. Even though the act of stone-throwing has such a political aspect, the *Ramy* series includes this event as a dialog, transforming the humor

of the series into a political tool. It puts the image of the 'Palestinian boy throwing stones' on its agenda. All these dialogues between Ramy and the police in the car give much information about the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, America's approach and political policy on this issue, and it would not be wrong to say that this episode is one of the most political and harsh episodes of the series. The point to be emphasized is that *Ramy* addresses such political issues through humor. Humor is displayed in Ramy's dialogues with the Israeli police officers. The police officer takes the situation overly seriously and frames a simple argument as a potential terrorist attack. This exaggerated approach contrasts the actual situation—Ramy having a simple argument with Palestinian children—with an overly dramatized narrative. The officer's comment, "It's common to be in shock after a terrorist attack," emphasizes the discrepancy between the exaggerated portrayal and the reality of the situation. *Ramy* uses humor to criticize the media's propensity to dehumanize and link Palestinians to terrorism. *Ramy* actively challenges stereotypes about Arab and Palestinian identities. The Israeli officer referring to the children as terrorists embodies the stereotypical discourse propagated by the media. The series reuses this stereotype in a way that combines political critique with humor, effectively challenging it. By presenting this situation satirically, *Ramy* turns the stereotype on its head, using it as a political tool to question and dismantle the repetitive and one-dimensional portrayals of Muslims in the media.

In the continuation of the episode, Israeli soldiers raid the child's house, beating and arresting him. Ramy feels terrible about the situation. This episode's director, Annemarie Jacir, highlights the revolutionary approach of the episode with her remarks in an interview: "The script was really funny, but it was also something I hadn't seen before. We've never seen a mainstream American show that captures how brutal the Israeli army is, especially to kids; or Palestinians getting denied entry and interrogated, which happens all the time, simply for being Palestinians. And of course, Americans rarely see the Apartheid wall and the checkpoints, or kids getting arrested. I couldn't believe that an American network was okay with it" (Goodfellow 2022).

Jacir's statements prove that *Ramy* brings an unprecedented representation to the mainstream American television landscape. The portrayal of the Israeli police treating

Ramy's situation as a terrorist attack and describing the Palestinian children as terrorists highlights how repetitive media images construct the identity of Palestinians through ideological representations. As I noted in my previous chapter, these representations contribute to forming a conception of identity—specifically, an understanding of Palestinian identity that is shaped by repetitive, media-driven stereotypes. The image of the "stone-throwing Palestinian child" is one such example of these reductive portrayals, which often fail to reflect the reality of Palestinian lives, as Jacir aptly notes that mainstream American television rarely depicts the brutal realities faced by Palestinians. On the other hand, *Ramy* disrupts these dominant media narratives by taking a revolutionary attitude and presenting glimpses of Palestinians' everyday lives. By bringing the Apartheid wall, checkpoints, and Palestinian suffering to the screen, *Ramy* challenges our biased view of Palestinians. The series undermines the Muslim identities that have been ideologically constructed by the media.

In the rest of the episode, the Israeli soldiers leave Ramy where he stays. Ramy explains to his boss, Ayala, why he was late for the dinner. Ayala assures him that she has connections in the military and will ensure the child's release. However, in the subsequent episodes of the season, when Ramy attends the annual New Jersey Muslim Conference of America to aid Muslim institutions in New Jersey, he sees a donation booth expressly set up to collect funds for the child detained in Palestine. This makes Ramy aware that the Palestinian child has not been released.

Ramy begins to question his jewelry business with all these developments and, at the same time, learns that he has a child with Zeinab, the sheik's daughter. He has opened his own brand of jewelry called 'Maktub.' He is making perfect money, but it is not exactly what he wants to do. Ramy realizes this again. His partner Yuval, a Jewish New Yorker, even tells Ramy that it is not good for their lives to be associated with so much money. He announces to Ramy that he is leaving the jewelry business. On the other hand, Ramy feels he has no choice, so he continues working as a jeweler. Ayala makes him a new offer in the jewelry business. She asks Ramy to sell a costly watch to very important customers. Ramy does not want to accept this job, but he cannot say no and

accepts. Ramy feels that his life is not at a point where he can make a choice. He feels doomed to this job.

At a time when Ramy is stuck with all these issues, he has a conversation with a prostitute about choice, fate, and God at the grave of his dead dog. Ramy tells her that he learned he had a daughter named Amani and adds: "You... you said that everything's planned, but... There has to be choice. When I touched Amina's hand, I had this feeling like I never wanted to do anything for myself again. I wanted to do it all for her, all for God." It is clear from this scene that Ramy wants to reconnect with God. The prostitute says that she thinks Ramy will make a choice, knocks him off the bench, and kisses him. The prostitute says that this is the last time she will see Ramy, and she leaves.

Later, in a phone conversation with Yuval, Ramy realizes that he does not have the watch he was given to sell to a customer. He had lost the watch, most likely stolen by the prostitute when she kissed Ramy. Ramy panics because the watch is worth much money, and by losing it, he has gotten himself into big trouble. However, Ramy interprets the theft of the watch as a sign that he can make a choice, and he believes that this sign is sent to him from Allah. He sees meeting the prostitute woman and having the watch stolen as fate. Feeling like he has found all the answers he has been searching for, he relaxes. He no longer feels panicked. He donates much of his money to the Palestinian boy under arrest. He feels relieved and happy. After performing ablution in the water of the nearby lake, he begins to pray. Ramy loudly recites the words Allahu Akbar during prayer. Ramy's character has never been seen praying so devotedly in the series before. He is seen returning to his identity as a Muslim, from which he has been estranged for the entire third season. Furthermore, the scene in which he prays aloud occurs in the third season's last episode.

Ramy's character development has significantly transformed between the first and third seasons. Ramy finds it difficult to balance his American and Muslim identities in the first season. The dilemmas he faces due to this dual identity led him to make wrong decisions. However, he is in search of discovery and spirituality. He continues this quest in the second season as well. By the third season, it is seen that he abandons his Muslim

identity and gets closer to his American identity. However, by the end of the season, he embraces his Muslim identity again. The series has represented the character of Ramy in a multi-layered way over three seasons. It does not present a one-dimensional depiction of a Muslim. Ramy is a character with both good qualities and many flaws. This multifaceted representation brings into question the Muslim identity of those living in America. Through his travels to Egypt and Israel, Ramy's identity is continually in a state of change and transformation. This aligns with Minh Ha's view of subject-in-process (1991) and Stuart Hall's idea of identity as constantly evolving (2013), which emphasize that identity can never be comprehended in a single dimension.

Conversely, Eurocentrism frequently relies on inflexible cultural norms and distinctions to view identity as fixed, linear, and static. In this paradigm, identities, especially those of non-European people, are frequently viewed in simplified, monolithic terms. For instance, Muslim identities in a Eurocentric narrative are often reduced to certain stereotypes or essentialized concepts, such as religious fundamentalism, terrorism, or oppression. The series *Ramy* challenges Eurocentric representation by presenting complex and nuanced Muslim identities.

In this section, I have attempted to examine Ramy's Muslim identity and character development through the storyline spanning three seasons and to analyze how *Ramy* disrupts stereotypes about Muslim identities by addressing the self-orientalist tendencies of the character Ramy. I have argued that the series *Ramy* offers an alternative representation to Eurocentric and Orientalist perspectives, portraying fluid Muslim identities that dismantle the binary opposition between West and East. In the next section, I will focus again on Ramy's Muslim identity while also examining other Muslim characters in the series to explain how the show challenges stereotypes about Muslim identities.

3.2 Multidimensional Muslim Identities in *Ramy*

The episode "*Strawberries*," Season 1, Episode 4 of the series, occurs during Ramy's childhood. It explores how young Ramy, in his early teens, tries to understand his

American Muslim identity in the aftermath of 9/11 and examines the impact of stereotypes about Muslims on his struggle with belonging and identity.

Ramy learns about the events of 9/11 through the news broadcast on the TV in his classroom. The anchor refers to the incident as a terrorist act and mentions that government officials are investigating whether it has any connection to Islamic leader Osama Bin Laden. The news also includes videos of Bin Laden declaring jihad against America in response to perceived threats to Saudi Arabia. At that moment, Ramy's walkie-talkie goes off. His mother is checking to see if Ramy is okay, and his father's voice, speaking in Arabic, can be heard through the device. As soon as Ramy hears his father speaking in Arabic over the walkie-talkie, he faces the stares of his friends. This moment dramatically illustrates the process of Muslim children being perceived as the "other" during that time.

When Ramy returns home, he watches the news with his family. The television screen once again shows images of Osama Bin Laden. This is one of the rare episodes that shows the television visuals repetitively. Ramy notices the military using walkie-talkies, similar to the ones his family owns, leading him to associate his family with terrorism. Later, on a chat site, Ramy encounters hate speech blaming Muslims for 9/11 and asks, "You think all Muslims are in on it?" He asks this because he is genuinely questioning whether all Muslims could have played a role in the attack. Media representations shape not only others' conception of Muslim identity but also Ramy's conception of his own identity.

