

KEEP DREAMING, KIDDO!

by

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## **Abstract**

Keep Dreaming Kiddo!

Masters of Fine Arts, 2019

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Documentary Media

Ryerson University

*Keep Dreaming, Kiddo!* is a documentary film about my experience as a Muslim actress who wears the hijab full time. I compare my journey to two other actresses: a white woman, Rachel Salsburg and a South Asian woman, Ameena Iqbal. I use this comparison as a case study to assess how our opportunities differ in the acting industry in Toronto in 2018. I also hold a roundtable discussion with two Muslim actresses, Maryan Haye and Asil Moussa, to talk about how our limitations due to our religion could get in the way of our performance art. As well, I speak to several experts including a producer, a filmmaker, a casting director, and an acting teacher to learn how to practically integrate Muslim actresses into film and TV as the issue not only stops at acting, but extends to education, writing, casting, production, and even government policies.

## **A: Acknowledgements**

Firstly, all praise, gratitude, and thanks is to God and God alone for allowing me to chase my dreams through the process of completing this MFA. Thank you for not letting me run away from what is destined for me. I hope that this difficult, yet rewarding experience will create an easier journey for those who chose to follow the same path as me.

Secondly, thank you to everyone who didn't understand, who said no, and who created an additional barrier for me. Your dismissal of my dreams created a fire inside me that drove me to live my truth unapologetically. Thank you for forcing me to fight for what is right. It is one of the most honourable qualities of myself that I can acknowledge and appreciate.

Thirdly, thank you to my supervisor, John Tarver, for the support, guidance, and encouragement. Admittedly, we had some difficult and sometimes frustrating conversations which humbled me and taught me that a good storyteller and activist is one that can reach and educate all audiences. Thank you to my advisor, Cynthia Ashperger, for the excitement and interest in my topic. Our discussions surrounding casting and citizenship made me critically reflect on the definition of what it means to be an actress and who has the right to play what character. I hope that more conversations of this nature happen in the future in both the institution and in the industry so we can learn to be more inclusive and diverse.

To the talented young actresses that participated in my project, thank you for your honesty and vulnerability. Rachel, thank you for being an ally and trusting me to tell a fair story. Your courage to be a part of this film despite not knowing me is sincerely appreciated. Ameena, thank you for your enthusiasm every time we filmed. Your dedication to follow your passions gave me the hope and motivation to continue doing what I love to do as well. Asil, thank you for trekking down from Windsor to be a part of my roundtable discussion. Your contribution, insight, and eloquence was very helpful in showcasing the importance of integrating hijabi actresses into film and TV. Maryan, thank you for your constant and overwhelming love and support even after our roundtable discussion. Your kind words helped me push through this process, especially at times when I felt scared and insecure about my own abilities. I wish all these young women nothing but the success they deserve.

To the industry professionals that took the time out of their busy schedules to hear my story and mentor me — thank you for believing in me. Thank you for brainstorming ways in which it will become possible for me to live my dreams and thrive in this industry. Thank you for your curiosity, and your words of wisdom. Thank you Laura, Nicola, Rua, Millie, Lisa, Samora, and Brian.

Thank you to Ryerson University's MFA Documentary Media program. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to continue advocating for the inclusion of Muslims in the media. I hope the program continues to stay diverse because I would not have been able to thrive had it not been for my peers, especially the women of colour. Their shared experiences, though nuanced, created a safe and comfortable space to not only learn but speak up and share my own story.

Finally, a reminder to myself to, "Keep dreaming, Kiddo!"

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## **Introduction**

### **A1: The Hijab**

As long as I've remembered, I've always wanted to be a performer. As a child I relished in front of my family's video camera, acting out commercials, recreating news broadcasts, and dancing to Bollywood music. I spent endless hours in front of the television, hoping that one day I will be inside it. When I got into high school, I fell in love with theatre and I realized that I wanted to become an actress. I intended on pursuing an undergraduate degree in theatre but was told by my community that I might have to compromise my faith in order to become an actress. They were concerned that I would have to perform explicit actions that were against my religion in order for me to depict different characters. As a result, I ended up studying institutional communications in university, but I decided to start my own Muslim dramatic arts club called Greenlight Productions to create a space for other Muslims like me who wanted to perform without compromising their religious beliefs. When I graduated, I got into film school and started taking acting classes in Toronto. It was then that I decided to wear the hijab. I wanted to showcase my Muslim identity in a space where I felt like there was nobody else like me there. In the Quran, in chapter 24, verse 31 it states that Muslim women should, "Wrap [a portion of] their head covers over their chests and not expose their adornment except to their husbands, their fathers, their husbands' fathers, their sons, their husbands' sons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their women, that which their right hands possess, or those male attendants having no physical desire, or children who are not yet aware of the private aspects of women."<sup>1</sup> In chapter 33, verse 59, it states, "O Prophet, tell your wives and your daughters and

