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'Why Do They Make Her Wear That?': A Rhetorical Analysis of *Ramy Youssef: Feelings*

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reached moments of desperation, and have pushed me through those difficult times. Not

many people can empathize with this writing process, but they have been my backbone,

and for that I am very appreciative.

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Abstract

Muslims have often been portrayed in the media, as violent, barbaric, terrorists, and powerless victims, along with many other misconceptions of negative and stereotypical images. *Ramy Youssef: Feelings* (2019), is an hour-long stand-up comedy special presented by comic Ramy Youssef, who is a Muslim millennial Egyptian-American man. By conducting a rhetorical analysis of the special, this research combines the method of Critical Rhetoric with two of Lowery and Renegar's (2016) three frameworks, those being Bicultural Otherness and Self and Culture Deprecating Humor, to analyze Youssef's comedy special *Feelings* (2019). This research delineates how the media influences the rhetoric of Muslim representations, and focuses on understanding how Youssef's comedic persona and performance influence his message, Muslim representations, and his viewers. The analysis considers the environment and the context, in which the comedy special takes place, as well as Youssef's performance and nonverbal communication. It has found that Youssef challenged many stereotypical representations of Muslims by questioning the responses of normative society and communicating his cultural identity to the audience. However, he also contributed to some new misrepresentations of Muslims, especially those who are first-generation Americans, as parts of his performance suggest a more secular, less-pious attitude that disregards some central tenets of the Islamic faith.

I AM GREEN

I grew up in Blue Country.
My parents grew up in Yellow Country.
They tell me I am Yellow
And sometimes we go visit Yellow Country.

When I am in Yellow Country
I go to school with the Yellow kids.
I dress like the Yellow kids
And I talk like the Yellow kids.

But when I am in Blue Country
I go to school with the Blue Kids.
I dress like the Blue kids
And I talk like the Blue kids.

Sometimes when I am in Yellow Country
I really miss the Blue ways.
I guess that the things I do and say,
Are really rather Bluish in color.

In the same way, when I am Blue Country
There are things I miss about Yellow Country.
And I am sure the things I do and say
Appear rather Yellowish in color.

All the changing around is so confusing
Blue or Yellow? Who am I really?
I wonder if there is a place where I could just be me,
Where the Blue and the Yellow could both run free.

Sometimes when I am flying between the two places
I want to stay up there in the middle of all the races.
If only I could stop some place in between
If only I could just be GREEN!

                                                            ('I am green', n.d.)

Chapter One: Introduction

Standing in the middle of a seated crowd, on a slightly elevated platform, Ramy Youssef is performing his stand-up comedy special *Ramy Youssef: Feelings* (2019). He is a brown man with a thick beard, wearing a backward black cap, a gray t-shirt, an unbuttoned blue long sleeve shirt, and white sneakers. He moves slowly within the crowd, in a calmly lit room, with gold walls. He speaks in a slow-paced, clear tone. He shares a story about encounters he has had, saying, "They'll [White people] find out I'm Muslim. The second they find out, crazy question, '*Why do you make them wear that?'* I'm like, *who?*" (Youssef et al., 2019, 33:25). He pauses, staring straight into the camera. This joke is a common misconception, as many people in the U.S. American and Western societies believe that Muslim women wear a headscarf [hijab] because they are oppressed by Muslim men and are forced to do so, and for society to become civil, Islamic practices such as hijab must be disallowed (Ruby, 2016).

Unfortunately, I have had many similar experiences of being asked intrusive questions once people see me wearing a hijab, and therefore, identify me as a Muslim. I have found that usually, these questions are a result of extreme ignorance of the Islamic faith, and/or because of stereotypical preconceptions of Muslim individuals. As, for example, the several microaggressions I experience daily because of my hijab are often done in jest. Like the many times people identify me as an ethnicity other than my own (*You* must be Indian), or tell me, "What *we* do in America" stories. A lot of people really do not know anything about the hijab. They think the cloth itself has a meaning, but the meaning is actually behind the concept of modesty.

These misconceptions are very common, and are likely a result of how the media associates Muslims, Islam, Arabs, Middle Easterners, immigrants, refugees, and brown folks with terrorists, hedonists, misogynists, and barbarian (Poynting, 2002; Shaheen, 2003; Earp & Jhally, 2006; Corbin, 2017). Many countries of immigration have previously perceived Islam to be a religion that is odd and foreign, which would best be managed by outsourcing (Loobuyck et al., 2013). The contradiction between the East and the West can be defined as the "Other", since the West acknowledges the East to be the alien (Taibi, 2019). The Orient is a term used to geographically refer to the Eastern world, whereas the term Orientalism is defined as "the way or method used to understand eastern world, based on its particular place in westerner experiences" (Turmudi, 2013, as cited in Rahmi, 2019, p. 10). Images of the Orient depict it as a place of exoticism, intrigue, and passion (Earp & Jhally, 2006).

The Orient is only an ideological representation and a Western projection of a fantasy world, and therefore, there is not a "real" Orient because "the Orient" itself is merely an Orientalist construction (Taibi, 2019). As Said (1979) explains, the geographical and cultural entities of the Orient and the Occident are "man-made". He states that "the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery, and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West" (p. 5). Referring to the Muslim minorities in a hostile manner is a form of Orientalism, which is a cultural practice that represents the Islamic world as inferior to the Western one (Ridanpää, 2009). Orientalism has violated Islam and Arabs (Said, 1979).

Unlike these negative portrayals, on Friday nights, my parents, siblings, and I gather in the living room to watch television together. We make popcorn, grab our

blankets, and dim the lights. Usually, we watch a movie or a classic Egyptian play. But

this time, we are watching Mo Amer's stand-up comedy special called *The*

Vagabond (2018). Amer is a Muslim comedian, who I had heard of before, and I heard he

was funny, so we were all excited to watch his special. In the opening statement, he

explains that *Mo* is short for *Mohamed*, following with "Surprise, bitches!" (Amer et al,

2018, 1:29). His usage of a curse word was a little unexpected. My parents, similar to

many traditional folks, do not expect this kind of language, which is obvious. The face

they make shows a mix of confusion and disapproval, but we continue to watch. Amer

continues to use foul language occasionally throughout his performance, but we all still

get a good laugh out of the special.

A few days later, I watch an episode from the television series *Ramy* (2019) for

the first time. In that show, Ramy Youssef plays the main character, provides content

related to Islam in a humorous manner, and portrays day-to-day situations a Muslim

Arab-American may encounter. My mom is beside me when we play the first episode,

and she does not like what she sees. Many of the jokes and the content presented,

especially those linked to Islam, are upsetting to both of us. Many sexual references are

made, which is often a taboo subject in many Arab and Southeast Asian households

(Tasnim, 2009; van Wees et al., 2021), even though Muslim "parents are urged not to feel

shy or embarrassed about providing necessary information about sex to their children"

(Noibi, 1993, as cited in Halstead, 1997, p. 319). But like many traditional households,

ours is no different.

It is uncomfortable watching it with my mom. I glance over at her every once and

a while, and I can visibly see her disapproval with her facial expressions. We stop

watching. My mom is slightly annoyed, and she says, "so the media either represents us in a violent manner or in an inappropriate manner? The media has completely ruined our image." Her statement comes after we had watched the movie *Hotel Mumbai* (2018) the day before, which is based on a true story in which Muslims are portrayed as terrorists. Her statement is a false binary, perhaps, but she makes a valid point.

I continue to search for 'lighter' media content that portrays Muslims and Islam in a more subtle and friendly manner. I am still interested in comedy, especially after watching Amer's special, but I desire comedy that could change the narrative of how Islam and Muslims are represented in the media. Comedy that could improve their misrepresented images and get rid of stereotypes, especially in Western countries and the United States. Unfortunately, as I try to do so, I find that it is difficult. Yes, there are a few that are fitting, but they offer more cliché jokes and humor. Instead, the majority of the content I view is quite surprising, as if the comedians are trying to show a very liberal, Western side to their narrative in an attempt to fit in with a Western, secular society. However, this narrative goes against some Islamic teachings, as it disregards many central tenets of the faith. I find that I simply could not identify with this comedic narrative either.

As a practicing, Muslim Egyptian-American heterosexual, able-bodied cisgender woman, I have a hard time relating to much of the content I found. I identify as a first-generation Muslim millennial Egyptian-American. Therefore, I identify with various separate and overlapping cultural identities; *first-generation American*, *Muslim*, *millennial*, *Egyptian*, and *American*. Therefore, these are the identities I focus on throughout my thesis. Out of all of my identities, I am more Muslim than I am

anything. This is why I am struggling with the question; why does the dominant culture

define me? Why should I be either Muslim or American? Why can I not be both? Why

can I not be non-secular and still be accepted? Why can I not be associated with

American culture; eat hotdogs and celebrate Thanksgiving, carry my Islamic values and

beliefs; practice Islam openly, pray, and fast, and also resonate with my Egyptian culture;

enjoy a good bowl of Koshary[1] and observe Sham El-Nessim[2]?

 After some time, I come across *Ramy Youssef: Feelings* (2019), which offers very

similar content to what I had first seen in *Ramy* (2019). I have some positive and negative

thoughts towards the artifact and think that I would like to better understand it. How does

Youssef communicate his cultural identity, which is very similar to mine, as he is also a

first-generation Muslim millennial Egyptian-American? Is my identity accurately

portrayed in this special? Have his jokes succeeded in breaking down negative

stereotypes? Have they created other controversies? How does his identity influence his

comedy? And how does his comedy influence his message, Muslim representations, and

his audience?

 My thesis addresses how comedy in general, and Muslim-American stand-up

comedy specifically, can both challenge and create negative stereotypes and

misconceptions of Muslims and Islam that exist in the West. By rhetorically analyzing

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[1] Koshary is an Egyptian dish, which consists of rice, macaroni, lentils, chickpeas, crispy fried onions, tomato sauce, and garlic vinegar. Many also add a hot sauce, although it is optional.

[2] Sham El-Nessim, which roughly translates to *smelling of the breeze* in Arabic, is an Egyptian national holiday that goes back to ancient Egyptian times. It always falls on the Monday after Easter, and it marks the beginning of spring. Some of the festivities include Egyptians gathering with friends and family in parks or gardens, as well as eating herring and feseekh, which is salted and fermented fish.

the stand-up comedy special *Feelings* (2019), I critique how Youssef communicates his

bicultural identity to the audience, by examining his performance, use of language, non-

verbal communication, choice of humor, and his interactions with the audience. I also

identify demeaning content within the special that may negatively influence both Muslim

and non-Muslim audiences and argue that Youssef creates new misrepresentations of

Muslims and Islam by painting a picture of secularism and disregarding many vital

elements of the Islamic faith. This rhetorical analysis builds on current scholarship in

understanding the impact of comedy's rhetorical discourse on the representations of

Muslims and Islam, in both a positive and negative manner.

Research Plan & Research Questions

For my thesis, I conduct a rhetorical criticism of *Feelings* (2019), as I focus on

how rhetoric functions to persuade and influence people. I acknowledge and state my

positionality as the researcher, which is an integral component and is actively involved in

my research. I explain that I am a practicing first-generation, Muslim millennial

Egyptian-American woman and that I have a personal desire to find media

representations that accurately represent me and my community.

I use Critical Rhetoric as the method of my analysis, which is a form of critique

that focuses on the integration of power and knowledge in society. I explore how the

discourse found in the comedy special is influenced by context and how power dynamics

influence the representations of Muslims. McKerrow (1989) explains that Critical

Rhetoric involves two forms of critique; a critique of domination and a critique of

freedom, which challenge power structures and influence social change.

Critical work addresses power as a component of social life and focuses on the different ways it functions (Ono, 2011). By using the two frameworks of Bicultural Otherness and Self and Culture Deprecating Humor as theoretical lenses, I critically and rhetorically explore how Youssef communicates his identities through his stand-up routine and addresses power relations. I argue that using the lens of Bicultural Otherness not only highlights the intersectionality of Youssef's character and his various identities, being a first-generation, Muslim, millennial, Egyptian-American male, but also critiques dominant systems of power. Similarly, using the lens of Self and Culture Deprecating Humor portrays the power of comedy in either challenging dominant systems or creating new misrepresentations. I argue that Youssef has done both, as he has confronted many existing stereotypes and prejudices, but also certain jokes in the special create new misrepresentations, controversies, and/or offenses, by presenting Muslim-American millennials in a fashion that has drifted away from Islamic values and beliefs, and has rather become more secular.

I am also interested in further understanding the role that comedy in general, and stand-up comedy specifically, play in breaking down previously held misconceptions of Islam and Muslims. To conduct this research, I watched the special repeatedly, concentrating each time on one of the frameworks picking jokes that fit the purpose of my research, especially those that portray power dynamics within society. I also focus on Ramy's use of language, non-verbal communication, choice of humor, and interactions with the audience for my analysis. I am also interested in seeing how being a woman affects my watching of the text because as a man, Youssef has a stronger platform, from

which he can be heard. Therefore, I am eager to understand if his rhetoric aligns with how I see myself.

My thesis consists of six chapters, which are the introduction and narrative, the context and the literature review, the theory and method, analyzing Bicultural Otherness, analyzing and Self and Culture Deprecating Humor, and the discussion and conclusion. For this project I answer the following research questions:

R1: How does Youssef communicate cultural identity through his stand-up routine?

R2: How do two of Lowrey and Renegar's (2016) three frameworks operate in Youssef's comedy?

R3: How do I see myself and my community represented in Youssef's comedy?

R4: How does the comedy presented in *Ramy Youssef: Feelings* play a role in breaking down previously held stereotypes about Muslims and Islam?

R5: How does the comedy presented in *Ramy Youssef: Feelings* create new misrepresentations?

Thesis Outline

In this thesis, I first shared my personal experiences of intrusive questions that have resulted from media portrayals and the Western construct of Orientalism. I then shared my initial thoughts of my watching not only watching the comedy special, *Ramy Youssef: Feelings* (2019), but also my watching of various other media forms, in which Muslims or Islam have been mentioned. I discuss how it has affected me and my various cultural identities, of being a first-generation, Muslim millennial Egyptian-American woman.