The 9/11 attacks drastically changed perceptions of Muslims, affecting Ramy's family as well. After the attacks, their neighbors claimed that a pool party was canceled to avoid including them, even though it was not canceled. Ramy's father, Farouk, responded by hanging an American flag outside their house, trying to assert their belonging to America in an atmosphere where people of their ethnic background were being equated with terrorism. Ramy's friends even question if he is a terrorist due to his Middle Eastern background. Ramy responds by stating that Egypt is not in the Middle East but in Africa; if anything, he is Black. This moment reveals Ramy's rejection of his

Arab identity, influenced by the association of his ethnic group with the stereotype of being a terrorist.

In his dream, Ramy sees Osama Bin Laden hiding in his house after 9/11, sitting on a chair in the kitchen and eating strawberries. A conversation begins between Bin Laden and Ramy. Bin Laden tells him that strawberries only grow in the summer. He points out that although winter will soon come, America still has strawberries. He emphasizes that this is possible because America can do this through Egypt. In the episode, strawberries serve the narrative as a symbol of American imperialism and give the episode its name.

Bin Laden asks Ramy if there are times when he does not feel like he belongs in America. Ramy responds that sometimes he does not feel he belongs in America. Bin Laden claims that America was once a friend that turned its back on him. Reminding Ramy that his friends no longer treat him the same way, Bin Laden emphasizes that Ramy knows how that feels. He tells Ramy that they are alike. Bin Laden describes the 9/11 attacks as a gift to the indifferent American public. He mentions that mothers in the Middle East have also died as a result of attacks, suggesting that the loss of Ramy's friend's mother on 9/11 represents a form of balance. In response to these radical statements, Ramy tells Bin Laden that he is nothing like him and that he is not a terrorist.

The next day, Ramy is seen walking to school with a baseball cap worn backward. This is the first scene where we see young Ramy wearing a cap, a habit he continues into adulthood. It is significant that after the night he dreams of Bin Laden, Ramy seeks to adopt a more distinctly American appearance. This mirrors his declaration to Bin Laden in the dream that he is not a terrorist and symbolizes his rejection of Bin Laden's radical ideology. It also reflects Ramy's desire to embrace a more American identity during a time when he felt excluded and labeled as a terrorist by his peers.

As Ramy walks to school, a child in a wheelchair calls him a "terrorist." Since this is a flashback episode, it becomes clear that this child is Steve, one of Ramy's closest

friends, revealing that their friendship dates back to their childhood. Steve calling Ramy a terrorist is significant. Here, we see the dominant media narrative about Muslims being echoed through Steve. However, Steve does not say this because he genuinely believes Ramy is a terrorist. Instead, he initiates a friendship with Ramy and even offers to walk to school together. This scene uses the media stereotype of Muslims as terrorists, but it challenges the trope. The term "terrorist" is voiced by Steve, a non-Muslim character, and ironically serves as the catalyst for the lifelong friendship between him and the Muslim protagonist.

The episode focuses on the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the overarching theme of terrorism. It sets itself apart by presenting this topic through the eyes of a small child, Ramy, successfully fusing childhood innocence with a complex political environment. The series blends fact and fiction by including Osama Bin Laden in Ramy's dream. By showing this terrorist leader eating strawberries, even though strawberries have a deep metaphorical meaning, as I mentioned, the episode presents the terrorist leader as an almost ordinary figure. Furthermore, the episode delves into a young boy's identity issue as he struggles to feel like he belongs to both his American and Muslim identities in the post-9/11 world rather than just the topic of terrorism. This is a crucial point in the series because it explores how the 9/11 attacks affected how society perceived Muslims, as well as how media portrayals of Muslims and terrorism affected Ramy's own identity. In this sense, the show introduces a unique viewpoint to the screen and completely breaks away from the conventional terrorism stories seen in Hollywood media. By doing so, it challenges the stereotype perpetuated by the media that equates Muslims with terrorism.

The show features both conventional and unconventional Muslim characters. In the second episode of its second season, titled "Can You Hear Me Now?" the audience is introduced to Dennis, a character who will choose to convert to Islam at the end of the episode. Dennis is a non-Muslim character who served in the Iraq war. He killed a Muslim in the Iraq war and is traumatized by it. He is homeless, has a difficult living situation, and is looking for work. In this respect, this character in *Ramy* is quite contrary to the representation of the patriotic heroic American who participates in wars

against Muslims, which is often found in the Hollywood narrative. At this point, *Ramy* challenges not only the stereotypical representation of Muslims but also the stereotypical representation of a non-Muslim character. Ramy wants to help Dennis cope with his challenging economic situation. Ramy decides to take him to the Sufi Center, thinking Dennis might find a job there. While walking, the sound of the call to prayer triggers Dennis's war trauma. He tells Ramy that hearing the call to prayer makes him aggressive. Ramy responds by explaining that the call to prayer has been manipulated by the media, which has tied it to violence. Ramy does not say this in anger but instead tries to make Dennis feel more at ease and offer support. This approach reflects the show's humorous tone. The series critiques the media's association of the call to prayer, a religious symbol of Islam, with violence by using humor as a tool.

Later in the episode, Ramy speaks to Sheikh Malik and Zeinab about Dennis working at the Sufi Center but does not mention that Dennis had killed a Muslim during the Iraq War. Dennis begins working at the Sufi Center, and he is deeply moved by the kindness and warmth shown to him by the Muslims he meets, ultimately deciding that he wants to convert to Islam. However, his newfound peace is soon disrupted. While Dennis, now a recent convert, prays at the Sufi Center, the sounds of protesters gathered to oppose the center can be heard. The Sufi Center was formerly a church but was transferred due to foreclosure. Anti-Muslim individuals interpret this as their church being taken away and protest with Islamophobic slogans like "No Sharia in New Jersey." During his prayer, Dennis hears the protesters, and his trauma is triggered again. Shouting "Allahu Akbar," he runs outside and violently attacks one of the protesters, beating them nearly to death.

The media has long perpetuated the association of the phrase "Allahu Akbar" with violence and radical Islamist movements. Repeated depictions in news and entertainment media have manipulated the public's perception of this statement, which translates to "God is the Greatest" and has deep spiritual meaning in Islamic prayer and daily life. It frequently serves as a shorthand for extremism and is used in conjunction with pictures of militant organizations or terrorist activities. Such portrayal decontextualizes the term and reduces its meaning to a sign of fear and hostility in the

collective consciousness of non-Muslim audiences. In order to critically and nuancedly address this media manipulation, *Ramy* uses a particular scenario involving Dennis, a character who recently converted to Islam. Dennis, who is shown as a new Muslim who is ignorant and untrained, uses violence while shouting "Allahu Akbar." Unlike the conventional media depiction of the phrase as a rallying cry for jihadist ideology, Dennis's use of the phrase is devoid of any such intent. He does not understand the phrase's linguistic, spiritual, or cultural depth and is simply mimicking the associations he has absorbed from media portrayals.

The critique of the show centers on this inconsistency. Dennis is portrayed as a misguided individual whose actions unintentionally embody the stereotypes perpetuated by the media; he is neither an extremist nor a figure driven by radical intentions. The shallowness of these associations is highlighted by his superficial use of "Allahu Akbar" and his ignorance of the faith he has joined. The sequence satirically reveals how people like Dennis, who has no real affiliation with extreme ideology, are influenced by the media's reductionist depiction of Islam and its symbols. *Ramy* breaks down the "Allahu Akbar" cliché by including this criticism in the story. This phrase is reinterpreted in the series to highlight its misuse and challenge its exclusive link to violence. The ridiculousness of these clichés is criticized through the character of Dennis. His act of violence is not motivated by any ideological objective or the teachings of Islam; instead, it reflects the false narratives about Muslims and Islam that both individuals and society internalize at large. By presenting a scene through Dennis, a newly converted character who acts based on prior media-driven assumptions about Islam and unknowingly perpetuates stereotypes, the series prompts viewers to question how the media shapes perceptions of Islam. The show provides a multi-layered commentary on identity construction, media narratives, and the responsibility of representation, in addition to questioning and criticizing the stereotyped depictions created by the media.

The second season's third episode opens with a scene depicting how Dennis's attack is reported in the media. A TV news segment covers the incident with the headline, "Breaking News | Protestor Beaten by Muslim Convert | New Islamic Center Took Place of NJ Church." The anchor states, "We're here at the recently built Islamic center,

where a man who was peacefully protesting was beaten within inches of his life by a man who had recently converted to Islam." This scene again underlines the bias and manipulative language in the way the media represents Muslims. The news headline and the announcer's statements directly link the attack to Islam and the newly opened Islamic center, associating it with religion rather than an individual act. The church was handed over because it could not pay the rent and is now used as a Sufi Center; however, the news does not mention this part, distorting the reality. By emphasizing that the Islamic center replaced a church, the news subtly reinforces the perception of Muslim presence as a "threat to the culture." This is a rhetoric that serves to otherize Muslims.