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<sup>1</sup> "Surah An-Nur [24:31]" Quran, accessed June 14, 2019, <https://quran.com/24/31>

the women of the believers to bring down over themselves [part] of their outer garments. It is likelier that they will be recognized.”<sup>2</sup> The hijab was a way for Muslim women to be distinguished from other women as believers of Islam.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, I wanted to be distinguished as a Muslim woman in an industry where there is a lack of representation and I hoped that as a result of me doing so, it would inspire other Muslim women who wear the hijab to pursue a career in acting. On top of that, I decided to wear the hijab as a way of practising *taqwa*<sup>4</sup>, which is an Islamic term for God consciousness, as well as a way of practising *tawakkul*<sup>5</sup>, which is the Islamic concept of reliance on God. I wanted to become an actress my entire life, and for me to wear the hijab is a constant reminder that I am choosing to sacrifice acting opportunities for the sake of God, having full trust that God will reward me. In the Quran, in chapter 65, verses 2-3 it states, “Anyone who believes in God and the Last Day should heed this: God will find a way out for those who are mindful of Him, and will provide for them from an unexpected source; God will be enough for those who put their trust in Him.”<sup>6</sup> I have had difficult experiences in my life, and I believe that if I worship God, He will take care of me because of what is stated in the Quran. Therefore a way that I practise worshipping God, is by wearing my hijab to remind me of God and as a way of relying on God to support me. I will not compromise that connection to God

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<sup>2</sup> “Surah Al-Ahzab [33:59],” Quran, accessed June 14, 2019, <https://quran.com/33/59>

<sup>3</sup> Theodore Gabriel, *Islam and the Veil: Theoretical and Regional Contexts* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2011), 111-113.

<sup>4</sup> Nora Eggen, "Conceptions of Trust in the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 13, no. 2 (2011): 56-85.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.



and I will not take off my hijab while I act. I believe it is possible for me to have fulfilling career as an actress, but I can acknowledge that my opportunities in the industry are limited right now.

## **Context**

### **B1: Historial and Politcal Context**

Historically, Muslims, both Muslim men and Muslim women in the hijab have not been depicted positively in film and TV which as a result can contribute to Islamophobia, which is the irrational fear and prejudice against Muslims and Islam. Islamophobia in the arts dates as far back to the 18th century through a concept called Orientalism. When Egypt was occupied by the French in 1798, Europeans began travelling to the Middle East and producing art based on their depictions of the region.<sup>7</sup> The artwork was often intended to be propaganda that supported French imperialism by illustrating the Orient as barbaric and in need of Christian reform.<sup>8</sup> More specifically, Muslim women were fetishized as exotic veiled women, who where frequently unveiled in Orientalist artworks.<sup>9</sup> For example, *Orientalist Interior: Nude in a Harem*<sup>10</sup> and *Moorish Woman Leaving the Bath in the Seraglio*<sup>11</sup> by Théodore Chassériau. War imagery was also prevalent in Orientalist artworks as it reflected the political climate at the time, most notably, the conquest of Algeria by the French.<sup>12</sup> In the early 20th century, Orientalist photography depicted Muslim Algerian women with their faces covered and their breasts

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<sup>7</sup> Jennifer Meagher. "Orientalism in Nineteenth-Century Art," *Metropolitan Museum of Art*. October 2004, [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/euor/hd\\_euor.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/euor/hd_euor.htm)

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad,. "The Post 9/11 Hijab as an Icon." *The Sociology of Religion* 68, no. 3 (2007): 253-267.

<sup>10</sup> Théodore Chassériau, *Orientalist Interior: Nude in a Harem*, 1850, oil on panel, Paris.

<sup>11</sup> Théodore Chassériau, *Moorish Woman Leaving the Bath in the Seraglio*, 1854, oil on canvas, Strasbourg, Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg.

<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Meagher. "Orientalism in Nineteenth-Century Art," *Metropolitan Museum of Art*. October 2004, [https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/euor/hd\\_euor.htm](https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/euor/hd_euor.htm)

uncovered in postcards.<sup>13</sup> This concept of unveiling the veiled Muslim woman has been reinvented in the media over and over during times of political conflict with Muslims.