In Chapter 2, I provide the necessary context, in which the comedy special was created, in order to better understand the discourse that appears within. This context includes who Ramy Youssef is and the work he has created this far. Additionally, I look at the awards and nominations he has earned, and his audiences' responses to his comedic stylings. Finally, I look at the larger political and social discourse related to Trump's presidential period and the Muslim Ban. I also review previous literature related to how Muslims and Islam have appeared in traditional media, how comedy has both positive and negative influences, as its potential in creating social change, or new misrepresentations and offenses, and finally, how Muslims have used stand-up comedy previously to combat stereotypical images and create social change.

In Chapter 3, I first explain the meaning and purpose of rhetorical criticism and transparently explain my positionality as a researcher. I then dive into the method of Critical Rhetoric, which I use to analyze *Feelings* (2019). I first explain what Critical Rhetoric is, its purpose, and how it is used in addressing discourses of power and enacting social change. I also explain McKerrow's (1989) critique of domination and critique of freedom. Finally, I move on to the theoretical frameworks developed by Lowrey and Renegar (2016) that I have considered utilizing, which are Bicultural Otherness, Self and Culture Deprecating Humor, and Ironic Essentialism. I explain that I have only chosen two of three frameworks, and justify the reasoning behind doing so.

In Chapter 4, Youssef communicates various aspects of his bicultural identity through his comedy special. He provides a critique of domination, by highlighting systems of power, such as ethnocentrism, patriarchy, the dominant/majority cultures' suppression of marginalized cultures, White privilege, and the harmful impact of

stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination. He also exerts a critique of freedom, by being

self-reflexive and recognizing the potential of not always understanding foreign cultures,

the needed effort to understand one's own heritage culture - especially when it is absent,

to prevent its suppression, and finally, the potential of having absurd prejudices. Through

this critique combination of domination and freedom, use motivates his audience

members towards social change.

      In Chapter 5, Youssef engages in self and culture deprecating to communicate his

cultural identity. I argue that he challenges and combats social injustices, as he

normalizes Muslims and Islam to his Western audience. However, he also ridicules and

disparages already marginalized groups, and also creates new stereotypes and

misrepresentations. He does so by publicizing and normalizing various acts that go

against the Islamic faith, such as being a womanizer, using foul language, and watching

porn. Furthermore, he sheds light on various topics, such as the media's power to set the

agenda, the absurdity of our extreme reliance on the media, the diaspora, the ongoing

state of war in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, and the absurdity of judging a person

based on their identity.

      Finally, in Chapter 6, I share my concluding thoughts on the special concerning

both the positive and negative aspects of the special. I also talk about future research

trajectory and highlight the potential for three areas of research. First, exploring how

Muslim audience members specifically react to and identify with the special, which could

be carried out in the form of a quantitative or qualitative study. It is also important to

receive responses from Muslims from various backgrounds, considering their cultures, if

they are Muslim-born or converts, their ages, their gender, their generations, and their

religiosity. Second, utilizing the framework of Ironic Essentialism to dive into how

Youssef further communicates his cultural identity and challenges the many essentialist

perceptions of the West, especially those created by Orientalism. Finally, focusing on a

female standup comedian could provide a different perspective for Muslim

representations, which would be interesting to understand and differentiate between her

narrative and that of Youssef.

Set-Up

My coworker, an older White woman, and I, are folding tables at the retailer where we work. It's a quiet day, so we're just talking. She asks, "When do you have to start wearing it? Your scarf on your head. I think it's called heee…" As she tries to say the word hijab.

Me: "Oh! My hijab? After we get our first periods." She continues

Coworker: "Do you have to wear it at home?"

Me: "No, if it's just me and my family." "But if a man comes over then, yes."

Coworker: "Do the colors and fabrics have special meanings?"

Me: "No. It's just different styles. Hijabs are exactly like any other piece of clothing. Styles and trends come out and are "in fashion", different colors and fabrics."

Coworker: "But, why do they make you wear that?"

Me: *Deadpans to the audience*

Chapter Two: Context & Literature Review

In this chapter, I detail the context about Ramy, his previous work, the comedy special, and Trump's Muslim Ban. Then, I look into previous research and aspects that are needed to understand the effect comedy has on perceptions of Muslims and Islam. The literature review first examines how the narrative concerning Muslims and Islam has been presented in traditional media. It then moves into how humor and comedy could be used both positively and negatively, either by challenging negative stereotypes and producing social change, or by ridiculing groups and creating controversies and offenses. Finally, it examines how stand-up comedy specifically has been used within an Islam-related context and how Muslim stand-up comedians have used humor to engage with stereotypes and influence others.

This rhetorical analysis builds on current scholarship in understanding the influence of rhetorical discourse in comedy and the media on the representations of Muslims and Islam, in both a positive and negative manner. My research makes three key contributions to the literature: After reviewing previous literature, I have found that significant work related to the influence of humor and comedy has been completed, not only in creating social change, but also in breaking down previously held misconceptions of Muslims and Islam that are usually found in traditional media. However, I see there being numerous opportunities to contribute to the current scholarship with this research through the critique of this text.

First, while there are many studies that analyze various stand-up comedy artifacts, there is yet to be one that rhetorically analyzes *Feelings* (2019) specifically. Second, while much of the current scholarship explores diverse narratives within various artifacts,

there is still a need for further analysis of representations as intersectional as Ramy

Youssef. Finally, the literature reveals that there are studies that have looked into the

ability of comedy to provoke social conflict, produce controversial content, or ridicule

rhetorical messages, however, a deeper focus is needed within a rhetorical context more

related to Muslims and Islam.

Context

Ramy Youssef's Background & Work

Ramy Youssef is a first-generation Muslim millennial Egyptian-American actor,

comedian, producer, and director, who grew up in New Jersey (Deb, 2019; Marchese,

2020). Youssef has been interested in the arts since an early age, as he filmed and edited

mini-movies with his home camera and also took acting classes after graduating high

school (Graham, 2019). Nowadays, and with the popularity of streaming, there are more

and more available opportunities to share diverse stories on different platforms, and

actors of color seek to utilize that created space (Albiniak, 2020). Youssef performed

stand-up in small clubs, but then gained national attention after appearing on *The Late*

Show with Stephen Colbert in 2017 (Ali, 2019a).

In April of 2019, the first season of the show *Ramy* (2019) was released, in which

Youssef is the protagonist and plays a fictionalized version of himself. He appears as a

first-generation, millennial, Muslim Egyptian-American growing up in New Jersey,

sharing his perspectives and related turmoil concerning multiple issues in a humorous

manner, including his religion, family, friends, job, and romance. Although sharing a

story that abundantly represents an entire community is unrealistic, Youssef still attempts

to connect with people and share his personal point of view (Graham, 2019). Rather than

portraying how Muslims are good and share the same values, the actor aimed to portray

how members of the underrepresented group have flaws, but also struggle "to be good".

This struggle between respecting culture and faith, drawing lines, but then crossing them,

and going through conflict and guilt, all provide a strong narrative that can be very

humorous (Ali, 2019a).

  Feelings (2019) is an exclusive HBO Max stand-up comedy special released in

June of 2019, just months after the first season of Youssef's television

show *Ramy* (2019). The special is available to millions all over the world[3], since the

streaming service, HBO Max, has a total of 17.2 million activated subscriptions, as of

January 2021 (Whitten, 2021). It is directed by Christopher Storer and produced by

Youssef himself, in partnership with A24. The special, which was recorded in front of a

live audience, is presented by Youssef, who shares outspoken narratives from his life and

thoughts on several different topics ("Ramy Youssef: Feelings", n.d.). The special may

seem a bit familiar to some viewers that have watched *Ramy* (2019), since a few of the

routines in the special had been incorporated from plot lines that appeared on the show

(McCarthy, 2019).

Awards, Nominations, & Audience Reception

  Youssef has received many acclaimed awards and nominations in his career. He

won the 77th Golden Globe Award for Best Performance by an Actor in a Television

---

[3] I would have liked to find research that is specific to the race demographics of *Ramy Youssef: Feelings*' (2019) audience, or that of HBO Max, however, that information is not available.

Series, Musical, or Comedy ('Winners & Nominees 2020', n.d.). He was nominated in

both the 25th and 26th Annual Critics Choice Awards for Best Actor in a Comedy Series

('Critics Choice Awards', n.d.). He was also nominated in the 36th Annual TCA Awards

for Individual Achievement in Comedy for his show *Ramy* (2019) ('2020 TCA Award

Nominations', n.d.). Additionally, Youssef received a couple of notable nominations in

the 72nd Emmy Awards for his show *Ramy* (2019), which was the first time for a

Muslim-American comedy (Albiniak, 2020). The first nomination was for Outstanding

Directing for a Comedy Series, while the second was for Outstanding Lead Actor in a

Comedy Series ('Ramy Youssef', n.d.). Youssef's comedy special *Feelings* (2019) was

nominated in the 25th Critics' Choice Television Awards for Best Comedy Special

('Critics Choice Awards', n.d.), and was also nominated for the 72nd Writers Guild of

America Awards for Best Comedy/Variety Special (Schneider et al., 2020).

      Although most of the existing feedback I have found concerning Youssef's work

is about the show *Ramy* (2019), there are several opinions that are specifically

about *Feelings* (2019). Looking at critic reviews of the comedy special on review

websites, the majority are overwhelmingly positive. Catlin (2019) said that the standup

show was "especially start and nuanced" and "recommended". Chavez (2019) stated that

the comedy special is a "thoughtful, increasingly bold introduction to Youssef's brand of

circuitous, sharp-witted comedy" (para. 1) and that there is also "a conversational

element to *Feelings*" (para. 7). Similarly, Wilstein (2020) said that "there's something

oddly calming about watching him slowly deliver devastating jokes in front of a brightly-

lit crowd in his debut special on HBO" (para. 13). Concerning Youssef's content, Doyle

(2019) has noted that:

His role here is Millennial Muslim riffing on things such as his father, who

emigrated from Egypt, working at one of Donald Trump's hotels. There are few

like Youssef on the radar because, as he points out, sometimes with savage wit,

people of his background and age are largely ignored (para. 11).

Gallagher (2019) also states that "the story of a millennial American Muslim is one that

isn't often told on TV, and Youssef's relaxed delivery feels like the perfect vehicle for

exploring a world filled with bigotry and misunderstanding" (para. 4). However, he also

critiqued the comedy special, saying that Youssef's "effort feels far less polished than his

show, and a lot of the material in the hour-long special feels under-rehearsed and rushed"

(para. 2) and that "Youssef doesn't seem to have figured out exactly what he wants to

say" (para. 6). Bond (2019) believes and admires that the comedy special is relatable to

those who grew up in a conservative religious tradition, and adds that:

The entire show is rooted in how our faith impacts, and sometimes doesn't

impact, our daily lives. But at the same time, this isn't a religious special. At no

point does Yousseff seem to be trying to sell you on Islam. He doesn't care if you

believe what he believes, he just presumes you'll be able to relate to experiences

outside your own (para. 8).

But, Ali (2019b) explains that the audience's reactions vary depending on the joke, as

some are more appealing to men, some to brown folks, and some to everyone. She also

states:

He doesn't try to endear himself to the non-Middle Eastern audience members by

calming their fears about guys with ethnic origins like his ("I'm one of the good

ones!"). He also doesn't placate the Muslims in the audience by toning down the

material. Explicit sexual humor is not the usual fare for the latter crowd — and he

delivers it in spades. (para. 16).

Therefore, it is important to understand that the audience members determine how jokes

are interpreted and what actual function the humor serves (Meyer, 2000).

There has also been a fair amount of audience's reception of the comedy special

on other websites and social media, however, there has been a wide range of perceptions

and mixed impressions. Under the user reviews for the special on the website IMDb.com

('*Ramy Youssef: Feelings (2019)*', n.d.), the user *superamro* said that "Ramy will make

you think and laugh at the same time. He did cross the line once or twice, but if you think

about it, you'll understand where he's coming from. I enjoyed it immensely" (para. 1).

The user *wwwspaghettisunday* said that there are "a lot of great jokes that many people

part of the Muslim community will appreciate, but the themes are universal. It's an honest

stand-up, which represents a community that are constantly misrepresented" (para. 3).

The user *bjornfogh-70246* noted:

If you go into this show with a [*sic*] open mind and some patience you will find a

lot of good jokes and funny twists. Comics spin everything, so perhaps take his

segment about islam with a grain of salt. I personally didnt like the parts where he

said he kept saying he researched it, which he clearly had not. More like a quick

google search, which was unfortunate (para. 5).

And while there were positive thoughts, there were some negative ones as well. The

user *cmburton-29875* stated:

This guy is such an arrogant and typical millennial. A selfish and self indulgent

narcissist. Starting off with I don't believe in institutions and I don't believe in

police...well too bad you need them to survive. People like this that offer nothing

but complaints are only part of the problem and his propaganda and his

ridiculousness as a person is hard to watch (para. 10).

The user *carlclements7* noted "typical unfunny leftist garbage. White man bad. Orange

man bad. America bad. And so on and so on and so on" (para. 6). The

user *jamesdrury* said "not funny. His last statement was maybe 9/11 worked because it

made Islam stronger and the USA weaker based on how things are now. Very classless"

(para. 7). Similarly, the user *rsandlercpa* also said that the "9/11 comment is tasteless and

horrible Why does he think this is an appropriate comment. This is actually very

disappointing" (para. 8). It seems like the negative feedback was mostly for political

reasons, as well as an objection to a specific joke that was perceived as inappropriate.

On Twitter, user @LeneAlta said "I love standup comics who just have a

conversation. None of that yelling, screaming. Just finished watching Ramy Youssef's

"Feelings" and it was great" (LeneAlta, 2020). And user @T_A_101 tweeted "if you

guys haven't watched it yet, watch Ramy Youssef's stand up set Feelings. Thoroughly

enjoyed it, though it does have some dark humor so yeah" (T_A_101, 2020). User

@ayeeshaobi stated, "Ramy (season 1) is basically his stand up, Ramy Youssef: Feelings.