The Muslim members of the Sufi Center visit the man Dennis assaulted in the hospital and pray for his recovery. They also bring food to his family. The show challenges the dominant narrative that portrays Muslims as violent by representing them through peaceful and compassionate actions. When Zeinab offers her well wishes to Dennis's brother at the hospital, he expresses surprise at her fluent English. Through this moment, the series critiques the common assumption, highlighted by Dennis's brother, that Black Muslim women who wear hijabs are often perceived as uneducated or not native English speakers. Zeinab's confident demeanor and articulate speech dismantle this stereotype, emphasizing that Muslim women who wear hijab possess multifaceted and complex identities. In this way, the series takes Zeinab beyond a simple representation, underlining her individuality and her identity that defies stereotypes.

Muslim characters in the show face not only the prejudices of non-Muslims but also stereotypical perceptions from within their own community. This dynamic is illustrated in Season 2, Episode 8, in a scene where Ramy and Zeinab's families come together to meet following their decision to get married. Uncle Naseem expresses surprise that Sheikh Malik can speak Arabic and asks, "What prison did you convert in?" This reflects the widespread misconception in the media that all Muslims are Arabs, and all Arabs are Muslims (Shaheen 2003, 171). Muslims are often portrayed as a monolithic group, ignoring the diversity within their communities. Black Muslim representation is rarely seen in traditional media, and when it is, Hollywood has often depicted Black

men as prone to violence (Shohat and Stam 2014, 199). This stereotype goes beyond media portrayals and is internalized within Muslim communities as well. Naseem's assumption that Sheikh Malik converted to Islam in prison reveals Naseem's own stereotypical views about Black Muslims. Zeinab responds to Uncle Naseem by saying, "We are also not the ones bombing stuff," and her continuing with, "I am Zeinab, by the way" further emphasizes how Uncle Naseem ignores her. This remark redirects the post-9/11 stereotype of Arabs being associated with terrorism and bombing back at Naseem. This interaction highlights how stereotypes can perpetuate prejudice both externally and internally within the Muslim community.

Zeinab and Uncle Naseem clash over the stereotypes imposed on them by the media. Sheikh Malik's statement, "We all battle our own stereotypes," underscores this point. His remarks bring to light the universal experience of battling prejudices on a personal and cultural level. The scene shows how Muslims deal with prejudices both inside their own community and in the stereotyped views of non-Muslims. It highlights the wider challenge of Muslims to acknowledge and celebrate their variety and throws light on how media-driven stereotypes cause problems in interpersonal relationships. This scene engages in dialogue with intersectionality theory (Kimberle 1989), recognizing the overlapping systems of race, religion, gender, and culture that shape these characters' experiences. In this scene, the characters are shown to be facing oppression through multiple identities and developing prejudices against each other. As Lorde (1983) states, oppression cannot be ranked in a hierarchical structure, each intersection of identity shapes oppression in an equally significant and impactful way. Sheikh Malik is subjected to a stereotypical remark by Uncle Naseem both for his religion (being Muslim) and his race (being a Black Muslim). Zeinab, on the other hand, is ignored by Uncle Naseem because of her gender (being a woman). Uncle Naseem, in turn, faces the 'bombing Arabs' stereotype from Zeinab due to his ethnicity (being Arab).

Another important character in terms of Muslim identities in the series is Uncle Nassem. Uncle Nassem is a Muslim who is presented almost as a cartoon character in the series. At first glance, Uncle Nassem's character seems to embody many of the Orientalist stereotypes. He is misogynistic and oppresses women. He divorced his wife because she

wanted to pursue her education. He thinks that his niece Dena should get married and have children, restricting her to traditional gender roles. He exhibits patriarchal attitudes. He is a diamond merchant who cooperates with Jews, but he is an anti-Semite. On 9/11, Uncle Nassem believed that no Jews went to work because they knew about the attack and that the Jews organized it.

The representation of Uncle Nassem in the series stands far away from a Muslim man who challenges the stereotypes that the West has created for Eastern men. In fact, in some dimensions, he is conveyed within this orientalist representation. Nassem's representation in the series is similar to the Western representation of Arab men as “heartless, brutal, uncivilized, religious fanatics through common depictions of Arabs kidnapping or raping a fair maiden; expressing hatred against the Jews and Christians; and demonstrating a love for wealth and power” (Shaheen 2003, 171). However, apart from all these cartoonist representations, Uncle Nassem is gay. In the series, it is shown that Uncle Nassem also resorts to his aggressive attitudes toward others as a way to conceal his gay identity. This revelation is pivotal as it reframes his hyper-masculine behavior as mechanisms of self-defense designed to conceal his true self in a culture where homosexuality is stigmatized.

Ramy challenges the assumptions of the audience by disclosing Uncle Nassem's sexuality. As a first impression, he is purposefully portrayed in the series as a caricature of a conventional Arab Muslim male, yet this portrayal is undermined by examining his complexity. The stereotypical, one-dimensional depictions that are frequently seen in Western media are criticized by this narrative decision. Uncle Nassem is more than just a "villainous Arab"; he is a person battling with self-acceptance, identity, and the social demands of his Muslim and Western environments.

In this sense, Uncle Nassem serves as a microcosm of the show's broader critique of Orientalism. Although the character initially seems to support stereotyped portrayals of Arab men, the story eventually dispels these notions by showing how inadequate they are at expressing the complexity of real individuals. *Ramy* uses Uncle Nassem's character to confront and offer alternatives to the narrow, repetitive media depictions of

Arab and Muslim men, aligning with the show's more significant effort to challenge Eurocentric and reductive narratives about Muslim identities.

In this section, I have aimed to explain how the series *Ramy* challenges stereotypes about Muslim identities by analyzing the main character, Ramy, and other Muslim characters. Focusing on Ramy, the newly converted Dennis, Black Muslim characters, and Uncle Naseem, I have argued that the series portrays Muslim identities in a nuanced and multidimensional way and challenges the one-dimensional identity representation shaped by Eurocentric and Orientalist perspectives. The construction of identity becomes an even more complex topic when it shifts to women. In the next chapter, I will discuss how *Ramy* offers alternatives to the representation of Muslim women.

4. GENDER IDENTITIES

Ramy presents a highly nuanced and multilayered representation of Muslim women. The show does not confine Muslim women to a fixed position. This chapter, which focuses on gender identities, addresses the issue that the representation of marginalized identities cannot be considered outside of intersectionality between gender and ethnicity when it comes to how Muslim women are represented in the series. The show makes the issues it discusses open to conversation, allowing a discussion to emerge. It sparks a dialogue on the representation of Muslim women's identities. *Ramy* challenges the stereotypes of Muslim women and creates a space where these topics can be discussed. In this context, this chapter will first explain the problematic representation of women in Hollywood and how digital platforms have introduced new approaches to female representation. It will then analyze how Muslim female identities are represented in the series. Additionally, this chapter will highlight how the stories in episodes directed by women contribute to the transformation of women's representations on screen, which are more positive and complex.

4.1 The Representation of Women in US Traditional Media and Digital Platforms

Before explaining how Muslim women are represented in *Ramy*, I would like first to discuss the state of women's representation in Hollywood and digital platforms to bring the discussion to a more current context. The representation of women in cinema globally is profoundly flawed and problematic. In her seminal essay *Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema*, Claire Johnston (1999) argues that traditional cinema predominantly portrays women in specific roles—such as passive and submissive characters, objectified figures, and domestic caretakers—and relies heavily on stereotypes like the 'good woman' and the 'bad woman.' Johnston contends that the persistent reproduction of these limited representations constructs narrow identities for women, restricting their visibility and roles in cinema, confining them to predefined

stereotypes, and reinforcing patriarchal values. Similarly, some studies explain how cinema is structured from a male perspective and how this perspective objectifies women, often presenting them as visual objects in films (Fischer 1976; Mulvey 1975). These works are considered iconic representations of female portrayal on screen for their time.

Furthermore, many contemporary academic studies and reports on female representation in film and television continue to highlight that representational issues are still very much prevalent today, both on screen and behind the scenes (Bielby 2009; Geena Davis Foundation 2014, 2015, 2021, 2022, 2024; French 2020). All these studies emphasize a notable underrepresentation of women, both quantitatively and qualitatively, in their roles on-screen and behind the scenes. This widespread inequality highlights women's persistent obstacles in their pursuit of equal representation within the film and television industry.