Didn't quite enjoy both" (Ayeeshaobi, 2020). Thus, it seems that there were also different

opinions that were being expressed on the platform.

On YouTube, the user Kenza B. commented on a clip from the show, in which

Youssef was talking about Muslim women wearing hijab. The user seems to suggest that

Youssef was able to explain something that has been addressed multiple times in the past,

in a new way saying that "he touched something really deep, first he ddnt [sic] go the

usual route of saying its her choice, because at this point we have been saying it for

decades and they just dont want to listen" (Kenza B, 2019). Similarly, the user Ahmed

Khaled comments on the same clip saying that "this approach or perspective Ramy gave

is so clever, he didn't bother explaining the whole concept behind how women wear in

the Middle East (specially Muslim women) but he just clarified that seeing different

culture will always raise different questions" (Khaled, 2019). There appears to be

particular admiration for that part of the special.

Trump's Presidential Period & the Muslim Ban

There has been a flow of Muslim immigration to the West since the 1960s and

1970s (Loobuyck et al., 2013). However, on January 27, 2017, President Trump issued

Executive Order 13769, also known as the 'Muslim Ban', as it "suspended the entry of

Syrian refugees indefinitely and delayed entry by citizens of Muslim-majority countries,

including Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen" (Gomez, 2018, p. 72).

Then, President Trump issued Executive Order 13780 on March 16, 2017, which revoked

order 13769. It excluded the suspended entry of nationals from Iraq, those who are

permanent residents of the United States, and visa holders who have already been

admitted to the United States. However, it still suspended the entry of certain aliens from

the remaining 6 countries, stating that "each of these countries is a state sponsor of

terrorism, has been significantly compromised by terrorist organizations, or contains

active conflict zones" ('Executive order protecting the nation', 2017, para. 9). The order

explains that the nationals of the designated countries present intensified risks to the

security of the United States, also stating that:

Recent history shows that some of those who have entered the United States

through our immigration system have proved to be threats to our national security.

Since 2001, hundreds of persons born abroad have been convicted of terrorism-

related crimes in the United States. They have included not just persons who came

here legally on visas but also individuals who first entered the country as refugees

(para. 19).

Along with both executive orders came widespread criticism and the general

acknowledgment that the orders were, in fact, a 'Muslim Ban'. The Trump administration

though claimed that this was not a ban on Muslims, that it did not discriminate against

them, and that it was essential for national security (Gomez, 2018), however, President

Trump himself had initially stated that he would use regions as a substitute.

In an interview with Chuck Todd on *Meet the Press*, Trump said "I'm looking

now at territories. People were so upset when I used the word Muslim. Oh, you can't use

the word Muslim. Remember this. And I'm okay with that, because I'm talking territory

instead of Muslim" ('Meet the Press—July 24, 2016', para. 66). Furthermore, when

asked by Fox News host Jeanine Pirro about how the 7 countries were decided on,

Former New York Mayor Rudy W. Giuliani said that President Trump first announced

the 'Muslim Ban' (Wang, 2017). He also said that President Trump asked him to assemble

a commission that could "do it legally", adding that:

What we did was, we focused on, instead of religion, *danger* — the areas of the

world that create danger for us. Which is a factual basis, not a religious basis.

Perfectly legal, perfectly sensible. And that's what the ban is based on. It's not

based on religion. It's based on places where there are substantial evidence that

people are sending terrorists into our country (Wang, 2017, para. 8)

The Muslim Ban was met with mixed opinions, both from media outlets and the public.

There is a strong correlation between bearing resentful attitudes toward Muslim-

Americans and supporting Trump, which supports the belief that his negative emphasis

on Muslim-Americans during his campaign resonated with voters (Lajevardi & Abrajano,

2019). The public's opinions that were expressed through online comments showed that

people who supported the Muslim ban validated their views by depicting Islam as evil, as

well as perceiving Muslim refugees and immigrants to be a threat to the security of

America. They believed that their patriotism would come in the form of protecting their

country and their cultural values, and excluding Muslim refugees and immigrants.

Additionally, many supporters of the ban used hate speech, revealing obvious

stereotyping and Islamophobia (Bresnahan et al., 2018). *Stereotypes* are descriptions of a

group by using characteristics thought to be shared by all, which are created by outsiders,

and *Islamophobia* is a term used to reflect a social anxiety towards Islam and Muslims

(Gottschalk et al., 2008).

One of the core American beliefs, which is freedom of religion, has been tested

ever since the ''War on Terror'' that has defined terrorists by their religion (Powell,

2011). The rhetoric surrounding the travel bans was used to sustain white supremacist

ideals, as many expressed the beliefs that all Muslims are, or potentially are, terrorists, or

that all racial and ethnic minorities are the same. Additionally, many separated religion

from country of origin/nationality, arguing that the ban simply 'was not a Muslim Ban',

as it did not target various other Muslim-majority countries (Gomez, 2018).

On the other hand, those who opposed the ban argued that immigration has been a critical part of U.S. history and that it had always been a refuge for immigrants. They also revealed anger towards the exclusion, explained that banning Muslims was considered to be Islamophobic, and expressed welcome and empathy towards Muslim immigrants (Bresnahan et al., 2018).

The order concerning the ban, similar to the order of building a wall on the Mexican border, are not only policies of exclusion, but also of purity (Richardson, 2017). They aim to harden "the lines between one body politic and another, preventing transmission that might change or (to veer into the toxic imagery of ethno-nationalism) infect the homeland" (Richardson, 2017, p. 748). President Trump's rhetoric of "ejection and containment" implies a repulsion towards difference, and figuring Muslims as terrorists that need to be banned amplifies fear (Richardson, 2017).

At the virtual event of the *Million Muslim Votes Summit*, President Biden, who at the time was still a presidential candidate, stated that "Muslim communities are the first to field Donald Trump's assault on black and brown communities in this country with his vile Muslim ban" (PBS NewsHour, 2020, 51:41). He also pledged that if he became the president he would "end the Muslim ban on day one, day one" (PBS NewsHour, 2020, 56:07).

Indeed, on January 20, 2021, his first day in office, President Biden put an end to the Muslim ban, by signing a proclamation that would revoke Executive Order 13780 ('Proclamation on ending discriminatory bans', 2021). The proclamation explained that the United States was built on a foundation of religious freedom and tolerance, and that the previous administrations' actions concerning the Muslim Ban were a stain on the

national conscience and are inconsistent with the nation's history ('Proclamation on ending discriminatory bans', 2021).

Literature Review

For the purpose of my research, it is necessary to differentiate between humor and comedy, as "humor is spontaneous and active", while "comedy is a pre-rehearsed, performing art" (Wheeler, 2004, p. 16). It is also important to define key terms necessary to thoroughly understand this work. Therefore, I define the terms *culture* and *cultural identity*, as well as differentiate between the words *Muslim* and *Islamic*. First, *culture* is defined as the "learned patterns of behavior and attitudes shared by a group of people" (Martin & Nakayama, 2013, p. 84). Second, *cultural identity* refers to a person considering themself as socially being a member of a particular group, based on shared behaviors, beliefs, values, and norms (Ferdman, 1990).

Furthermore, the word *Muslim* describes a person who believes in and consciously follows the religion of *Islam*, and practice Islamic teachings. The word *Muslim* is never used to describe a thing, an idea, or an event, therefore, it is "incorrect to say *Muslim architecture*, *Muslim music*, *Muslim art*, *Muslim thought*, etc." (Souaiaia, 2016, p. 1). The word *Islamic* is the correct adjective used to describe things, ideas, and events whose origins are in Islam (Souaiaia, 2016). Following, I give an account of the context surrounding Youssef and his career.

Muslims & Islam in Media

Muslims and Islam are often portrayed in Western media through a negative

image and a narrative of extreme violence, but the majority of the news coverage about

Islam and Muslims in the media today is inherited from historical representations (Reza,

2011). News stories about American terrorists that have Arab roots or are Muslim-

Americans are presented differently in the media and with more emphasis (Earp & Jhally,

2006). News coverage of terrorist events presents a dominant fear of international

terrorism, especially of Muslims, Arabs, and Islam, which works against a ''Christian

America'', while on the other hand, domestic terrorism is presented as a much lesser

threat that is carried out as lone acts by troubled individuals (Powell, 2011). When news

of the Oklahoma City bombing broke, many reporters and politicians jumped to

conclusions about Arabs or Muslims being responsible without any proof, when in fact, it

was carried out by Timothy McVeigh; a White, Christian male (Earp & Jhally, 2006).

Americans live in a culture of fear because the media fosters misbegotten threats

(Glassner, 2010).

Much of the motion picture industry, especially Hollywood, has contributed to

framing the community and creating misrepresentations, as Muslims and Arabs have

played antagonistic roles in over 900 movies since 1896 (Reza, 2011). Muslims have

been portrayed as incompetent, irrational, and intellectually weak, as well as lazy,

slothful, and indolent (Sides & Gross, 2013). Arabs are also one of the most maligned

groups in the history of Hollywood, as they have been portrayed as villains, buffoons,

inept, dangerous, and incompetent (Earp & Jhally, 2006). And while "negative

stereotypes about Islam and American Muslims existed long before 9/11, the

consequences of that event led to an intensified public scrutiny that continues to produce

different yet targeted responses from the Muslim community" (Michael, 2013, p. 130).

After the American government had announced a 'War on Terror' following the events of

9/11, a series of films related to terrorism were produced in Hollywood (Khatun, 2016).

The media creates an image of Muslims and Islam as being "Other", which is a

term used to describe "the strange, the different, the alien, the odd, the mysterious, the

bizarre, the weird, the unfamiliar, the unknown, uncanny, the hostile, and the foreign"

(Taibi, 2019, p. 22). This is especially because they have been associated with terms such

as "honour-killing, oppression of women, anti-western, and anti-modernity" (Matindoost,

2015, p.33), as well as "fundamentalist, terrorist, sexist, militant, undemocratic, violent,

suicide bombers, hijackers, orthodox/scripturalist, and fanatic" (Akbarzadeh & Smith,

2005, p. 4). Not only have Muslims been belittled, depicted as evil and unfavorable, and

ridiculed by Hollywood (Reza, 2011), but have also been consistently linked to terrorism

through governmental policies, which need to fight ''them", through the Afghan and Iraqi

wars, or through siding with Israel against the Palestinian-Occupied Territories (Powell,

2011).

The media uses rhetoric, which claims that Islam is radical and a religion of

extremism, as they take Islamic laws and customs out of context. This also helps in

creating negative stereotypes of the religion's values (Siraj, 2012). This discourse of

vilification leads to the jeopardy of their religious, personal, and social identities

(Matindoost, 2015). The discourses present in visual media place many Muslim youths in

vulnerable situations, concerning them attempting to position themselves and protect

their religious identities, especially those whose religious identities are visible (Islam,

2019).

Muslim-Americans and Muslims are considered similar by Americans in most dimensions (Sides & Gross, 2013). They face issues of detachment and disintegration, which include inequality, discrimination, bigotry, and being viewed as someone who does not belong and is inferior (Matindoost, 2015). They are considered an unnatural part of the Western culture, even when they are secular, law-abiding, taxpaying, and/or peace-loving people (Siraj, 2012). Unfortunately, Muslim-Americans are unable to freely express and practice their religion without fearing prosecution or judgment, since they are often linked to terrorism in the media by following the same religion as the terrorists (Powell, 2011).

Representations of Islamic and Muslim success stories are rarely featured in the press and are generally not covered by the mainstream media (Reza, 2011). The knowledge of Western audiences related to Islam and Muslims is rather minimal, as most of the major media stories cover issues related to controlling oil resources, war, terrorism, and fear, as well as being Orientalist (Powell, 2011). Many critics believe that there is an issue of gender equality, and think that Muslim communities supposedly consist of men that are perpetrators, who oppress women (Ruby, 2016), as if Muslim men oppress women because Islam commands them to (Jarrar, 2018).

Because of these many reasons of misrepresentations and lack of knowledge, people need to recognize the presence of *ethnocentrism*, which is the centrality of culture and "the assumption that one's own culture is normal and natural, and thus, the corollary is that the other's culture is weird and abnormal" (Hamidi, 2013, p. 10). Moreover, non-Muslims must be able to recognize negative media stereotypes about Muslims, in order for society to move past Islamophobia (Bullock, 2015). When a group is vilified and

demonized on a regular basis, people need to speak up and take a stand against what is

morally and ethically wrong, in order to pass on and 'unlearn' prejudices against them, as

many have for black folks, Native Americans, Jewish folks, etc. (Earp & Jhally, 2006).

Unfortunately, Muslims have been spoken for in various ways. Many believe that

the media presents images of them and Islam in an unfair, negative, and stereotypical

manner, which does not accurately reflect the true disposition of the religion or the

majority of its followers (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2007). These stereotypes include being

violent or untrustworthy (Sides & Gross, 2013), and physical stereotypes of Muslim men

rely on the characteristics of the beard and mustache, kaffiyeh or turban, brown skin, and

an exaggerated size of a beaklike nose (Gottschalk et al., 2008). Perceiving members of

other cultures in terms of stereotypes is also a result of ethnocentrism (Hamidi, 2013).

Humanizing Arabs and Muslims in the media and projecting them just as any

other person can cause these stereotypes to gradually diminish (Earp & Jhally, 2006).

Even though "Muslims come from distinct cultural backgrounds and are heterogeneous in

many ways, their common belief in, and practice of, Islam binds them together"

(Akbarzadeh & Smith, 2005, p. 2). Nevertheless, there should be greater prominence to

highlighting the reality and diversity of Muslim communities to annihilate stereotypes,

better understand the Other, and condemn ethnocentrism (Reza, 2011).

Instead of being acted upon, many Muslim individuals, and specifically the

Muslim youth, are actively shaping cultures, both on a local and global level. They

engage themselves in the media and frame their discourses of Islam in a way that could

unify, instead of divide (Gardner & Hameed, 2018). A new normal should be established

for Muslim communities of being an acceptable Other and domesticated, even when they

are not within the framework of liberal Muslims (Poole, 2002, as cited in Reza, 2011).

Since the information most Americans have about Islam and Muslims is very

limited, the available and presented images of terrorism have served as portraying the

essence of Muslims as being terrorists (Powell, 2011). However, Muslim media

producers aim to counter negative media narratives of Muslims and Islam that are usually

found in dominant mainstream ideologies, and also provide a positive impact, by

understanding diversity issues and helping diverse voices become more available (Poole,

2014).

They do so through "Muslim media", which is a valuable resource and a term

used "in differentiating media that aims specifically to address Muslim issues" (Poole,

2014, p. 103). Moreover, the internet has been utilized by Muslim users to create user-

generated content, as they aim to communicate about Islam, promote its religious merits,

refute stereotypes, express themselves, and gain social recognition (Mosemghvdlishvili &

Jansz, 2013).

Some of these individuals include the social media influencer Dina Tokio, who is

the producer of the YouTube documentary *#YourAverageMuslim*, which shows how

multiple Muslim female digital activists reclaim their authority and rearticulate the

narratives of Muslim women (Islam, 2019). Another Muslim individual who has gained

social recognition is Amal Kassir, who is a Syrian-American spoken word poet and artist

that has conducted workshops, given lectures, and performed on the TED stage (Kassir &

Zietlow, 2019).

Comedy, Humor, & Social Change

Comedy has the ability to attract attention and highlight insights gained from serious forms of news and information (Chattoo, 2019). Its perceived entertainment value increases the audience's attitude change, as they find arguments to be compelling, rather than irrelevant (Feldman & Chattoo, 2019). Humor can either promote social cohesion and provoke social conflict, or it can ridicule these messages (Michael, 2013), and since comedy is culturally specific, it can be interpreted and understood differently by different audiences (Chattoo, 2019).

Humor is a "double-edged sword", as its messages could function as either a unifier or a divider, since it "unites communicators through mutual identification and clarification of positions and values, while dividing them through enforcement of norms and differentiation of acceptable versus unacceptable behaviors or people" (Meyer, 2000, p. 310). Thus, categorical distinctions of 'serious' and 'comical' can oftentimes overlap or merge together (Ridanpää, 2009).

Humor can capture various positive functions, such as affiliation; allowing others to feel good or bond with them, or self-enhancement; regulating one's emotions, and maintaining a positive attitude (Hodson & MacInnis, 2016). Moreover, comedy can persuade through emotion, invite conversations about complex social issues, and dissolve social barriers (Chattoo, 2019).

Stand-up comedy has great potential in reaching people in a unique and complex way, and thus creating social change, by challenging the audience and allowing them to see the world through a genuinely new perspective (Manwell, 2018). Social change is defined as "the process in which an alteration occurs in the structure and function of a

social system" (Singhal & Rogers, 2012, p. xii), which can occur within an individual, a

community, an organization, or society (Singhal & Rogers, 2012). Although comedy is

not able to guarantee immediate and long-lasting effects of social change, as many years

may be required for that to gradually occur, there is still however some level of its

intersection with potential social change (Chattoo, 2019).

Moreover, humor can enact cultural citizenship, as it "seeks to represent the

underrepresented, to empower and affirm marginalized communities and identities, and

to edify and mobilize their audiences" (Krefting, 2014, p. 189). Many comedians actually

belong to more than one marginalized category of identity, and for those who do not fit

within the mainstream, humor enables them to create community and culture among

themselves (Krefting, 2014). Comedians like Margaret Cho, Eddie Izzard, Dick Gregory,

and George Carlin have used their onstage comedic presence to challenge and reverse

social values (Bingham, & Green, 2016).

While humor allows us "to cope with the daily, hourly, inescapable difficulty of

being" (Bentley, 1991, p. 306), it often deals with many sensitive topics related to social

norms and moral boundaries, which can be the source of hurt, exclusion, and offense

(Graefer & Das, 2020). Social norms are developed as expectations for behavior, and

deviating from these expectations can be humorous and result in ridicule, invoking

laughter to discipline those who do not follow the ideals of the social group, therefore,

humor can invoke these social norms (Meyer, 2000).

Therefore, humor has the ability to also capture negative functions, such as

aggression, when prejudicial people exert dominance and demean, control, and

manipulate others, keeping them in disadvantaged positions (Hodson & MacInnis, 2016).

Moreover, by pointing out power dynamics that exist within social issues, stand-up comedy may unintentionally reinforce those power dynamics, instead of effectively critiquing and weakening them (Chattoo, 2019).

To further elaborate, humor can be used as a form of ridicule or mockery, as a delegitimization strategy (Hodson & MacInnis, 2016). Bar-Tal and Hammack (2012) define *delegitimization* as:

> The categorization of a group, or groups, into extremely negative social categories that exclude it, or them, from the sphere of human groups that act within the limits of acceptable norms and/or values, since these groups are viewed as violating basic human norms or values and therefore deserving maltreatment. (p. 30).

Oftentimes, individuals, who are religious themselves, are offended by some jokes and humor about religious minorities, like Muslims, as they can strengthen social inequalities and discrimination (Graefer & Das, 2020). Additionally, humor that includes *blasphemy*, which refers to showing disrespect towards God, religion, a religious icon, or something else considered sacred (Ahmad, 2018), is also an offensive form of humor. An example of this includes the Danish cartoon crisis in 2005, which involved twelve satirical cartoons depicting Prophet Muhammed (peace be upon him) being published in the Danish daily newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* (Ridanpää, 2009).

When people use disparaging humor, it can aggressively put people down to establish superiority, however, it can often be passed off as harmless or 'just a joke' (Hodson & MacInnis, 2016). This is argued to be the worst excuse for insulting and racist statements, which offensive comic discourse commonly relies on (Ridanpää, 2009).

Moreover, a recipient of an offensive joke will hide their feeling of being offended or will simply ignore what has been said, so that they do not cause trouble or so they are not perceived as "killjoy" (Graefer & Das, 2020), which is a term used to describe willfully speaking up to contest happiness, resulting in discomfort, guilt, and a risk of being excluded (Twine, 2014). While some do believe that there should be levity around humor, that belief not only disregards harm to others, but also reinforces dominance towards members of low-status groups (Hodson & MacInnis, 2016). Therefore, attempting to avoid being perceived as *killjoy* is understandable, however, it is also very problematic, as it fails to challenge oppressive forms of power within society, evading responsibility and action, which then hinders social change (Graefer & Das, 2020).

It is important to note that "whether an audience reads offense, subversion, or hope into a joke has as much to do with the specific audience member and the context, as the content of the joke itself" (Goltz, 2015, p. 280). Moreover, humor is conditioned, meaning that spatial and temporal circumstances can influence what is found funny, and why, and thus deeming it constructive or destructive (Ridanpää, 2009). Therefore, a speaker must conduct an audience analysis before choosing humorous messages, as the audience's age, culture, and previous experience will influence how the humor is interpreted (Wanzer, 2002). Furthermore, source identification plays a role in how messages are received by the audience, as first-generation individuals, or those who are more religious, may dissociate themselves from a relatively emancipated speaker (Wojcieszak et al. 2017).

Stand-Up Comedy & Islam

Stand-up comedy is "the act of one speaker delivering humourous, monologic quips, observations, and anecdotes to an audience, who may then signal their approval or disapproval of the performance and concepts presented" (Meier & Schmitt, 2016, p. xxv). Stand-up comedy is also interactive and somewhat improvisational, which helps in providing unique data and an understanding of a culture's attitudes, dispositions, and concerns, helping affirm and integrate a culture's values (Gilbert, 2004).

A person who performs stand-up comedy is active, engaging, and interactive with others and their environment. They intend to be funny, but they also provide significant social and rhetorical meaning to their audiences (Meier & Schmitt, 2016), sometimes discussing controversial topics as well. It is fundamentally focused on critiquing power dynamics (Chattoo, 2019), as the act of standing up is understood to be challenging authority, oppression, corruption, and other forms of adversity (Meier & Schmitt, 2016). It can help in reducing the stigma around sensitive topics, which may also lead to influencing social change (Chattoo, 2019).

Marginalized individuals and minority groups aim to create social impact and understanding by breaking down cultural barriers, stereotypes, and differences (Chattoo, 2019). Using humor related to everyday situations and experiences of practicing Islam, in general and in a Western society, can help Muslim-Americans claim cultural citizenship and a sense of belonging within both American society and Islamic practices and beliefs (Ali, 2020). "Muslim comedians attempt to provide cultural leadership and urge members of their community to see themselves as equal citizens" (Amarasingam, 2010, p. 474). After 9/11, instead of using a defensive posture, Muslim stand-up comedians have used

humor to boldly challenge misconceptions of Muslim America, and correct these views

that have distorted the Muslim identity (Michael, 2013). They are dedicated to combating

stereotypes, voicing the interests of their community, and promoting intercultural

dialogue (Amarasingam, 2010).

      This use of comedy is meant to deliver social messages that address outsider

attitudes held about Muslims, as well as insider attitudes among Muslims (Michael,

2013). Muslim comedians, not only aim to repaint the negative images of Arabs,

Muslims, and Islam that are found in the West, but also hope to uplift and inspire

individuals from their own community, providing them with new ideas about what it

means to be a Muslim in America. They are defending public perceptions of them and

fight for recognition (Amarasingam, 2010). Therefore, stand-up comedy could be a new

and unique method "to reveal and evaluate the ways that Muslim-Americans engage with

the stereotypes and realities of being both Muslim and American in a post-9/11 context"

(Michael, 2013, p. 130). Unfortunately, stereotypes oftentimes still provide a means for

ridicule.

      Marginalized regions and groups are not only the objects of irony, but stereotypes

and regional prejudices could imply that they are unsophisticated and incapable of

understanding irony (Ridanpää, 2009). Muslims are perceived to lack a sense of humor,

especially after the Danish cartoon crisis (Bilici, 2010). When Muslim comedians utilize

a stage to perform stand-up and announce their Muslim identity, they confront many

misinformed associations related to Muslims, but they are then able to prove that

Muslims can actually be very funny (Michael, 2013).

Muslim comedy is empowered by Islamophobia, as Muslim comedians use the

discrimination, prejudices, and stereotypes that they encounter to present their

experiences (Bilici, 2010). It creates a deep paranoia, where words such as Arab and

Muslim are perceived as threatening words (Earp & Jhally, 2006). Hirzalla, van Zoonen,

and Müller (2013) found through analyzing a humorous blog, *I Am a Muslim*, that humor

can work "to produce identification between those groups on shared norms and values"

(p. 59), as it challenges stereotypes, uses a narrative of unity and attempts to merge Islam

with ideas of peace and of being American (Hirzalla et al., 2013).

Following the Islamophobic backlash, which resulted from the 9/11 attacks, many

Muslim comedians used stand-up comedy to challenge common perceptions of race,

religion, and gender (Amarasingam 2010). Maysoon Zayid is a successful Muslim,

Palestinian-American comedian who suffers from cerebral palsy (El Beshlawy, 2016).

Zayid has found that "her identities as a Muslim woman and a disabled comedian

intersect in ways that sometimes create complicated layers of disadvantage and

discrimination" (Bingham & Green, 2016, p. 284). However, even though she belongs to

various minority groups, which may seem like a weakness, she is still able to successfully

incorporate them into her acts. Zayid had faced absurd discrimination after the attacks of

9/11, as she was asked by some of her non-Arab friends if she had known about the

attacks beforehand, and others stopped talking to her (Mahdawi, 2008).

In many of her acts, Zayid is willing to ridicule her identity, and "her jokes are

sometimes shocking, often outrageously rude, and full of foul language" (Mahdawi,

2008, p. 88). Dean Obeidallah is another Muslim stand-up comedian, who, similar to

Zayid, is also of Palestinian heritage. Obiedallah explains that he often encounters

remarks, some of which are naive like people saying that they 'love hummus', some are irrelevant like people saying they 'love Indian food', and others are bolder like people asking 'why Muslims are so angry all the time (Willett, & Willett, 2019).

Dean Obeidallah and Maysoon Zayid co-founded the *New York Arab-American Comedy Festival* in 2003 "to change the way Middle Easterners are perceived and to showcase and inspire the works of Arab-American comic artists" (Zimbardo, 2014, p. 66). The annual festival may be considered a form of political activism, as Arab and Iranian comedians bring some much-needed positivity to the struggling Arab-American community (Mahdawi, 2008). Obeidallah and Zayid later co-founded the *Muslim Funny Fest* in 2015 (Willett, & Willett, 2019). Other Muslim comedians also include Mo Amer, Hasan Minhaj, and Azhar Usman, just to name a few.

To summarize, the current scholarship has provided valuable information about many necessary aspects of this research. First, it shows how Muslims and Islam have been negatively and stereotypically portrayed in Western media, and how many Muslims counter those images through 'Muslim media'. It then explains how humor has various benefits, such as challenging negative stereotypes, producing social change, enacting cultural citizenship, and acting as a coping mechanism. However, it highlights that humor can have many negative impacts as well, as it may ridicule, hurt, and delegitimize groups, as well as create controversies and offenses. Finally, the scholarship examines how stand-up comedy specifically has been used by Muslim comedians to question power structures, challenge misconceptions, and engage with audiences.

Tagline

I'm working at my retail job, and an older White couple needs assistance in the woman's department. I help them. The woman kindly says, "We just want you to know that we're happy to have you here [in America]." Her husband nods along.

I smile. "Thank you"

But what I'm actually thinking is *I'm FROM here, and yeah, I'm happy to have you here, too*.

Chapter Three: Method and Theory

In the last chapter, I examined the context, in which the comedy special takes place, as well as dived into previous scholarship in order to better understand the comedy special. In this chapter, I explain the meaning of rhetorical criticism and using it as my research method to critique my specific text. I then discuss my researcher positionality. I follow with teasing out Critical Rhetoric, as the method I use to critique *Feelings* (2019), by explaining its meaning, its purpose, and how it is used in addressing discourses of power and enacting social change. I examine McKerrow's (1989) critique of domination and critique of freedom, and understand how it can be applied to my research.