Focusing on this inequality within the context of the United States, Lauzen, who has conducted numerous studies on gender inequality in Hollywood film and TV production, found that women are particularly underrepresented in technical behind-the-scenes roles (Lauzen 2009; Lauzen 2012). Between 1998 and 2011, women occupied only 16 to 18 percent of behind-the-scenes positions in top-grossing films. Additionally, women directed only 7 percent of Hollywood films released in theaters between 2000 and 2011 (Erigha 2014). Examining more recent studies on the role of women in Hollywood reveals that inequality persists. According to the data analyzed for the year 2019 in Hollywood films, just 34% of speaking or named characters were female, with the industry still largely dominated by white characters; only 17% of leading or co-leading roles were occupied by women or girls of color (Women and Hollywood 2019).

According to more recent reports of Lauzen, in 2022, only 33% of films had female protagonists, which represents an increase of just two percentage points compared to the previous year (Lauzen 2023a). Also, the same author released a different analysis demonstrating that men continue to finance and direct over 80% of motion pictures

(Lauzen 2023b). Based on all this information, it can be said that the representation of women in Hollywood remains problematic both quantitatively and qualitatively.

On the other hand, as I discussed in the introduction, the representation of marginalized identities has transformed with the rise of digital platforms which offer a new ways of exploring diverse identities on television (Bucciferro 2019; Christian 2019). There has been significant progress in the representation of women, both in front of and behind the camera, through series on digital platforms. They break away from the conventional gatekeeping methods that governed film and television production by investing millions in original shows and bringing in movie stars and directors (including older women and people of color, who are often overlooked in Hollywood) to head various projects (Bucciferro 2019). As digital platforms have become more prominent, there are now more nuanced representations of women on screen that were once uncommon, such as Amazon's popular series *Transparent*, which challenges traditional gender and age norms, and Netflix's *Orange Is The New Black*, which portrays women of color from various class and sexual backgrounds (Christian 2019, 459-60). Similarly, Griffiths (2016) has highlighted the importance of streaming platforms releasing shows that challenge gender norms and traditional female narratives. He mentions that Netflix series such as the female-led superhero show *Jessica Jones* and the comedy *Grace and Frankie*, which features older women in lead roles. These series exemplify how female characters are presented with more diverse representations on digital platforms.

The report titled *"Inclusion or Invisibility? Comprehensive Annenberg Report on Diversity in Entertainment"* (Smith et al. 2016) evaluates inclusion both on-screen and behind the camera in fictional films, TV series, and digital series distributed by 10 major media companies. This report finds that while Hollywood has a diversity problem, series on digital platforms are more innovative in representing marginalized identities. There is a closer balance in digital series, with girls and women making up 37.1% of characters and 42% of regular cast members. Additionally, women are more commonly involved behind the scenes as directors and writers (2016, 28).

This report also reveals the level of inclusivity approach adopted by the companies. The report highlights Hulu as a leading performer among streaming services, with women and people of color represented proportionally on screen. Additionally, 44% of the writers for Hulu's original series are women. Amazon is also noted as a top performer, being the only streaming service to achieve Full Inclusion for female directors. The company excels in depicting women, with its content being Fully Inclusive of female characters on screen (Smith et al. 2016, 30).

In this context, I argue that the series *Ramy* on the popular Hulu platform provides a much more revolutionary approach to female representation and offers a broad spectrum in the portrayal of Muslim women. In this chapter, after summarizing how Muslim women have been represented in Hollywood, I will discuss the non-stereotypical Muslim female characters in the series and examine, mainly through the lens of intersectionality theory, how the show challenges stereotypical judgments about Muslim women's identities. I will also explore how the series does not confine Muslim women to a fixed position and instead opens their representation for discussion.

When Muslim women's identities are considered, a different hierarchy emerges, where ethnicity and racism come into play alongside patriarchy, leading to a more layered form of stereotyping, as noted by Audre Lorde (1983). As I mentioned in my chapter called “Discussions on Identity Representation”, Western feminists have discussed the absence of women in the signifying processes of mainstream (patriarchal) cinema. However, they have not focused on race in their work. In this regard, feminists such as Claire Johnston and Laura Mulvey have been criticized by Black feminists for neglecting to consider ethnic and racial factors in the construction of women's identities. Black feminists articulate the theory of *intersectionality* to explain how various systems of oppression, such as racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of social inequality, overlap and interact to shape the lived experiences of marginalized individuals (Davis 1983; hooks 1984, 1996, 1999; Lorde 1983, 1984).

When the identity of Muslim women is examined through the framework of intersectionality, it becomes possible to gain a deeper understanding of the multiple

layers of discrimination and othering they experience. Analyzing how Hollywood represents Muslim women reveals that they are often portrayed as the "other" and depicted through stereotypical, reductive representations due to their ethnicity. Akabli and Chahdi (2022, 17) assert that the portrayal of Arab and Muslim women has for decades been a mere object rather than a subject within the imperialist Orientalist narrative. According to them, Hollywood has consistently preferred a simplistic, repetitive, and imitated reality to create a conventional, monolithic, reductive, and stereotypical image of Arab and Muslim women on screen. For decades, this portrayal has depicted her as suppressed and oppressed, indecent and libidinous, ignorant and backward, violent and terrorist, devious and villainous, and so forth. Shaheen (2003) states that Muslim women have been depicted as oppressed, exotic, belly dancers, and sexualized women in the early portrayals of the 18th and 19th centuries. Common stereotypes about Muslim women include being humiliated, demonized, and eroticized (Abdo 2002, 235-36; Shaheen 2003, 183); oppressed, passive, submissive, and silent wives in a male-dominated region (Abu-Lughod 2002; Alhassen 2018; Hirji 2011; Navarro 2010). Similarly, in line with Orientalist perspectives, Western men, who symbolized the white, advanced (or, using Orientalist language, civilized) nations of that era, are frequently portrayed as rescuers in these representations (Hirji 2011).

After September 11, there was a change in the representation of Arab women. Especially after 9/11, the news media associated Arabs and Muslims with terrorism and depicted Muslim women as oppressed victims who require rescue from a religion perceived as being both gender-oppressive and violent (Alsultany 2013; Haque 2010; Mishra 2007). Moreover, Terman (2017, 500) argues that US news coverage presents Muslim women in a limited and focused manner, primarily highlighting issues related to "Women's Rights and Gender Equality," focusing on the headscarf affair, whereas non-Muslim women are depicted with greater complexity and nuance. Alsultany (2013, 165) highlights the use of headlines such as "Lifting the Veil"¹, "Under the Veil"², and "Unveiled Threat"³ in news media within the year following 9/11, drawing attention to

¹ "Lifting the Veil" *CNN Newsnight*, November 20, 2001.

² "Under the Veil" *ABC Nightline*, October 26, 2006.

³ Mulrine, Anna. 2001. "Unveiled Threat: The Taliban is Relentless in its Oppression of Afghan Women." *US News and World Report*, October 15: 33–4. See more examples: "Beneath the Veil" *CNN Newsnight*, September 13, 2002.

the representation of Muslim women as oppressed figures in the media. She also mentions that the news stories describe incidents where Muslim women face honor killings, female genital mutilation, beatings in Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia for violating dress codes, death sentences for adultery, beatings for disobeying their husbands, domestic rape, and the inability to obtain divorce or child custody rights.

In addition to news media, there has also been a change in the representation of Arab women in Hollywood and US mainstream television. Post-September 11, more contemporary portrayals have depicted Arab women as bombers intent on killing Westerners (Shaheen 2003) and as terrorists, showing them as a threat that illustrates the connection between Islam and violence (Hirji 2011; Shaheen 2007). There are two different approaches to the representation of Muslim women after 9/11. On the one hand, there are the 'good' Muslim women who are harmless, oppressed, and need to be saved, and on the other hand, there are the 'bad' Muslim women who pose a threat to Western countries and are associated with terrorism. This reveals that the traditional cinema's representation of women in stereotypes of good women and bad women, as Clarie Jhonstan pointed out in the 1970s, is still valid in the case of Muslim women. Moreover, the problem of representation is further complicated by the ethnicity of Muslim women.

In her article titled *Through the Looking Glass: Muslim Women on Television—An Analysis of 24, Lost, and Little Mosque on the Prairie*, Hirji (2011) analyzes Muslim female characters in these three series. She acknowledges that *Little Mosque on the Prairie* has more positive portrayals of Muslim women than the other two series. However, Hirji argues that even *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, which serves as the first series to present such a significant number of central Muslim characters in North America, falls short of providing a complete and balanced representation of Muslim women. Hirji contends that it has done little to change essentialist images of Muslim women and has not shown sufficient diversity to highlight the broad spectrum of Muslim womanhood genuinely. She even points out that post-9/11 television has not evolved in its portrayal of Muslim women (Hirji 2011, 33).

"Unveiling Freedom" *CNN Newsnight*, December 3, 2001.

Recently, institutions such as the Geena Davis Foundation (2022) and USC Annenberg (2021, 2022) have conducted reports to analyze how Muslims are portrayed in popular TV shows. The Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism's research analyzed over 200 TV series aired between 2018 and 2019. According to research, only 1% of the speaking characters were Muslim, despite Muslims making up 25% of the global population and fewer than one-third of those characters were women (Khan et al. 2022). The study also found that Muslim women were often portrayed as "fearful and at risk" and predominantly depicted as victims of threats and violence. Researchers have stated that this report clearly shows the need for more work to increase the prevalence of Muslim representation on screen and to limit stigmatizing and stereotypical portrayals. They emphasized that a key solution for creating more positive representations of Muslim characters is to tell stories about them and to do so in collaboration with Muslim creatives. They also cited the series *Ramy* as an example, arguing that this strategy can be effective. That is, *Ramy* is highlighted as a successful example in this report, and this is due to the fact that a team of Muslim artists has created the series. I believe that being released on a digital platform has allowed the team to include people from more diverse backgrounds because, as a reminder, digital platforms not only offer diverse representation on screen but also enable the employment of creators from different identities behind the scenes (Wold 2017).

At this point, before analyzing how Muslim female characters are portrayed in the series *Ramy*, I would like to mention that there are episodes specifically dedicated to two of the main characters, Dena and Maysa, and female directors directed these episodes. The episodes dedicated to Dena—Season 1, Episode 6 titled "Refugees" and Season 2, Episode 5 titled "3riana grande"—and the episodes dedicated to Maysa—Season 1, Episode 7 titled "Ne Me Quitte Pas" and Season 2, Episode 6 titled "they"—were directed by Cherien Dabis who is a Palestinian American actress, director, producer, and screenwriter. As a Palestinian American woman herself, I find it noteworthy that the episodes telling the stories of Maysa, who also migrated from Palestine to America, were directed by Cherien Dabis. Hiam Abbas, who portrays the character Maysa in the series, directed Season 3, Episode 7, titled "Merchants in Medina" and consulted

producer Season 3, Episode 2, titled “Egyptian Cigarettes.” Considering how underrepresented women are as laborers in the Hollywood, I find it valuable that women are present as directors on the set of *Ramy* and that women direct the women's stories in these episodes. The fact that female directors helmed these episodes allows for a much deeper representation of the female characters in the series. Female directors have a better understanding of women's experiences, which makes the characters portrayed on screen more multi-dimensional. A more inclusive exploration of gender and identity becomes more possible when female characters are represented through a female perspective.

Moreover, it's not only the episodes covering Maysa and Dena's stories directed by women; other episodes also involved female directors. Palestinian director Annemarie Jacir⁴ directed *Egyptian Cigarettes*, the second episode of season 3, which centers on Ramy's journey to Israel. Desiree Akhavan⁵ also directed *Uncle Naseem*, the episode in which Naseem's homosexuality is revealed. It is especially nuanced that the themes these directors explore in their own projects align with the episodes they directed in *Ramy*. The themes and characters in the episodes directed by Annemarie Jacir and Desiree Akhavan reflect the distinctive cinematic approaches of these directors, shaped by their innovative use of film language and the thematic concerns they have explored in their previous productions. This brings a deeper and more nuanced dimension to the portrayal of these characters. Moreover, Cherien Dabis and Annemarie Jacir do not come from a television background; they are among the most important representatives of independent Palestinian cinema. While their work has primarily been in the realm of independent cinema, creating a project in a mainstream space like *Ramy* allows for a more nuanced representation of the series.

In addition to the presence of women directors, the show features many women writers, including Maytha Alhassen, Kate Thulin, Bjanka Pasic, Minhal Baig, Sahar Jahani, Leah Nanako Winkler, Colleen McGuinness, Monica Hanna, and Farida Zahran. As I

⁴ Jacir's award-winning film *The Salt of the Sea* tells the story of a Palestinian woman born in America who travels to Israel and Palestine to reclaim her family's home.

⁵ Akhavan identifies herself as a bisexual woman and she is an activist advocating for the LGBTQ community within the film industry. In her films *The Miseducation of Cameron Post*, *The Bisexual*, and *Appropriate Behaviour*, which Akhavan both wrote and directed, she focuses on queer women's stories.

mentioned earlier, Lauzen's studies demonstrate the underrepresentation of women in behind-the-camera roles. Yet *Ramy* stands in clear opposition to this, including a substantial number of women as both directors and writers. In this respect, the show is a significant step forward compared to Hollywood by providing such extensive opportunities to women behind the scenes. Increasing the number of women working behind the scenes also adds diversity and new viewpoints to the production processes.

In the next section of this chapter, I will focus on how female characters are represented on screen, demonstrating that the series is progressive in its qualitative representation of women. I will use intersectionality theory to analyze the portrayal of female characters in *Ramy*. In doing so, I aim to reinforce my thesis's primary argument that *Ramy* opens the representation of Muslim women for discussion, presents female characters with nuance, and challenges common stereotypes about Muslim women.

4.2 Challenging Expectations of Muslim Women as Dena

Season 1, Episode 6, titled "*Refugees*" is dedicated to the character Dena. The episode opens with Farouk having a conversation with the early teenage Dena about male/female relationships. This conversation is in Arabic and appears on the screen with English subtitles. In this conversation, Farouk mentions that a man and a woman are never alone in a room; the devil is with them, and this devil makes them do things that lead them to sin. He adds, "There is no greater sin in this entire world than having sex before marriage. If you have sex before marriage, you will 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." This scene directly exemplifies Lorde's intersectional theory of feminism. Although Farouk, as an Arab man, is marginalized in the West because of his ethnicity, he has authority over his daughter due to his gender. As Lorde (1984) claims, identities cannot be examined from a single perspective since they all

interact with other types of oppression, forming a complicated framework that determines a person's position in society. Farouk has historically been marginalized and repressed due to ethnic identity, being Arab, but he also has discursive authority over his daughter due to his gender, being male. In alignment with Lorde's theory, this demonstrates that power shifts dynamically and that the layered nature of identity does not always produce a fixed position of authority. Moreover, this scene is also important because Farouk's speech is a strong reflection of traditional values and Muslim societal norms, and it is important to understand how Dena's perspective on sex was shaped during her childhood in a Muslim family. As the episode continues, Dena's internal conflict as a Muslim woman and her stance on whether or not to have sex with a man will be revealed. Additionally, Farouk's emphasis on the "white man" and his warning to Dena illustrates how the power dynamics between East and West and the "us/them" distinction are internalized.

Farouk and Maysa treat their daughter Dena differently than their son Ramy. When Ramy wants to go out, his parents do not ask him where he is going or what time he will return, whereas Dena faces warnings from her parents when she wants to go out. Her parents caution her to be careful and insist that she should not come home late. The double standard applied to Ramy is apparent here. Just as in Farouk's conversation with Dena about sex, there is an attempt by her parents to control Dena, a Muslim woman, and to position her as someone more vulnerable to external dangers, unlike their son Ramy.

Beyond this, Dena also faces oppression from Uncle Nassem. He criticizes her clothing and expects her to serve him. In response to Dena's rebellious behavior, he tells Farouk, "You know, Farouk, you have to worry. Who's gonna marry a woman with such bad manners? She's gonna be on your hands forever." This statement indicates a patriarchal attitude, in which the father maintains authority and accountability over his daughter until marriage, at which time the husband assumes this role. Dena responds by apologizing for her actions and saying she is on her period. It is obvious, though, that Dena is not genuinely sorry. Knowing how Uncle Nassem will react, she purposefully brings up her period. He reassures her, saying, "Habibti, look. There's nothing to be

embarrassed about. Your brain is not working, because of the period. You know, it's very natural. What you need to do is go outside and take a walk. The fresh air will help you recover. If they stay in the house with the hormones, they turn on us, you know. It's good for them to see nature.” This conversation provides Dena with a legitimate reason to go outside. Dena intentionally feigns embarrassment by strategically mentioning her period to manipulate the situation. Through this, she creates an opportunity to step outside. Dena has ‘bargaining with patriarchy’ (Kandiyoti 1988), bending its norms and expectations to suit her own desires. She has devised a subtle yet effective form of resistance against the pressure exerted on her by the patriarchal system. In doing so, she challenges the Orientalist stereotype that portrays Muslim women as submissive and oppressed. Dena may not have made an overt or radical break from the patriarchy, but she has skillfully maneuvered within its constraints to turn the system to her advantage.