Finally, I delve into Lowrey and Renegar's (2016) three theoretical frameworks, which I have considered utilizing. From Bicultural Otherness, Self and Culture Deprecating Humor, and Ironic Essentialism, I explain that I have chosen only two of the three frameworks; Bicultural Otherness and, Self and Culture Deprecating Humor, to explore, and justify my decisions to do so. Next, I follow with the meaning of rhetorical criticism and my positionality as they are inextricably linked.

Rhetorical Criticism & the Researcher's Positionality

Rhetorical criticism entails a researcher taking a closer, critical, look at how rhetoric functions to persuade and influence people. It is an art, which involves the analytical examination of an artifact and, in turn, presents a possible interpretation and judgment (Kuypers, 2009). The positionality of the researcher is an integral component and is actively involved, as "the very choices of what to study, and how and why to study

a rhetorical artifact are heavily influenced by the personal qualities of the researcher"
(Kuypers, 2009, p. 14), therefore, it is important to acknowledge it.

To transparently explain my positionality, I am a practicing first-generation,
Muslim millennial Egyptian-American woman. My research is driven by my personal
desire to find media representations that accurately represent me and my community, as
practicing Muslim individuals, and to understand how media misrepresentations
influence audience members, and hence the people around me.

I am White, but also Brown. When I was younger, I was taught in school that
those who are of Egyptian ethnicity belong to the Caucasoid race. Moreover, according to
the United States Census Bureau, someone who is White is "a person having origins in
any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa" (Bureau, n.d.,
para. 2). Therefore, I am White, both in theory and on paper.

However, I do not look White - at least not in the sense of European White - but
actually Brown because of my [4] قمحي skin tone. My understanding of my own race is
challenged, as people around me assume that I am of a race other than White. They do
not see light, pinkish skin, blue eyes, and blond hair, instead, they see the melanin in my
skin, dark eyes, and the hijab on my head. So, even though I am White on paper, people
do not read me as White, and I am not afforded the same White privilege as those from
Westernized cultures because of the intersections of Whiteness with female Muslim
identity.

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[4] The word قمحي [kam'hi] is derived from the word قمح [kam'h], which is the Arabic word
for *wheat*. Egyptians describe their skin tone as being wheaty; the color of wheat.

I am marginalized in this sense; of not looking White and fitting in with the majority group. Therefore, I need to negotiate my position within the dominant system. My cultural identity, my beliefs, and my appearance all influence the way I see the world. Am I free from White privilege? I would say not. And I am afraid that I am feeding a problematic discourse of "White privilege does not exist" if I do not reflexively look at my social identities and know that I am both privileged and marginalized by my connection to Whiteness.

As is true with all cultural groups, Muslims have done terrible things, such as oppress women and display violence, however, these are shortcomings of Muslims, not of Islam (Jarrar, 2018), therefore, I understand how stereotypes have been created and why they exist. However, all stereotypes are incomplete portrayals, even though they sometimes might be based on some truth (Adichie, 2009).

Many tenants and values of the Islamic faith have been mixed with both cultural aspects and traditions, as well as laws and regulations. Therefore, the 'problems with Islam' are in fact, "problems of culture, traditions, politics, superstitions, and tribal or ethnic codes of conduct of some Muslim-majority region" (Saidi, 2008, para. 1). I have seen many misrepresentations associated with Islam, such as racism, sexism, hijab, jihad, terrorism, and misogyny. Islamic teachings and values have been taken out of context and have been misinterpreted, and for these reasons, many negative portrayals have been produced. I believe that Islam, my religion, is flawless, and therefore, I do not critique it. However, I know that Muslims, and humans in general, are not. Many cultural practices are wrongly perceived to be Islamic, and for that reason, it is unfair to judge Islam by the

un-Islamic and inappropriate actions of some individuals who identify as Muslims (Saidi, 2008).

I do not discuss why or how these mainstream representations are misrepresented and what the accurate meanings are in Islam, as it is not my area of expertise and there are Islamic scholars and journals that specialize in that area, nor is it the purpose of my research. I am concerned with the rhetoric presented in one stand-up comedy special and how it influences the representations of Muslims and the discourses of power. I only mention Islamic teachings when it is necessary for my analysis, and I explain them to the best of my knowledge, as I emphasize that I am a Muslim scholar, not a scholar in Islamic Studies. It is also important to mention that as a rhetorical critic, I do my best to critique "a problematic course of action, without reducing it to the evil, trivial, or absurd" (Brigham et al., 2017, p. 86). Thus, my thesis, while could possibly be seen as a critique of the character or their actions, is rather focused on the rhetoric within the comedy special.

I argue that Youssef has the power to represent a large group of people and his cultural groups. As Stuart Hall explains in his lecture Representations & the Media (Jhally, 1997), the term *representation* is usually related to whether or not a depiction of an object is accurate or inaccurate. However, he argues that a representation, in fact, constitutes the world it aims to represent. In other words, a representation is part of the object itself, and therefore, pushes us to think of communication in much more complex ways.

Critical Rhetoric as a Method

Critical Rhetoric is a form of critique that analyzes the integration of power and knowledge (McKerrow & St. John, 2009). The method strengthens our ability to observe, by directing us to look at the dynamic of social relations (Charland, 1991) and focuses on examining discourse that addresses publics (McKerrow, 1989). It is an influential, transformative practice that (McKerrow, 1989) functions by focusing on how the context forms discourse (McKerrow & St. John, 2009). It seeks to "unmask or demystify the discourse of power" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 91). Critical rhetoric allows us to perform an intersectional critique by focusing on power dynamics found among those who are characterized as inferior within American culture (Hobson & Margulies, 2018).

The critique is driven by *telos* acknowledging the unseen or unexplored influences of power and knowledge (McKerrow & St. John, 2009). Ono and Sloop (1992) state that *telos* "represents the moment when a person's pen is put to paper purposely, when ideas become words and when will becomes action" (p. 48). *Telos* refers to a purpose, goal, and end state (McKerrow & St. John, 2009), which must exist to inform Critical Rhetoric.

McKerrow (1989) explains that Critical Rhetoric involves two forms of critique, which are a critique of domination and a critique of freedom. The critique of domination focuses on "the discourse of power which creates and sustains the social practices which control the dominated. It is, more particularly, a critique of ideologies, perceived as rhetorical creations" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 92). By utilizing a critique of domination, the Critical Rhetorician is able to expose how subjects are unfairly dominated by systems of power, as well as aid them with the objective of liberating them from domination

(McKerrow & St. John, 2009). Thus, its *telos* is aiming to demystify the conditions of domination (McKerrow, 1989).

The critique of freedom is more provocative and challenging, as it calls for self-reflexivity and "promotes a realignment in the forces of power that construct social relations" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 91). It is characterized as a critique that is "of never-ending skepticism, hence permanent criticism" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 96). Therefore, it is not against anything, such as the critique of domination, but it instead creates a critical stance of skepticism (McKerrow & St. John, 2009). Its *telos* is the aspect of permanent criticism (McKerrow, 1989).

Charland (1991) critiques McKerrow's approach to Critical Rhetoric, showing concern that it does not offer a social vision. He explains that constant critique and a continual focus on the relations of power and knowledge would prevent the Critical Rhetorician from taking a stand, since they are always in the state of critique rather than acting to create change. He argues that instead of constantly engaging in an infinite form of negative critique, the Critical Rhetorician should rather deconstruct certain formations in order to construct new ones, as well as remain alert to the responses of audiences.

Ono and Sloop (1992) respond to the critique by explaining that Critical Rhetoric requires an acting agent of *telos*. They argue that "by critiquing domination, the critic responds to the oppression of institutional power, and by critiquing freedom, the critic engages in a self-conscious, skeptical critique of writing and thinking" (p. 50). Therefore, both a critique of domination and a critique of freedom aim to recreate and "an argument that identifies the integration of power and knowledge and delineates the role of power/knowledge in structuring social practices" (McKerrow, 1989, p. 102). The method

is *critical*, as it addresses power as an aspect within social life and examines how it

functions (Ono, 2011).

Critical Rhetoric examines the impact that discursive formations have on people's

lives, as well as highlights issues of social change (McKerrow & St. John, 2009). The

method "challenges normative power structures, and seeks to restore agency to bodies of

those who are considered other for their race, class, gender, sexuality, and other

intersectional identities" (Hobson & Margulies, 2018, p. 141). The goal is to understand

the incorporation of power and knowledge in society, and consequently, identify the

possibilities for amendment, as well as the appropriate strategies that could influence

social change (McKerrow, 1989). By using Critical Rhetoric as a method, I explore how

the discourse found in *Feelings* (2019) is influenced by context and how power dynamics

influence the representations of Muslims.

Theoretical Frameworks

While I use Critical Rhetoric as a method, I look at Lowrey and Renegar's (2016)

three theoretical lenses when analyzing Margret Cho's stand-up comedy, which are:

Bicultural Otherness, Self and Culture Deprecating Humor, and Ironic Essentialism. The

frameworks explain how comedians use humor to create a social and cultural identity for

a large audience. Utilizing a combination of all three frameworks for analysis provides a

deeper understanding of humor's rhetorical significance, as well as its implications

regarding cultural identity development (Lowrey & Renegar, 2016).

While I talk about all of them, in my analysis, I use the two most pertinent

frameworks: Bicultural Otherness and Self and Cultural Deprecating Humor. While

Ironic Essentialism serves an important function, for my research, I found the other two to be most relevant to my thesis. In this section, I define each of the three frameworks in more detail and elaborate on their possibility of being applied to *Feelings* (2019).

Bicultural Otherness

A *culture* is shaped by interactions between individuals and groups, and refers to the learned activities of human behavior, concerning arts, beliefs, values, perceptions, attitudes, practices, and ideas, which influence each member (Sani et al., 2011).

Individuals may resonate with two cultural backgrounds and identify and implement one culture's traditions while simultaneously incorporating another's values or behaviors into their identities (Lowrey & Renegar, 2016). There are *mainstream cultures*, which refer to a dominant culture that a person lives in, and *heritage cultures*, which refer to the culture that a person was born into or brought up in, or one that had a significant impact on previous generations of the person's family (Ferenczi et al., 2016). This incorporation of both cultures is *biculturalism*. To expand, biculturalism is self-labeling or group self-categorizing, which reflects cultural dualism and results from an individual's exposure to and internalization of two cultures. The term is used to refer to any pair of two cultures, whether those cultures are ethnic, professional, geographic, or generational (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2007).

These "individuals who identify with two distinct sets of cultural norms, practices, and values are categorized as bicultural" (Lowrey & Renegar, 2016, p. 5). While an ethnic individual may keep their unique characteristics and also adopt some features of the host culture (Hamidi, 2013), a person is required to live among two

cultural groups without indicating a preference to one particular group. This leads to developing and maintaining relationships, and achieving a high level of bicultural competence, without risking their own sense of cultural identity (LaFromboise et al, 1993). Bicultural individuals confront both benefits and drawbacks, as they form their cultural identities leading to uncertainty because they employ two distinct sets of cultural values, norms, and practices. It has become difficult for them to negotiate their identities, especially when cultural boundaries are unclear. Moreover, attempting to merge both cultural affiliations can be problematic, considering that bicultural individuals may be pressured by one or both sides of their backgrounds to conform to only one aspect of their identity (Lowrey & Renegar, 2016).

The concept of biculturalism can often lead individuals who bear a bicultural identity to suffer from the negative effects of cultural Othering and social dissonance, rendered by members of their cultural heritage. "This social separation delineates clear outgroups based solely on cultural group membership, and the formulation of these boundaries highlights the unique set of social issues that arise for bicultural individuals" (Lowrey & Renegar, 2016, p. 5). They are forced into a position of an outsider, because some aspects of their identity do not align with the majority group or because they are unable or unwilling to observe only one set of cultural practices. They may also be perceived as rebellious when they impose aspects from both of their cultural backgrounds in an attempt to balance their identities (Lowrey & Renegar, 2016).

Considering that Youssef carries various cultural identities, such as being Muslim, American, Egyptian, Arab, male, a first-generation citizen, and a millennial, I would argue that he is a multicultural individual. However, for the purpose of this analysis, I

focus on two of his cultural identities; being Muslim and being American. Accordingly, using "Bicultural Otherness" balances and communicates Youssef's cultural identity as a framework to analyze his character, jokes, and general rhetoric. Nevertheless, I consider many of his other cultural identities, as well as my own, throughout my analysis.

Self and Culture Deprecating Humor

The next framework from Lowrey & Renegar (2016) is Self and Culture Deprecating Humor, which is used by comedians to highlight personal flaws or embarrassing qualities, placing themselves as the object of the joke. This helps put the audience at ease due to its lack of aggression, and in turn, creates a sense of community between the comedian and the audience. In doing so, not only do comedians ally themselves with their audiences, but they also bring their audience members up to a more equal relationship, as they may laugh together at some relief of tension (Meyer, 2000). Moreover, "engaging in mild self-deprecatory humor is generally perceived as a clear indication of having a sense of humor" (Apte, 1987, p. 30). Audiences then know that the speaker is human too, and has the ability to laugh at themself (Meyer, 2000). This humor can be used positively as a coping mechanism when presented among members of the same cultural group.

However, if presented by a minority group member among members of other groups, it could produce unconstructive and negative implications, and result in the minority group being perceived as socially inferior (Lowrey & Renegar, 2016). Although self-deprecation may seem demeaning, it actually questions cultural values by ridiculing the society that creates ideals for behavior, as well as individuals who follow those

standards (Gilbert, 2004). "Group members clearly disagree on a rational level with the violations that spark the humor and would be expected to object if an "outsider" told the same deprecatory jokes about their group" (Meyer, 2000, p. 323). When group members tell jokes about their own group, the humor seems to unite the group's members against the issue or behavior for which they have been mocked (Meyer, 2000).