Dena is flirting with a white man, Kyle, who works at her university's cafeteria. She goes on a date with him, and because Kyle knows Dena is Egyptian, he prepares hummus for her, a dish often associated with Arab cuisine. Kyle's orientalist approach towards Dena also becomes evident in his comment about her straightening her curly hair. He says to Dena: “I mean, I love your natural curls. Like, that is sort of like what's different, you know?” When they start making out, Kyle asks Dena to speak Arabic and compliments her “olive” skin. Kyle's remarks become increasingly absurd. He asks Dena if she really wants to have sex with a white infidel and adds, “I can just stick it in your ass, and you can still be a virgin.” Kyle's remarks indicate a culturally stereotypical approach and tend to objectify and associate Dena's cultural background with sexuality despite his ignorance of her previous sexual experiences. Dena is subjected to stereotypical narratives by Kyle at the intersection of her ethnic and religious identities. While Dena's Arab identity appears exotic to Kyle, he assumes that, as an unmarried Muslim woman, her virginity must hold significant importance to her. Throughout the scene, Kyle's successive remarks reflect a stereotypical perception of Dena, much like the Eurocentric approach prevalent in Hollywood. The series *Ramy* satirizes these clichéd narratives through the character of Kyle. By reproducing these stereotypes through him, the show highlights the superficiality of this Eurocentric perspective and challenges these stereotypes.

The Western notion that Eastern women need to be rescued by their own cultures (Alsultany 2013; Haque 2010; Mishra 2007), which I mentioned earlier, reveals itself in Kyle's following words: "You can just, like, be yourself. I accept you. You don't have to wear a fucking head scarf or..." This statement is also in dialogue with Shohat's assertion that:

Still playing a significant role in post-colonial geopolitics, the predominant trope of "rescue" in colonial discourse forms the crucial site of the battle over representation. Not only has the Western imaginary metaphorically rendered the colonized land as a female to be saved from her environmental disorder, it has also projected rather more literal narratives of rescue, specifically of Western and non-Western women — from African, Asian, Arab, or American-Indian men. (Shohat 2006, 39)

Shohat (1990, 40) suggests that the repeated portrayal of the veiled woman in these films serves as a metaphor for the mystery of the Orient, which can only be understood through a process of Western revelation. This perspective is revealed in Kyle's statement: "I think it's hot that you're Egyptian. Like, is that... No, I think it's like... I think it's a cool part of you. I think it's interesting. It's just, like, so... unknown, and I just want to know it." This statement also draws a connection between the Western perception of the Orient as a mysterious feminine region and the deep interest in revealing the veiled woman (Yeğenoğlu 1998).

As a result of all these remarks, Dena realizes that Kyle wants to be with her just because she is Egyptian, which makes her uncomfortable. Dena tells Kyle that she does not want everything to be about her Arab identity. Kyle responds with, "Normal sucks. Right? Like, I wish that I was... Oh, my God. I just wish I was something. Like, anything. 'Cause I'm this, like, all the time. I'm just white. Do you know how weird it is to be nothing? Okay. Like, my art, right? I've got, like, this voice. And fuck, like, nobody gives a shit, 'cause I'm not... Indian or trans." His words reveal a deep sense of frustration. However, this frustration and the statements in question are highly ironic, especially considering that they are made by a white man to a marginalized woman. The irony is in contrasting the white man's grievances about his identity and sense of being "nothing" with the historical context in which Western perspectives have largely shaped

information, opinions, and the development of stereotypes against Others. As I discussed in my chapter called "Discussions on Identity Representation", Western powers have possessed the ability to shape discourse about communities and people they perceive as being outside their own norms. They have constructed the identities of Eastern societies through the lens of their own ideologies. In this context, the West has portrayed the East in an Orientalist manner, framing it in ways that reinforce its colonial and imperial interests. Kyle's words reveal how Orientalism and a Eurocentric perspective reduce and exoticize Dena's identity. From an Orientalist perspective, Kyle sees Dena's Arab identity as exotic and considers Dena as "other" based on the normative superiority of his own white identity. This highlights how Eurocentric representations not only constrain marginalized groups but also define them through "differences" that clash with Western norms. *Ramy* critiques these dynamics by exposing both the superficiality of Orientalism and Eurocentric representations and the problematic nature of the stereotypes imposed on marginalized identities. Through the character of Kyle, the show brings this white colonizer gaze to the screen and satirizes it.

Season 2, Episode 5, titled "3riane grande," is dedicated to the character Dena and focuses on her Arab American identity. In this episode, Dena learns that she has received a full scholarship to law school and shares a Facebook post announcing this news. In response, her parents, Maysa and Farouk, tell her that what she did was wrong and warn her that people might give her the evil eye. Later in the episode, Dena notices that some of her hair has started falling out, and she feels a lump in her chest. She begins to believe that these symptoms result from some people being jealous of her and giving her the evil eye after she posted about getting into law school. As a result, she starts wearing a headscarf for a while.

In the continuation of the episode, Dena has to return home with a Mexican American tow truck driver because her car breaks down. The conversation between them focuses on how Muslim women who wear the hijab are perceived, which is one of the main focal points of the episode. The driver asks Dena some questions to get to know her better, and upon learning that she is going to law school, assumes that Dena is the first

person in her family to study law, given that she is a Muslim woman. He even finds it progressive that Dena is driving a car. His comments escalate, and he says to her, "All I'm saying is, if you'd stayed back in your homeland, you would have been too busy getting your clit sawed off to do any of this law stuff, right?" Despite not knowing which country Dena's family migrated from to America, the Mexican American driver assumes her homeland is a backward country that oppresses women and does not allow them to study, likely due to Dena wearing a headscarf. This assumption can also be understood from his comment, "...and you don't have to be wearing that thing. It's a symbol of oppression." The driver's comments about Dena wearing a headscarf and attending law school reveal how her identity is perceived through the intersection of gender, religion, and ethnicity. The Mexican driver's assumption that Dena, as a Muslim woman of Arab descent, is oppressed influences how he positions her within the intersection of these factors in her identity.

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, the representation of Muslim women in the media has changed since September 11; similarly, Donnell argues that the portrayal of the veil has also shifted post-9/11. Instead of being framed as 'an object of mystique, exoticism, and eroticism,' the veil or headscarf is now depicted as a 'xenophobic, more specifically Islamophobic gaze through which the veil, or headscarf, is seen as a highly visible sign of a despised difference' (Donnell 2003, 123). Kyle and the Mexican driver's approaches to Dena are different. For Kyle, Dena's Egyptian identity is intriguing; he is fascinated by her skin color, curly hair, and speaking Arabic. Kyle displays a complete orientalist perspective toward Dena.

On the other hand, the Mexican driver does not have an orientalist attitude that sees Dena as exotic or erotic. Instead, he believes that if Dena had stayed in her own country, she would be oppressed and suggests that coming to the US was her salvation, making comments that sometimes veer into xenophobia. The Mexican driver's words also parallel the changing representations of Muslim women after 9/11. He tells Dena that just as he, as a Mexican, does not have to wear a sombrero or celebrate the criminal activities of Mexicans crossing the border illegally, she does not have to wear a headscarf, emphasizing that America is a melting pot and Dena should simply melt into it. These statements are particularly significant because they are made by a Mexican

American, who is himself marginalized. As a marginalized person, the Mexican driver adopts a white supremacist ideology and applies it to Dena. Western cultural norms are considered normal or universal in the framework in which the debate is set. Dena's headscarf, as a marker of her Muslim identity, is viewed by the Mexican driver as a deviation from Western normative standards. This aligns with Edward Said's assertion that Orientalism is a discourse through which the West exercises control over the "Other." The scene underscores how marginalized individuals reconstruct their own identities and those of others according to colonial norms, revealing how these dynamics persist in daily life and are reproduced between individuals.

As can be understood from the driver's words, Dena, as an Arab Muslim woman, becomes the object of many stereotypical views of the intersection of her ethnicity and religious beliefs. However, this time, these views are not directed at her by a white man but by a Mexican American man who is himself also colonized. In this way, the series *Ramy* offers the audience a different perspective on how Muslim women are perceived, not only from a Western viewpoint but also from the viewpoint of someone marginalized. At the same time, the series conveys these stereotypes against Arab Muslim women through intermediaries like Kyle and the Mexican man. In other words, while the series relies on stereotypes, it challenges them within the narrative.

Dena is a headstrong, outspoken character who does not succumb to her family's pressures. In Season 3, we learn that she is interning at a law firm that helps migrants and refugees. She is studying for the bar exams to get her law license. Maysa has created an online dating profile for Dena and invited a suitable candidate to their home to meet her. However, Dena tells them that she is not interested in dating anyone and does not have the time, as she is busy preparing for the bar exam and sends the candidate away. Maysa pressures Dena, insisting it is time for her to marry and have children as soon as possible. Maysa's attitude suggests that she wants Dena to continue the traditional image of a married Muslim woman with children. Dena, however, is entirely focused on her career.

She wants to help a refugee woman whose daughter has cancer with her case. However, when she learns from her boss that they cannot file the case because the woman does

not have the proper visa, Dena faces the reality that, as a lawyer, she cannot help everyone she wants to assist. For this reason, Dena is in a bad mood, and the night before her bar exam, she goes out drinking with her friends. Later, she goes to Tarek's house and wants to have sex with him. However, Tarek does not want to have sex before marriage due to his Muslim beliefs. However, partly because of Dena's insistence and strong desire, they end up having sex. When Dena wakes up, it is past midnight, and very little time is left before the bar exam. She finds Tarek praying, seeking forgiveness for his sins. Tarek tells Dena that he has never had sex with anyone before and that they need to get married to be cleansed of their sins. However, Dena says that is not necessary. By presenting a scene where a Muslim woman takes the virginity of a Muslim man, *Ramy* offers a revolutionary moment that breaks stereotypes.

In the following days, Dena visits Tarek to apologize. She admits that her behavior that night was entirely selfish, that she only acted on her own desire without considering how Tarek felt about having sex, and that she apologizes to him. Tarek tells her, "...you are more convincing than any guy I've ever met. I think you could convince anyone of anything." Tarek's perception of Dena is far from the stereotype of the oppressed Muslim woman who is dependent on Muslim men. Dena is entirely independent, confident, and assertive. In fact, in her relationship with Tarek, Dena is mostly in control, even to the point of pressuring him into having sex.

In the Season 3 finale, Dena announces to her family that she will marry Tarek. She clarifies that this decision will not detract from her career goals, that she is still focused on her career, and that she will pass the bar exam. She also mentions that they are not planning to have children for a while. Throughout these three seasons, Dena's character development challenges the common stereotypical representations of Muslim women as submissive, obedient, and/or silent wives of a repressive Muslim man (Alhassen 2018). Dena is outside of many stereotypical representations about Muslim women, such as being dependent on her husband, married and having to take care of her children, and involved in household chores but not having a profession. The *Ramy* series presents a much more layered representation of Muslim women through the character of Dena and distorts the stereotypes about Muslim women.

In this section, I have attempted to examine how gender identities are represented in the series *Ramy* by analyzing Dena's story across three seasons. Using examples from Dena's character, I argued that the representation of Muslim women in *Ramy* is not one-dimensional. Instead of portraying Muslim women as oppressed and backward, the series presents them as strong, purpose-driven individuals who challenge stereotypical judgments. In the next section, I will examine other female characters in the series to explore how *Ramy* offers alternatives to the representations of Muslim women.

4.3 Female Desires in *Ramy*

It will also be important to examine how another main character, Maysa, is represented in *Ramy* to argue that the series offers a revolutionary approach to the representation of Muslim women. Maysa is a clumsy, aggressive, and, at times, rude character. In the series, we mostly see her as a mother engaged in household chores and cooking for her family. At first glance, this reinforces the typical stereotype of Muslim women being restricted by patriarchal communities or families. However, the episode titled "Ne Me Quitte Pas" from Season 1, Episode 7, provides an opportunity to delve deeper into Maysa's character and reveals that she is much more complex than these stereotypical representations suggest. The episode highlights how lonely Maysa feels. She shares almost nothing with Farouk aside from watching television together.

Maysa starts driving for Lyft to combat her loneliness, trying to connect with passengers and make friends. She frequently bothers passengers with excessive communication and comments on topics that do not concern her. She even brings homemade food for her passengers, though some drivers find the smell unpleasant. As a result, her rating on the app remains relatively low, and she feels disappointed. Maysa realizes how futile her efforts and preparations have been and how empty her desire for connection with passengers was. Just as she feels this sense of failure, a French customer enters her car, and Maysa begins a conversation with him in French. They share their life stories and discuss the pros and cons of living in New Jersey. Unlike her interactions with Farouk, Maysa has deep, meaningful, and extended conversations with this French customer.

This interaction makes Maysa feel less lonely and find the deep connection she has longed for with this man.

On another day, they agree that Maysa will drive him to his destination again. This time, she goes all out, dressing up, putting on makeup, applying perfume, and wearing jewelry. This is not the only instance where we see Maysa wanting to flirt with another man. Maysa is mistaken for Ramy's grandmother rather than her mother, which damages her self-esteem and makes her feel old. She then calls Tarek, and after confirming that Dena has not met with him, she feels relieved. They start a conversation where Maysa shares that she has never spoken to Farouk in this manner and talks about her loneliness. Maysa asks Tarek if he has any plans for the evening. An additional facet of Maysa's character is illustrated by her inclination to engage with and flirt with a young man, whom she considers a potential suitor for her daughter.

Ramy goes beyond the stereotypical portrayal of married Muslim women with children by emphasizing Maysa's loneliness and her need to flirt with men outside of her family, which enables a more complex understanding of her character. Instead of portraying Maysa as a one-dimensional representation, the show offers a more nuanced portrayal of a Muslim woman and challenges stereotypes. Through Maysa, the show initially depicts a classic housewife figure—a domestic woman who constantly cooks, favors her son over her daughter, and imposes restrictions on her daughter. However, it simultaneously portrays Maysa as a character who pursues romance, harbors suppressed desires, and is unafraid to chase after her passions, even those that have been socially repressed, including her sexuality. In this way, the narrative consequently takes an unforeseen direction, employing these narrative tools to challenge conventional stereotypes of Muslim women.

In the scene where Maysa establishes a deeper relationship with her daughter, she tells her daughter that she is proud of her for becoming a lawyer and that she appreciates her for being independent. It is important that she says this out loud to Dena because we do not see this from Maysa very often in the series; she is more repressive towards her daughter. However, the series again opened a new layer for Maysa. Maysa is self-

critical and expresses her regret for not standing on her own feet and marrying Faruk. In the third season, we also see Maysa occasionally asking for a divorce from Faruk. This is mainly due to the fact that Faruk made ridiculous investments after losing his job, which ended in failure, and he did not tell Maysa that he had lost his job. Even though she has the idea of divorce in her mind, when Maysa hears this from the psychologist she goes to with her daughter, Maysa strongly objects. The psychologist asks Maysa whether she has experienced power struggle dynamics in her previous relationships. Maysa tells her that she is not a prostitute and that, in her culture, she can only choose one man. When the psychologist asks her if she has ever considered divorce, Maysa sternly replies that she is a Palestinian woman by emphasizing that when they have problems, they solve them; they do not pretend that they do not have a family as the West does. *Ramy* series presents a very diverse representation of Maysa. It does not close the representation of the Muslim woman with a conclusion. On the contrary, it brings this representation into a space open to discussion and debate.

In *Ramy*, aside from Maysa and Dena, there are several other Muslim female characters in supporting roles that break stereotypes. One notable example is Salma, a hijab-wearing married woman with children whom Ramy meets in Season 1, Episode 5, titled "Do The Ramadan." Ramy encounters Salma at the mosque during Ramadan. Salma needs to return home to give insulin to her child, and Ramy offers to help by carrying the child to their home. At Salma's house, she removes her hijab in Ramy's presence, which is not in line with Islamic dress code requirements. This is an action entirely unexpected from a married Muslim woman and plays with the audience's expectations of what a married Muslim woman should be.

When Ramy mentions that he has not broken his fast yet, Salma offers him snacks instead of the expected meal. This is particularly significant in light of the widespread misconception that Muslim women are only involved in household duties like cooking extravagant meals and taking care of the home. The absence of a prepared dinner in Salma's household stands in contrast to these expectations. Additionally, Salma expresses frustration with her domestic situation, commenting on her husband: "He rolls in whenever he wants, expects me to hand over half my paycheck, expects me to raise

Ali single-handedly... Sometimes... I really wish he was like an old-school misogynist, ya know? Like our dads? Just expect a hot meal at the end of the day, clean house, good kid... Nowadays, guys expect you to work on top of everything else.” This remark emphasizes the irrational expectations placed on her, which stands in stark contrast to the conventional stereotype that Muslim women are supposed to take care of the home. Salma undermines the stereotype of a married, hijab-wearing Muslim woman by taking off her hijab and serving snacks instead of a home-cooked lunch. By having sex with Ramy, she pushes this portrayal and challenges the audience's assumptions of the character. Salma, a married Muslim wearing the hijab, breaks several stereotypes. Her portrayal in the series questions the simplistic, monolithic views of Muslim women and presents a more nuanced, multifaceted representation.

Nour is another significant character in the series who challenges stereotypes about Muslim women. Ramy and Nour meet at an Egyptian restaurant chosen by Ramy for their first date. Her cousin, who serves as a traditional figure and protector, is with Nour. However, the meeting is interrupted when Ramy's friends invite Ramy to a nightclub. Surprisingly, Nour's cousin is open to the idea and even suggests a different nightclub. While he is portrayed as a dominant male figure, his familiarity with nightclubs challenges the audience's expectations about his character. Eventually, the cousin leaves with Ramy's friends to go to the nightclub, leaving Ramy and Nour alone.