Comedians who use Self and Culture Deprecating Humor are often members of minority groups, who utilize accepted cultural and ethnic stereotypes that have been socially constructed. These stereotypes help develop and maintain a cultural minority group's personal identity and separate the out-group from the majority (Lowrey & Renegar, 2016). Self-deprecating humor "allows performances within a social minority group to simultaneously support and rebel against social norms and stereotypes" (Lowrey & Renegar, 2016, p. 12), which is apparent in *Feelings* (2019).

Through his comedy special, Youssef uses stereotypical jokes that were presented before an audience consisting of both Muslims and non-Muslims. Utilizing this framework allows us to determine if he was able to reduce aggression, create a community, and cope with stereotypes, or if he created negative implications and portrayed his cultural background as socially inferior. Moreover, I explore Youssef's ability to produce positive social change with his usage of this type of humor, as well as his creation of new misrepresentations of Muslims.

Ironic Essentialism

Essentialism is the misunderstanding that socially constructed groups are a coherent and unified entity. This often leads those in the dominant culture to treat group

members as if they were all the same (Figgou, 2013). This creates stereotypes, which "link observable group features to deep inherent characteristics, common to all group members" (Figgou, 2013, p. 687). In other words, it is the assumption that all individuals belonging to a social or cultural group share similar characteristics and behaviors, which reduces entire cultural groups to a limited set of attributes (Lowrey & Renegar, 2016). It attributes "a fixed, underlying nature to members of a category, which is understood to determine their identity, explain their observable properties, render them fundamentally alike, and allow many inferences to be drawn about them" (Haslam et al. 2006, p. 64). Cultural essentialism assigns a fixed identity to all the members of a cultural group and thus, results in prejudicial attitudes (Lowrey & Renegar, 2016). These essentialized groups are viewed as outsiders and are likely to be discriminated against. Therefore, when essentialism is implemented literally, it can classify entire groups of people in an unfair and stereotypical manner, based solely on the inaccurate social expectations of a race, ethnicity, or culture (Lowrey & Renegar, 2016).

However, when implemented ironically, "a comedian is able to subversively highlight the absurdity embedded within this extreme form of cultural categorization while simultaneously appearing to adhere to it" (Lowrey & Renegar, 2016, p. 6). Since irony is not meant to be straightforward nor to be taken literally, the audience must be able to understand both the literal and indirect meaning of the presented message. In other words, humorous irony allows the comedian to develop a narrative that is literal and another that carries an underlying meaning, and therefore, is capable of providing subtle critiques of the essentialist portrayal of groups (Lowrey & Renegar, 2016). Youssef uses some level of Ironic Essentialism in his special, and therefore, could provide a great

opportunity to analyze his rhetorical messages using this framework to further understand

their significance.

Nevertheless, for my thesis, I choose to omit this framework in this particular

analysis, for various reasons. First, I limit myself to using only two frameworks, to

provide an in-depth and rich analysis of their usage. Second, the usage of Ironic

Essentialism is not as useful when examining the comedy special, compared with

Bicultural Otherness and Self and Culture Deprecating Humor. Finally, this framework

does not add as much to the overall argument of social change as the other two

frameworks, while also lacking a clear lens that would allow us to focus on the created

new misrepresentations of Muslims.

As such, my thesis critically examines power structures, dominant systems, and

minority relations that appear in Youssef's performance of comedy. Critical scholarship

has the potential to address issues such as "social inequity, oppression, political

resistance, institutional analysis, social and political organizing and organizations,

vernacular logics, and cultural differences" (Ono, 2011, p. 95). Performances that

emphasize the disruption of power relations, which privilege a few and marginalize

many, have the ability to create critical interventions that would advance a culture that is

more inclusive and pluralistic (Bodkin, 2013).

In summary, this rhetorical critique combines the method of Critical Rhetoric with

two of Lowrey and Renegar's (2016) three frameworks, those being Bicultural Otherness

and Self and Culture Deprecating Humor to analyze Youssef's comedy

special *Feelings* (2019) and his performance. Doing so allows me to focus on power

relationships, as well as determine the special's impact on representations of Muslims

and Islam, in terms of producing positive social change, or new and problematic

misrepresentations.

Punchline

It's the holiday season and my retail job is very busy. It's wear-a-Santa-hat at work. I'm wearing one over my hijab. One of my coworkers, an older White female, sees me…

Coworker: I've never seen an Indian Santa before.

Me: *confused* What?

Coworker: *repeats herself* I've never seen an Indian Santa before.

Me: *laughing, starting to realize she means me* Who?

Coworker: You!

Me: I'm not from India.

Coworker: Oh... from where then?

Me: Egypt.

Coworker: Oh! Then I've never seen an Egyptian Santa before.

Me: *laughs and walks away*

Chapter Four: Bicultural Otherness

In this chapter, I focus on Youssef's ability to communicate various aspects of his bicultural identity, as well as explain how individuals from either cultural identity generate a sense of Otherness. I also point a finger towards the critiques of domination and freedom that he provides, as he highlights systems of power and problematic imagery, through self-reflexivity. Through this combination of critiquing domination and freedom, I demonstrate how Youssef motivates his audience members towards social change.

As Lowery and Renegar (2016) explain, bicultural individuals may face cultural Othering as they attempt to combine characteristics from both of their cultural affiliations. This creates boundaries and leads to social separation, which brings to light the social issues that bicultural individuals go through. Highlighting this Otherness in humor can be used as a tool for communicating culture.

There are non-verbal tools in Youssef's performance that contribute to his bicultural identity, such as his wardrobe. Youssef has a 'still in college' appearance. He is dressed in an unbuttoned blue shirt and white sneakers, which has been a trend for the past decade (Suarez, 2020), and is also wearing a backward black cap. This look helps create a sense of identification with audience members, as opposed to if he were to wear a suit and tie or traditional Islamic clothing. Ali (2019b) states that "the bearded, baseball hat-wearing Youssef looks like any other nominally ambitious millennial" (para. 6) and that "he appears so unremarkably 'American Dude' that viewers may find themselves looking in a mirror" (para. 7). I focus on how these aspects of his performance along with his rhetoric and choice of jokes influence his audience.

Bicultural Otherness

Youssef does not rely on typical and cliché jokes to express his cultural identity, like imitating his parents' Arab accent or referencing a Muslim that is at an airport, is dealing with the FBI, or is a barber. Instead, he presents fairly new material, or at least presents these jokes in a novel manner. Youssef's comedy is a means for him to communicate his cultural identity to his Western audience. This is apparent in his choice of language. He does not use common, relatively well-known Arabic language in *Feelings* (2019), like *habibi*[5], *elhamdulillah*[6], or *as'salam alaykom*[7], even though this tactic has been used by various Muslim comedians, like Mo Amer and Maysoon Zayid for example.

Youssef only used the Arabic language on two occasions; the first was related to the 'R. Kelly' joke that I later critique in Chapter Five; Self and Culture Deprecating Humor (see page 68), in which he discusses the distrust of media coverage. He explains that he watched the R. Kelly documentary [Surviving R. Kelly] and admired his singing. He states:

> You think he's singing a song, but he's like, *Allahu Akbar*. And you're like, *oh my God*. That would be devastating to the Muslim community. R. Kelly doing the call to prayer? 'Cause it would be the most beautiful call to prayer that we'd ever heard. (Youssef et al., 2019, 7:20)

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[5] Habibi is the Arabic word for *my love* or *my dear* (male form).
[6] Elhamdullillah is an Arabic phrase meaning *praise be to God* or *thank God*.
[7] As'salam alaykom is an Islamic salutation that means *peace be upon you* in Arabic. Although the phrase is a religious salutation among Muslims when greeting or departing, it is also used by Arabic speakers of other religions, as well as non-Arabic-speaking Muslims.

Even though he used foreign language, he quickly followed with its explanation; *Allahu Akbar* is *the call to prayer*, or more specifically, it is the first part of it.

The second time he used the Arabic language was when he explained that people pick and choose what they want to learn about. He states, "they [people] want to know about *baba ghanoush*[8], not *Allah*" (Youssef et al., 2019, 37:16). This shows how some people are not keen on learning other languages or about other cultures. Nevertheless, his comedy special is meant for a broad audience, and therefore, his choice of language is simple and relevant. He also acknowledges and understands how people may be afraid of things that they do not understand, like Islam, foreign language, or hijab, however, he bears the ability to address that fear.

Bicultural individuals confront benefits, as they can often relate to and follow both sides of their cultural identities, without portraying preference to either, hence, reaching bicultural competence. Youssef states, "They'll find out I'm Muslim. The second they find out, crazy question, *why do you make them wear that?* I'm like, *who?*" (Youssef et al., 2019, 33:25). As I have previously stated, many mistakenly believe that Muslim women are oppressed and coerced to wear hijab (Ruby, 2016), since Western literature has persistently depicted it as a symbol of oppression (Jarrar, 2018). However, numerous studies actually "show that Muslim women associate multiple positive meanings with the hijab—such as fulfilling an Islamic requirement and taking control of their bodies" (Ruby, 2016, p. 141), as well as feeling liberated, safe, and protected (Jarrar, 2018).

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[8] Baba ghanoush is an Arab dish that originated in Lebanon. It consists of cooked eggplant, which has a smokey taste, and is mashed and seasoned. It is often served as a side dish and eaten with pita bread.

Youssef then says, "Just because you don't get it, doesn't mean it's oppressive. If you step outside of even your own culture, things might look weird" (Youssef et al., 2019, 34:16). This statement is not delivered in a humorous manner, but rather in a calm tone, which indicates a more serious message. Not a single audience member laughs. He says these words while looking into the camera, rather than towards his present audience members, which is one of the few times, if not the only time, he does so. This gives the impression that this significant message is directed to a larger audience, one that is watching from their home and is located all over the world.

As Bodkin (2013) notes, "performing comedy is dependent on contradiction and juxtaposition" (p. 53). Youssef performs comedy, by juxtaposing a Muslim woman wearing a headscarf in extremely hot weather with a non-Muslim woman wearing a short dress in extremely cold weather, Youssef cleverly explains that sometimes cultural norms dictate how people dress, and not understanding another person's culture does not make it wrong or oppressive. In fact, it would be ethnocentric to think so. Youssef has achieved a high level of bicultural competence that allows him to live effectively among two cultural groups without displaying preference to one particular group, and by delivering this analogy, he is able to successfully explain biculturalism.

Youssef has the advantage of being a bicultural man, as his voice is heard easier than if he were a bicultural woman because of the patriarchal society, in which we live, that includes many male-centered aspects such as language, popular culture, and institutions (Kleinman et al., 2021). In this part of the special, Youssef himself is able to provide a critique of domination, as he tackles ethnocentrism and sheds light on the absurdity of being concerned with why a woman wears a hijab. He also provides a

critique of freedom, when being self-reflexive and acknowledging that he might not understand a culture that is foreign to him as well. By doing so, he is able to appeal to various audiences, both Muslim and non-Muslim; American and non-American, motivating them to also engage in self-reflexivity and, therefore, promote social change.

In another part of his special, Youssef refers to first-generation American Muslims who may become completely dissociated from their faith if they are not keen on practicing or learning more about it. He states, "If 9-11 didn't happen, I might've just been like, *Yeah, my dad's from Egypt. Add the bacon*." (Youssef et al., 2019, 53:27). This delineates how many first-generation Americans may become estranged from their heritage cultures. This is known as *assimilation*, which is when an "individual gives precedence to the dominant culture and renounces his or her own" (Lao-Arthur, 2011, p. 36). Youssef provides a critique of domination related to American culture that may be stronger than an absent heritage culture, which leads to empowerment and elimination.

However, because of his biculturalism, Youssef possesses the advantage of being an American that lives in the United States, but also understands - and follows - a key value related to the Islamic faith of not consuming pork. Through this, he is also able to provide a critique of freedom, as he recognizes this threat and understands that one must also put in the effort to grasp their heritage culture, especially when that culture is absent, or at least, not as present as their other mainstream cultural identity. By doing so, Youssef is able to call attention to dominant cultures and systems of power, and motivate his audience members to contribute to social change, simply through these realizations.

Additionally, Youssef lets it be known that Muslims do not really face oppression from each other or from their culture, but are rather more oppressed - or Othered - by the majority. He states:

> I want White guilt to get to the point where my life gets recalled. You know, like, turn on the TV in a couple years, see a guy in a suit, and he's just like, *hi, were you Muslim between 2001 and 2025? If so, we may owe you a huge cash settlement. Were you black ever? Even now, in the future?*" (Youssef et al., 2019, 32:42).

Youssef subtly implies that White folks have wronged Muslims, as they have many other minority groups, like Black folks, and therefore, would clearly like to be compensated for being Othered.

A critique of domination is most obvious at this point, as he sheds light on White privilege, Whiteness, and White supremacy. Moreover, he highlights the need for *White guilt*, which is a term that "describes the dysphoria felt by European Americans who see their group as responsible for illegitimate advantage held over other racial groups" (Iyer et al., 2003, p. 118). This points a finger towards White society's lack of racial innocence, abuse of power, wrongdoings, and racial injustices over time (Steele, 1990), and the need for that White guilt to even extend to other races, ethnicities, and cultures, such as Islam.

In another part of his special, he explains how he had to learn how to ski so he could keep up with popular activities that White folks engage in. He states, "This isn't easy for me. I had to learn how to ski. Like, it's…it's nuts. These people do crazy sports because they know they should die" (Youssef et al., 2019, 31:56). He not only points to

the Whiteness of *risk culture* (Baldwin, 2009) and how adventure sports have become a

predominately White space (McLean, 2013), but he again hints at White privilege, and

White folks recognizing their privilege and knowing that it is wrong. Youssef uses *dark*

comedy, which is a term used to refer to merging comedy with inappropriate and/or

horrific elements, as it is both unsettling and amusing (Hawley, 2011). It provides the

audience with the opportunity to laugh when they are not supposed to (Moore, 2007). The

joke is a deep examination into White guilt, and even goes so far as to imply that White

people should die because of the injustices they have done in the past, as a means of

compensation.

When considering the various individuals within Youssef's audience, these jokes

could have both negative and positive impacts. On the one hand, focusing on White folks

that refuse to admit they have White privilege, and actually deny its existence, these jokes

might only create frustration or even anger towards minority groups. I argue that this joke

feeds the problematic reverse racism narrative. *Reverse racism* is a concept that refers to

White folks' unsound belief that "they are discriminated against as much as or more than

racial/ethnic minorities" (Woo, 2018, p. 766). On the other hand, focusing on his non-

White audience members and his White audience member that acknowledge White

privilege and understand its harmful effects, these jokes are not only appealing, but also

reinforce a desire towards social change to move past these dreadful injustices.

However, there is more to this one joke, as Youssef also portrays his bicultural

Otherness. Even though he is of Middle Eastern, and therefore, technically also White, he

encapsulates how there are some cultural aspects that he cannot comply with, or would

need to put in the effort to do so, such as in this case, learning how to ski. He aims to

reach bicultural competence.

Unfortunately, reaching bicultural competence does not mean that bicultural

individuals are free from any and all conflicts between their cultures. Bicultural

individuals confront drawbacks, like suffering from cultural Othering based on aspects of

their identity that do not align with the majority group. Youssef states:

> Like, I get really upset every time I get a White Uber driver. Devastated. Like, I
>
> look down on my phone, I see the little white face, and I'm just like, *fuck! I'm…*
>
> *I'm gonna be late. He's gonna stop at every stop sign. He's gonna make me listen*
>
> *to his fucking band.* I'm like, *Scott, what the fuck?* Like, I get so angry (Youssef
>
> et al., 2019, 27:26).

Here, Youssef not only demonstrates his prejudices in a self-deprecating manner, but he

also exemplifies how his wishes stem from one aspect of his bicultural identity - wanting

a driver who shares similar characteristics, such as race and behavior. This creates

dissonance, and therefore, leads to more cultural Othering. Here, Youssef engages in a

critique of freedom, as he admits to his own irrational prejudices.

When bicultural individuals implement one culture's values, while also

implementing another's, sometimes conflicts occur, and a struggle is intensified when

those values are contradictory. Youssef portrays an example of this struggle as he states:

> Because there's Friday prayers and then there's Friday nights. I'll be at Friday
>
> prayers, I'm listening to the imam. I'm like, *Yo, this is me, man.* I go out Friday, I
>
> see the most beautiful woman I've ever seen, and I'm like, *No, this is me. I think,*
>
> *this is…this is, wow!* To pray on Friday? It's like getting your car washed before a

hurricane. Like, you know what the weather is gonna be. You're like, *No, I'm gonna spend $50 and detail the whole thing.* Why? Because we have to. (Youssef et al., 2019, 39:10)

Youssef here illustrates how he identifies as being a Muslim, by going to the mosque and praying the Friday [Jummah] prayer, while also incorporating a party culture, by going out with women that same day. He describes going to the mosque and praying as 'getting a car washed', while describing the party culture of Friday-nights-out as 'a hurricane'. It explains how both acts contradict one another, and the struggle he goes through by being a part of both cultures. He is pressured by his Islamic cultural background to conform to aspects of his identity, and his attempting to merge both cultural affiliations proves to be challenging.

Through this exposition and metaphor, he offers a critique of freedom by referencing his own internal struggle of incorporating two cultural aspects that are not compatible, and knowing that one of them is an undesirable and regretful action. He probably has audience members that can relate to the inner struggle he describes in this joke, whether they are Muslim or non-Muslim. Accordingly, Youssef uses comedy to express his bicultural struggle.

Youssef also incorporated strong messages about identity in his special that were presented in a non-humorous manner. For example, in his opening statement, he says "I feel like, as a Muslim, so much of my life has been defined by all these things that I have no control over" (Youssef et al., 2019, 1:34). He refers to how he is pre-judged based on people's previous misconceptions of his identity. Similarly, in another part of his special, he states:

> 9-11 made me more Muslim, because I was told it was my fault. I was told that
>
> the most horrible thing that I had ever seen happen, to this day, was because of
>
> who I was, where I came from, the language that I speak, and my faith (Youssef
>
> et al., 2019, 52:48).

Youssef clearly uses a critique of domination through these messages as he underlines

present prejudices and discrimination within society. The majority group owns the power

to assign 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong' to a person, simply based on who they are.

Doing so may lead bicultural individuals to suppress some aspects of one of their cultural

identities, if not the whole identity, because of fear, shame, or guilt. As an audience

member, we cannot help but think about his age at the time, whether he was a kid or was

in high school. Nevertheless, being told that something so horrific was his fault because

of who he is as a person portrays the intensity of the situation, especially at an age that

young.

> This shows the dangers of being targeted because of who you are as a person or

your identity. Youssef mentions an encounter between him and a classmate, saying:

> I would fight him. He'd be like, *you're Middle Eastern*. And I'd be like, *no, man,*
>
> *I'm from Egypt. It's in Africa. I'm black.* No, guys, I very much wasn't black, and
>
> there's no…there's nothing more suspicious than just wearing a ton of Iverson
>
> jerseys and…trying to blend in" (Youssef et al., 2019, 43:16).

This portrays a sense of denial and being ashamed of where a person comes from or their

identity. Because he is 'Middle Eastern', he is worried that he will be labeled as

something he is not - a violent terrorist. He then tries to find another identity to fit in

with. Black, something else he is not.

Here, Youssef provides a critique of freedom, as he acknowledges the absurdity of his argument, and the danger of not taking pride in who he is, but rather trying to suppress his identity and find another one that he could try to 'blend in with'. In doing so, Youssef brings the audience's attention to this danger, and therefore, motives them towards social changes through taking caution of stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination.

Youssef effectively uses comedy to address various aspects related to bicultural identity, by providing a critique of domination. He sheds light on ethnocentrism, the patriarchal system related to being concerned with what women wear, the potential of dominant cultures to literally suppress other absent ones, White privilege, and the danger behind stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination. He also exhibits a critique of freedom by being self-reflexive and acknowledging that he may not always understand cultures that we are foreign to, and that HE must exert the effort to understand HIS own cultural heritage, to prevent its suppression, and confront his irrational prejudices. Through these critiques of domination and freedom in combination with using comedy to highlight Bicultural Otherness, not only does Youssef successfully bring his audience's attention to systems of power, but he also encourages people to change their perceptions of, and actions towards, not only Muslims, but all minority groups.

Punchline

An older White man needs assistance in the shoe department. I go to help him. Once he

sees me...

Older White man: Which part of India are you from?

Me: Ummm, I'm not from India.

Older White man: Pakistan?

Me: No…

Older White man: From somewhere around there?

Me (thinking): I'm from here actually. But I know that's not what he wants to hear

Me: I'm from Egypt.

Older White man: Oh! Egypt is a beautiful country! I'm sure you know all about the

mummies?

Chapter Five: Self and Culture Deprecating Humor

As explained by Lowrey & Renegar (2016), comedians utilize Self and Culture Deprecating Humor to accentuate personal flaws or embarrassing qualities, which places them at the center of the joke. This may seem demeaning, but in doing so, the speaker actually reduces aggression, creates a community, and copes with stereotypes. It challenges cultural values by deriding the society that creates standards for behavior, as well as the individuals who follow those standards. Moreover, they lead others to perceive them as having a sense of humor and the ability to laugh at themselves.

Youssef also utilizes non-verbal aspects in his performance to create a sense of identity with his audience members. He creates a sense of relevancy through his positioning and movement in the center of the audience, which is circled around him. This style of delivery is very different from the traditional delivery style of stand-up comedy or other performances, of being up on stage and looking towards an audience. Throughout his special, he moves around in a circle, facing different audience members from time to time. Furthermore, audience members are able to see each other. This may invite a feeling of him being 'one of them'.

Humor has the ability to challenge and combat social injustices, but also ridicule and disparage already marginalized groups. In this chapter, I argue through my analysis that Youssef has done both. I do not focus on finding critiques of freedom and domination as much, since they are not as evident as they were in Chapter Four; Bicultural Otherness. Instead, I focus on analyzing the Self and Culture Deprecating jokes that are presented to an audience of both Muslims and non-Muslims, and how those jokes create a sense of identity between the speaker and the audience members. I argue

that this use of comedy, on the one hand, normalizes Muslims/Islam to his Western

audience, but on the other hand, creates new stereotypes and misrepresentations of the

cultural group. I also focus on power by critiquing stereotypes, as well as the absurdity of

needing to self and culture deprecate in order to be accepted by the majority.

Self and Culture Deprecating Humor

There is a clear pattern of media reporting that differentiates between terrorists

who are Muslim with international ties, and thus, are connected to a larger terrorist cell,

and terrorists who are U.S. citizens with no clear international ties, and thus are mentally

unstable human beings (Powell, 2011). Moreover, almost any act of terrorism can be now

associated with Islam, which is a new form of anti-Semitism and represents religious

discrimination and intolerance (Reza, 2011). Youssef addresses this at one point in his

special, as he refers to the news oftentimes finding a way to connect negative stories to

Islam. He mentions the R. Kelly documentary and waiting for him to be associated with

Islam in some way. He says:

> I'm just so used to seeing stories get spun. You see it all the time. Some random
>
> crime will happen, a day later they'll be like, *and he recently converted to Islam*.
>
> They'll just, like, throw it in there (Youssef et al., 2019, 6:48).

He then continues to say in a slow, hesitant tone, "I was just waiting for them to find the

Quran" (Youssef et al., 2019, 7:05). It seems that Youssef wants to hold the audience's

attention, considering his overall slow storytelling pace (McCarthy, 2019). Youssef

provides an obvious critique of domination as he highlights the media's overwhelming

power to set the agenda and frame news stories, as it focuses on what it pleases, and

ignores other aspects. This is obvious in another part of the special when he juxtaposes

the media coverage related to Dennis Hastert and Jared Fogle saying that:

> Longest-serving Republican Speaker of the House. He touched kids. Nobody
>
> knows. Because the news didn't cover it. But Jared from Subway…every reporter
>
> in the country for years was like, *did he feed them the sandwiches? Tonight at*
>
> *10.* It's just proof. It's just proof that the media is fucking run by *Quiznos*. Like,
>
> the…you see it now, right? Like, it's…they've been doing it forever. They've
>
> been doing it forever. And that's how bad things happen. (Youssef et al., 2019,
>
> 35:57).

Through these jokes Youssef also shows how much we, as people, rely on and believe the

media, which in itself, is a power structure, to make our lives meaningful.

As a rhetorical analysis of Youssef's statements and jokes, my concern is not with

trying to learn what he might have actually thought or felt in his delivery, but rather how

they textually make sense of the moment for himself and others (Brigham et al., 2017). In

other words, I am not concerned with Youssef's acts, as judging him is not my place, nor

the intention of my research. Instead, I look at how his rhetoric influences representations

of Muslims and Islam. An example of this includes publicizing one's own wrongdoings,

which is an act that goes against Islamic values. In doing so, the transgressor themself, by

breaching the privacy of their actions, constitutes the sin. The reason against this is that

publicizing one's own sinful act implicitly serves to normalize sinful behavior in public,

and therefore, harms the community (El Shamsy, 2015).

Youssef does so on several occasions throughout his special, one of which is

when he portrays himself as a womanizer. By using the term *womanizer*, I refer to a man

who often has casual, temporary sexual relationships with women, in addition to being

abusive. He states:

> If I'm being self-reflective, I mean, I've been racist in a small, similar way. I date
>
> White women. They're a huge part of my life. But I would never make it official.
>
> Like, with my Muslim parents, like…? You know what I'm talking about. Like,
>
> with my Muslim parents? (Youssef et al., 2019, 29:14).

Not only does Youssef ridicule himself and gives the impression that he is a 'bad guy',

because of how he treats women, but this joke is demeaning to White women

specifically. Additionally, by emphasizing "my Muslim parents", Youssef scapegoats

Muslim parents, implying that they are the actual reason that he would not marry a White

woman.

He continues to describe an exchange between him and the mother of a White

woman he had been dating at the time. She explained to him that she was initially afraid

of Muslims before she had met him and was worried about her daughter being with him,

because the only Muslims she had seen were on the news. He states:

> It was a really beautiful moment, but the only thing I wanted to do was break up
>
> with her daughter. Because it made me realize something about myself. Because I
>
> was like, *man, this woman hated Muslims, and then she spent just a couple of*
>
> *hours with me and completely changed her mind.* Like, *if I had that kind of power,*
>
> *I have a responsibility to sleep with as many White women as possible.* (Youssef
>
> et al., 2019, 31:08)

Indeed, this joke holds a powerful life lesson, encouraging others to seek out and

understand things that may seem foreign to them. It is a critique of domination, shedding

light on the power and negative influences of stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination, but the mother changed her mind and prejudiced thoughts, just by meeting and spending the day with him. This is similar to the "Hug a Muslim" campaign, in which members of the public were invited to *meet a Muslim* or *come talk to a Muslim*, and non-Muslim women were invited to *try on a hijab*. The campaign aimed to promote public awareness of negative and stereotypical representations of Muslims (Zhakata, 2018). However, this joke also reinforces the womanizer aspect of the representation and implies that he has problematic attitudes towards women, even if it is only emotionally.

Through these two jokes, Youssef engages in a critique of freedom, by being self-reflexive and acknowledging that he mistreats women - especially White women. He also engages in cultural depreciation by implying that the older generation, traditional Muslims would not accept a White person as their child's spouse, because of their race. Similar to the 'crazy sports' joke I have previously critiqued in Chapter Four; Bicultural Otherness (see page 60), I argue that this joke also fuels the reverse racism narrative. Moreover, Youssef normalizes the idea of going around, sleeping with women, and messing with their feelings, which goes against Islamic teachings.