Ramy walks with Nour to her car to say goodbye. Before leaving, Nour wants to kiss him and Ramy is surprised by this. In the car, she takes the situation further, initiating a sexual encounter that leaves him even more stunned. Ramy had not expected Nour, a Muslim woman, to express such desire before marriage. He says it would not be correct because they are not married, but normally, Ramy is someone who sleeps with white women without being married. Nour is portrayed as passionate and assertive. At one point, she even asks Ramy to choke her while she masturbates, but he refuses. In response, Nour expresses her discomfort with being confined to what she calls a 'Muslim box' by saying, "I'm, like, in this little Muslim box in your head, and I'm the wife or the mother of your kids, right? I'm not supposed to cum."

Through her actions, Nour challenges the stereotype of the “virgin Muslim woman” who is expected to abstain from any sexual experiences before marriage. This stereotype often portrays Muslim women as pure, modest, and restrained, limiting their autonomy and desires. Nour’s assertiveness in expressing her own sexuality breaks down this reductive view, making her an embodiment of freedom and self-determination. Each time Nour expresses a desire that defies Ramy’s expectations, he is taken aback, highlighting his struggle to reconcile her actions with the image he has of what a Muslim woman should be. His reactions reveal his assumptions about Muslim women’s identity. Nour, however, refuses to be confined by these expectations. She challenges Ramy’s behavior, pointing out the way he tries to box her into predefined roles — either as the obedient wife or the dutiful mother of his children. Through Ramy’s character, the series critiques the Orientalist perspectives that have been used to depict Muslim women as monolithic figures. In *Ramy*, Nour overturns these clichés by openly expressing her sexual desires and refusing to conform to reductive stereotypes.

As I discussed in my first chapter, Clare Johnston argues that Hollywood cinema represents women through the male gaze. In her essay, *Women’s Cinema as Counter-Cinema*, Johnston (1999) asserts that women’s cinema challenges patriarchal cinematic norms and their ideological functions. Similarly, the women represented in *Ramy* create a counter-image to the female identities constructed within the framework of Eurocentric perspectives.

In this chapter, I analyzed how Muslim female characters are represented in the series *Ramy*. I argued that the show depicts Muslim characters in ways that go beyond the accepted norms of Hollywood depiction, and it challenges typical stereotypical images. These women follow their female desires and ambitions rather than being obedient to oppression or restricted to household duties. *Ramy* presents them throughout the series in a complex and multifaceted way.

5. CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored how religious and gender identities are represented in the series *Ramy* and how these representations disrupt the stereotypes associated with Muslim identities in traditional Hollywood media. By conducting a textual and contextual analysis of the series' narrative structure through the lens of Third World cinema, postcolonial theory, and feminist film studies literature, this study has demonstrated that *Ramy* develops an alternative representation that challenges Eurocentric and Orientalist practices of representation. In this context, I argued that *Ramy* sets itself as a great example of how the representation of Muslim identities has always been problematic.

The problematic aspect of Muslim representation cited by scholars such as Shaheen (2003, 2007), Alhassen (2018), and Alsultany (2013, 2022) is that Muslim identities have historically been portrayed in Hollywood media as backward, exotic, and oppressive, with these representations worsening after 9/11, reducing Muslim identities to specific stereotypical images such as terrorists and bombers. Moreover, Hollywood media has represented Muslim identities through an Orientalist and Eurocentric approach in a manner that reinforces the West's ideological aims and hegemonic power over the Middle East, emphasizing the West's superiority over the East, creating a binary opposition between the West and the East, and portraying Muslims as one-dimensional identities (Said 1978; Shohat and Stam 2014; Stam and Spence 1983).

On the other hand, the *Ramy* series stands as an example outside of these dominant Eurocentric and Orientalist representations in Hollywood media because, with its nuanced storytelling, *Ramy* challenges the traditional “us versus them” dichotomies of Hollywood media by presenting multidimensional characters that embody the complexity of Muslim identities. In this regard, I claimed that the series *Ramy* disrupts Hollywood's dominant Orientalist and Eurocentric narratives and paves the way for alternative representations of Muslim identities by challenging the stereotypical portrayals associated with the representation of Muslims in traditional media. In this context, I believe that digital platforms create space for bringing diverse identity representations to the screen and, much like *Ramy*, break the conservatism of traditional media while offering more nuanced identity representations.

The series highlights the complex nature of religious, cultural, and gender-related experiences through the personal journey of its protagonist, Ramy Hassan, as well as the narratives of other Muslim characters. While the series incorporates stereotypes, it creates a narrative that challenges these stereotypes, achieving this through the use of humor. The series employs humor as a political tool.

Ramy places Muslim identities within a discursive space where they can be negotiated and redefined. In this regard, the series does not aim to reach a conclusion about the representation of Muslim identities but rather makes these representations open to questioning and discussion within mainstream media.

The first chapter, "Discussions on Identity Representation", examined the historical representation of Muslim identities in Hollywood media. It analyzed the problematic dimensions of these representations and the role of media in shaping prevailing ideologies. The chapter also delved into identity as a concept shaped by ideological forces in media narratives (Stuart Hall 1989) and further examined stereotyping as a prevalent representational approach (Richard Dyer 1977). It highlighted the deeply rooted stereotypes in the West's framing of the East by illuminating the notions of Orientalism (Said 1978) and Eurocentrism (Shohat and Stam 2014), drawing on the views of researchers who study media and representation. Since their works address representational issues and seek alternatives to the Eurocentric representational methods created by the West, the perspectives of Third World cinema and postcolonial film theorists were also investigated. Finally, I utilized feminist theory in this chapter to analyze the ideological construction of gender identities since the representation of Muslim women in the series was examined.

The second chapter, "Religious Identities", focused on how Muslim identities are represented in the series *Ramy*. In the first section of this chapter, the reader was introduced to the character by focusing on Ramy's journey across three seasons of the series, and his diasporic identity was analyzed. By examining the episodes where Ramy visits Egypt and Palestine, the analysis delved into the self-orientalist attitude the character falls into during his encounters with people in these countries, using the theories of scholars such as Trinh T. Minh-Ha (1991, 2011), Stuart Hall (2006, 2013),

and Homi Bhabha (1994). In light of these theorists, it was argued that the series dismantles the binary distinction of Eastern/Western identities, showing that an Eastern individual can adopt a Western perspective and vice versa and that identities are not fixed but fluid and dynamic. I emphasized that the series serves as an innovative example by bringing topics typically discussed in independent cinema into a mainstream platform. Additionally, this section addressed Ramy's identity crisis as an Egyptian immigrant living in America, focusing on the struggles he faces in reconciling his American lifestyle with his Muslim identity.

The analysis did not remain confined to Ramy alone and continued with another section of this chapter that examined how the Muslim identities of other characters in the series are represented. While this section also revisited Ramy, it additionally focused on figures such as Dennis, a newly converted Muslim; Black Muslims; and Uncle Naseem. With this broader spectrum of Muslim identities, I argued that the series challenges the one-dimensional and stereotypical representation of Muslim identities in Hollywood media by portraying them in a multidimensional way.

The third chapter "Gender Identities", focused on how gender identities were represented in the series *Ramy*. The first section examined the problematic global representation of women using Lauzen's contemporary film and television reports (2012, 2023a, 2023b). In the continuation of this section, it was explained that, unlike traditional media, digital platforms have created space for a more nuanced representations of women. (Bucciferro 2019; Christian 2019; Griffiths 2016; Smith et al. 2016). The negative and stereotypical portrayal of Muslim women in Hollywood media was also addressed in this section (Akabli and Chahdi 2022; Navarro 2010; Shaheen 2007; Terman 2017).

The following section focused on the character Dena. Through examples centered on her, it was argued that the series challenge clichés about Muslim women's representation. In the final section, characters such as Maysa, Salma, and Nour were discussed, highlighting how the series adopted a multidimensional approach to representing Muslim women's identities, steering away from Hollywood's stereotypical

images. This chapter argued that the series opened the representation of Muslim women to an interrogation and a discussion, challenging stereotypes by portraying women not as passive, oppressed, or confined to household roles but as independent individuals pursuing their own desires and goals.

In conclusion, by analyzing the representations of religious and gender identities in *Ramy*, this thesis argues that the series is an example of resisting hegemonic representations in Hollywood media, challenging stereotypes, and offering nuanced, multifaceted representations of Muslim identities. Moreover, the most important aspect of the series is that it brings the issue of identity representation, which is still being discussed and problematized in the third cinema, into the popular sphere through the digital platform. This is why the series is so groundbreaking.

I believe that one of the important reasons why *Ramy* is such a groundbreaking example is that the creative team of the series includes large number of Muslims. I also think that, beyond the film crew, the semi-autobiographical nature of the series—rooted in creator and lead actor Ramy Youssef's own life—plays a significant role in shaping its approach to the issue of representation. Just like in *Ramy*, I believe that with more examples of marginalized people telling their own experiences and stories from their own perspective, more nuanced and realistic representations of identities that challenge hegemonic narratives will find a place on the screen and that digital platforms provide space for such examples.

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