Furthermore, Youssef also uses curse words such as *fuck* and *shit* repeatedly, extensively discusses his watching of adult movies, which incompatible with the Islamic principle of modesty (Halstead, 1997), mentions having premarital sex, and hints at him living an abusive party culture. While discussing the differences between Christians praying on Sundays, and Muslims praying on Fridays, he says:

> It's just so much easier to be Christian. Sunday? Man, that's the day. You fuck up
>
> the whole weekend, and then you're just like, *God, I don't know what that was.*

Just make me new. Friday, we're like…we're at the mosque, we're like, *hey, look,*

this might not count. Just make me sick. Just knock me out. Do something so I can

stay home and not be a piece of shit. (Youssef et al., 2019, 39:57).

Youssef uses self-deprecating humor to create a sense of identification with his audience

members, however, Hodson & MacInnis (2016) explain that "disparaging humor can play

a key role in delegitimizing outgroups, trivializing their rights, concerns, and right to

protection" (p. 70). In using self and culture deprecating humor, not only does Youssef

normalize acts that are deemed wrongful in his own religion, but he also portrays

Muslims as having a secular, less pious attitude, thus constituting new representations of

Muslims, especially those who are first-generation Americans.

This is because Youssef has a powerful platform; being able to be heard by

millions of people all over the world, and he makes his identity public to that audience.

He represents millions, and through his rhetoric, he is able to disregard the experiences of

other Muslims, who may not share the same ones as Youssef. And since a representation

constitutes the world it aims to represent (Jhally, 1997), Youssef's representation is part

of the cultures that he represents.

Comedians ally themselves with their audiences when they make fun of

themselves, which leads their audience members to identify with them and combat the

embossed up stereotypes and forces of power that have been around for so long. Youssef

does this as he subtly ridicules his cultural group when discussing that he does not want a

White Uber driver, because they would not meet his desired standards of speed, and

instead, would want a driver that is more fitting to his cultural ideals. He states:

"I want one of my people, right? I want an *Omar*. I want a *Mohamed*. I want

somebody who's running from their country. That's Uber. Uber's like, *quick, get*

in! We don't have the paperwork. We gotta go, dude. We gotta fucking go. We

don't have time" (Youssef et al., 2019, 27:59).

Through the delivery of this joke, Youssef feeds the oversimplified and essentialist

perception that Muslims living in the West are immigrants (Nanabawa, 2013) or even

refugees. He also uses dark comedy to engage in self and culture deprecation of Muslims,

which is evident since the names *Omar* and *Mohamed* are specifically names given to

Muslims, as well as culture deprecation, referring to the ongoing state of war and social

unrest in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, such as that in Palestine, Syria, Iraq,

Afghanistan, and Pakistan (Paige, 2019; Jabbar & Zaza, 2014; Gelpi et al., 2005; Engels

& Saas, 2013; Khaliq & García, 2019), which forces war victims to flee their countries

and seek refuge. Through this ridicule, Youssef places these cultural groups as the object

of the joke, but in turn, he creates a sense of community between them and audience

members. Through this joke, he is also able to cope with stereotypes, which helps his

audience members perceive him as having a sense of humor.

Youssef here provides a critique of domination, as he sheds light on the

consequences of war and the harmful power of entities that inflict it, like the United

States or the Israeli occupation. He highlights the struggle of diasporic communities. The

term *diaspora* includes "alien residents, expellees, political refugees, expatriates,

immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities, and it refers to movement from an ancestral

land to settlement in a new land" (Nanabawa, 2013, p. 17). He, therefore, tenuously

critiques this system of power that has abused nations for years.

While still on the topic of Uber drivers, Youssef demonstrates how comedy provides "a rhetorically significant method for performing cultural identity membership" (Lowrey & Renegar, 2016, p. 4). He states:

> From the second I get in the car to when we arrive, I wanna hear somebody talk to their whole family. Like, that…that makes me feel safe. That's like an emotional seatbelt. I'm like, *okay, cool. He called his cousin. We're gonna get there*."
>
> (Youssef et al., 2019, 28:14)

Youssef uses self-deprecating humor to portray the nature of the collectivist culture related to Muslims/Islam and Arabs. *Collectivism* refers to "the collective social welfare or the treatment of the subjects by their sovereign as a single entity instead of their individual entities" (Ahmad, 2011, p. 17). This culture is different from the general individualistic cultures found in the West.

However, with this same joke, Youssef engages in culture-deprecation that could question the work ethic of Muslims. Drivers who make personal phone calls while passengers are in the car with them may concern, or even irritate people, since talking on the phone while driving is not only distracting and dangerous, but some passengers may also find it to be rude ('Uber help', n.d.). By implying that Muslims, or even Arabs in general, do not take their job seriously, Youssef fuels the foul portrayals of Muslims being lazy, the resentful attitudes towards them, and the support for the Muslim Ban, and thus, reinforcing demeaning representations that many would like to overcome.

Through this joke, Youssef also provides a critique of domination by highlighting prejudices, discrimination, and absurdity from the majority group. Related to his 'my life has been defined' statement, which I have previously discussed in Chapter Four;

Bicultural Otherness (see page 63), Youssef utilizes Self and Culture Deprecating Humor to shed light on how others define who he is as a person, based on stereotypes and prejudiced thoughts of his identity.

Further in the special, Youssef shares a story about his mom buying him a walkie-talkie instead of a cell phone, so that she could know where he was and not have to worry. He says:

My mom was really paranoid, but she was also really cheap. So instead of buying me a cell phone, she bought me a four-mile radius walkie-talkie…that I had to carry with me everywhere that I went. I had to charge it every night, like the whole thing. And I remember at first everyone was like, *ah, man, Ramy's got a walkie-talkie! What's the range on that thing? How far does it go?* And then 9/11 happened, and everyone was like, *oh man, Ramy's got a walkie-talkie. What's the range on that thing? How far does it go?* (Youssef et al., 2019, 41:57).

Youssef hints at the fear other people have towards Muslims and Arabs, especially after 9/11. He relies on the stereotype of Muslims being terrorists and violent in the delivery of his joke. However, through this self-deprecation, Youssef is able to ease tension and relate to his audience members. He gives an example of how 'things are not always how they seem', since his peers saw him as a Muslim, Arab kid with a walkie talkie, which gave them anxiety, while the reality of the situation is that his mom was just worried about him and did not want to spend a lot of money on a cell phone.

Further in the special, Youssef continues using this same stereotype and delineates how others told him *who* he was. He explains:

> The name of the first World Trade Center bomber was Ramzi Yousef. And
>
> everybody thought we were related…including me. I was like, *yeah, he might be*
>
> *part of the family. I don't know, everyone's always late to*
>
> *dinner. Maybe…Maybe.* (Youssef et al., 2019, 42:44)

Through this joke, he depicts how others made him out to be a relative of a terrorist,

based on the similarity of their names. He eases the tension, however, by self-deprecation

and saying that it could be possible, as he actually refers to another stereotype; Arabs

being late (Blasco & Zølner, 2009).

Youssef does so through a third joke, as he explains that kids at his school would

start rumors that would be associated with him. He states, "People started getting in my

head, telling me I was a terrorist, all that shit. This kid convinced me I was related to Bin

Laden" (Youssef et al., 2019, 43:05). He later refers to another popular kid at his school,

saying:

> He convinced everyone, because we were in Jersey, that Bin Laden was coming
>
> to the school. Everyone believed him. People were taking off Monday. It was like
>
> a three-day Bin Laden weekend. And everyone was scared. I'm thinking I'm
>
> related to him. They're all like, *what are we gonna do?* I was like, *I don't know.*
>
> *What are you guys gonna do? That's my uncle.* I had some very prominent uncles
>
> as a kid. It was… it was a crazy time. (Youssef et al., 2019, 44:11)

This joke could negatively be interpreted as a kid, who was being bullied, taking

advantage and misusing power he 'thought' he had. Again, he uses dark comedy, putting

his audience members at unease, while also allowing them to laugh. Through these three

examples, Youssef portrays how the majority can quite literally speak for minority

groups, and assign qualities or characteristics to them that are not true.

Finally, in his closing statement, Youssef says, "so it's like, Islam is stronger, and

America is weaker all because of this one thing. And so the thought I had was…did 9-11

work?" (Youssef et al., 2019, 54:26). This is his shocking finale, in which his usage of

dark comedy is extremely evident. I could quite easily argue that it is his 'darkest' joke.

He touches on an instance that is very sensitive to Americans, one that has caused great

hurt to many. Not only that, but the tragic event was caused by members who claimed to

be part of his cultural group. The joke is quite risky, and some may have found it tasteless

and extremely inappropriate. We can quite literally hear the audience members gasping

after his statement. I argue that this one, spiteful joke could have caused much anger

towards, not only Youssef, but Muslims in general. However, he did recover quickly by

moving on from a risky joke in a humorous manner, saying "but now that I have your

attention…the ice caps are melting" (Youssef et al., 2019, 54:59). This is a reference to a

joke he had used at the beginning of the special, implying that he did not mean what he

said, and the statement was just a means of grabbing people's attention in order to

address another important issue.

WHY DO THEY MAKE HER WEAR THAT?   78

Punchline

I'm at the beach with my family. It's a nice, hot summer day in July. I'm wearing a dark burkini[9]. I go to grab something from the car, and on my way back, three White girls approach me in passing. They're all wearing colorful bikinis.

White girl 1: *looks at me from head to toe* "Aren't you hot?!"

Me: *thinking to myself, *of course, this question!** But I know how it looks, so I reply, "no."

She makes a face. A mix of confusion with disbelief. They continue along, but as they walk by, I hear her say…

White girl 1: "WEIRD."

Her friends laugh

Me: *thinking to myself, *wow, okay, but who makes you wear THAT?**

---

[9] A burkini is a full-body swimsuit, which many Muslim women wear at the beach or the pool, which covers everything but the face, hands and feet. It is similar to a diving suit, but usually with a loose piece of fabric to cover the bottom area.

Chapter Six: Concluding Thoughts & Future Research Trajectory

My thesis analyzed the rhetoric found in Youssef's comedy special *Feelings* (2019), focusing on how the comedy and his performance influence the representations of Muslims and Islam. I have identified both negative and positive aspects to the special and found that Youssef, on the one hand, was able to challenge many stereotypical representations of Muslims, by questioning the responses of normative society and communicating his cultural identity to the audience. While on the other hand, he also contributed to some new misrepresentations of Muslims, especially those who are first-generation Americans, as parts of his performance suggest a more secular, less-pious attitude that disregards some central tenets of the Islamic faith.

In order to effectively conduct my analysis, I first focused on the media portrayals and the Western construct of Orientalism, and identified how these portrayals have impacted me and my various cultural identities, of being a first-generation, Muslim millennial Egyptian-American woman, in everyday situations. I then provided the necessary context, in which the comedy special was created, in order to better understand the rhetorical discourse that appears within. That context included Ramy Youssef's background, previous work, awards and nominations he has earned, his audiences' responses to his comedic style, and finally, the political and social discourse associated with Trump's presidential period and the Muslim Ban.

I then reviewed existing scholarship related to the necessary aspects of this research. This included how Muslims and Islam have been negatively and stereotypically portrayed in Western media, and how they were being countered by 'Muslim media'. The literature also constituted how comedy has both positive and negative influences, as well

as the potential to create social change, or new misrepresentations and offenses. Finally, it also examined how stand-up comedy specifically has been used by Muslim comedians to question power structures, challenge misconceptions, and engage with audiences.

I used Critical Rhetoric as my method, in order to address discourses of power and identify the enactment of social change, which I combined with the two theoretical frameworks, Bicultural Otherness, and Self and Culture Deprecating Humor. Doing so allowed me to focus on Youssef's communication of his cultural identity, his critique of domination and freedom, his encouragement of social change, and his production of new misrepresentations.

Through my analysis of his special, I found many topics of high significance that were addressed within the special, such as ethnocentrism, patriarchy, the mainstream cultures' suppression of heritage cultures, White privilege, White guilt, the media's power to set the agenda, the extreme reliance on the media, the diaspora, the ongoing state of war in the Middle East and Southeast Asia, and finally, the harmful impacts of stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination., and judging people based on their identities. I found that Youssef normalizes Muslims and Islam to his Western audience, but also ridicules and disparages already marginalized groups, and also creates new stereotypes and misrepresentations. He does so by publicizing and normalizing various acts that go against the Islamic faith, such as being a womanizer, using foul language, and watching porn.

I conclude this reach by offering my take on the great potential for future research. I identify three different areas. First, because Youssef's special has the potential to impact its audience members, both negatively and positively, exploring how Muslim

audience members specifically react to and identify with the special, could prove to be a

matter of significance. This would allow the future researcher to determine if they

find *Feelings* (2019) to be an accurate example of Muslim representations. This research

could be carried out in the form of a quantitative or qualitative study. It is also important

to receive responses from Muslims from various backgrounds, considering their cultures,

if they are Muslim-born or converts, their ages, their gender, their generations, and their

religiosity.

Second, utilizing the framework of Ironic Essentialism to dive into how Youssef

further communicates his cultural identity and challenges the many essentialist

perceptions of the West, especially those created by Orientalism. Lastly, focusing on a

female standup comedian could provide a different perspective for Muslim

representations, which would be interesting to understand and differentiate between her

narrative and that of Youssef.

Finale

Top Five Things NOT to ask when you meet a Muslim Woman

"Are you forced to wear it?"

NOOOO!

"So, what part of India are you from?"

Yeah..ughhh...I'm not.

"Do you shower with it?"

How could I even?!

"Aren't you hot?!"

Aren't you cold?

"What do the different colors mean?"

It means that it goes with my outfit.

But now that I have your attention[10], what I do mean to say is that even though some of these questions may be intrusive and my responses may be sarcastic, I would still much rather have people ask me questions, instead of assuming things about my identity or culture.

---

[10] This is incorporated from Youssef's line "but now that I have your attention…the ice caps are melting" (Youssef et al., 2019, 54:59), in which he diverts from a 'risky' statement or joke in a humorous manner to give a serious message.

Exit

I'm Rania Zaied, [11]شكراً Harrisonburg, and good night!

---

[11] The word شكراً [shukran] is the Arabic word for *thank you*.

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