Hollywood is no stranger to perpetuating stereotypes in film and TV, and Muslims have not gone untouched. The propaganda machine that is Hollywood took to films to create a narrative of Muslim men as aggressive authoritarians and Muslim women as passive victims. The influx of anti-Muslim films in Hollywood began in the 70s with the Saudi Oil Embargo, the Iranian Revolution, and the American Hostage Crisis.<sup>14</sup> In 1973, Middle Eastern nations imposed an oil embargo on the United States and banned oil shipments as retaliation for the support of Israel during the Yom Kippur War.<sup>15</sup> Around this time, there was an uprising in Iran known as the Islamic Revolution which resulted in Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi being overthrown.<sup>16</sup> He was known for his support of the West and was replaced by a more religious leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini.<sup>17</sup> The American Hostage Crisis occurred around this time as well when Iranian students stormed the United States Embassy in Tehran, and took American hostages to protest the United States' involvement in Iran.<sup>18</sup> In the following years and decades after these

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<sup>13</sup> Malek Alloula, *Colonial Harem*, (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1986).

<sup>14</sup> Duaa Hana Alwan. "Programming of Fear: The Cultural Context of Islam and Muslim Characters in Hollywood Fiction Films." (Master's thesis, Chapman University, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> "Arab oil embargo," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, last modified February 15, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Arab-oil-embargo>

<sup>16</sup> Janet Afary, "Iranian Revolution of 1978–79." *Encyclopædia Britannica*, last modified April 13, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Iranian-Revolution-of-1978-1979>

<sup>17</sup> "Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi," *Encyclopædia Britannica*, last modified October 22, 2018, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Mohammad-Reza-Shah-Pahlavi>

<sup>18</sup> "Iran Hostage Crisis", *HISTORY*, last modified October 4, 2018, <https://www.history.com/topics/middle-east/iran-hostage-crisis>

events, Hollywood began producing films about Muslims as terrorist. A couple of examples include: *Black Sunday* (1977); A film about a terrorist group planning an attack during the Super Bowl,<sup>19</sup> *The Delta Force* (1986); A film about two terrorists hijacking an airplane,<sup>20</sup> *Executive Decision* (1996); another film about terrorists hijacking a plane,<sup>21</sup> and *The Siege* (1998); a film about terrorist attacks in New York City.<sup>22</sup>

Then came Tuesday, September 11th, 2001. Four planes were hijacked and flown into targets in the United States including the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon.<sup>23</sup> The attacks were linked to the Al-Qaeda and subsequently resulted in the War on Terror in the Middle East, in particular the War in Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> With this came another large wave of terrorist films which created an overwhelming fear of Muslims in the West. It can be easily argued that the propaganda against Muslims in film and TV often aligns during times of political unrest, as seen over and over again from the age of Orientalism to post 9/11. As a result, one can assume that the government has an influence on the entertainment industry but that's simply not the case. At least not to the degree that we assume. Movies and TV shows are largely privately funded, though it isn't to say that they don't reflect what is happening in society.

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<sup>19</sup> "Black Sunday", IMDB, accessed December 10th, 2018, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0075765/>

<sup>20</sup> "The Delta Force," IMDB, accessed December 10th, 2018, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090927/>

<sup>21</sup> "Executive Decision," IMDB, accessed December 10th, 2018, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0116253/>

<sup>22</sup> "The Siege," IMDB, accessed December 10th, 2018, <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0133952/>

<sup>23</sup> "The 9/11 terrorist acts," BBC, accessed December 12th, 2018, [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/events/the\\_september\\_11th\\_terrorist\\_attacks](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/events/the_september_11th_terrorist_attacks)

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

## **B2: Casting**

In an interview with Rua Wani, MFA in Media Production and Scripted Development Manager at Temple Street Productions, I ask her about the degree to which government policies are effecting the production of film and TV. She admits that nothing is in a vacuum and that what is happening around the world informs perceptions of Muslims. Network executives and producers want to create things that they think people will watch and understand.<sup>25</sup> If the current perceptions of Muslims are the fact that they are terrorist because of what we see reflected in the news and foreign policy, then it's an easy trope to feed into and use. She asks, "If you write a script that goes against stereotypes ... do you have people who are the decision makers who get that?"<sup>26</sup> She goes on to say, "To get to a point where we have stories about Muslims that that aren't just focusing on them as terrorists and are able to tell very textured stories about them, you need the writers who can do that. And who can tell very textured stories about Muslims? Muslims."<sup>27</sup> She goes on to stress the importance of having Muslims in various roles in the industry including network executives, directors, and writers but understands there is a lack of opportunity. She asks, "Do they have the networks, the connections, and the money? Can they get into these kinds of writing programs?"<sup>28</sup> I then asked whether we should ask the government to fund films about anti-Islamophobia when our government is often complacent in violence in the Middle East to which she replied, "We live in a liberal democracy that really flies the flag of

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<sup>25</sup> Rua Wani (Producer) in discussion with the author, August 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

multiculturalism and diversity ... I think that's a great idea to lobby for programs that fund or help give opportunity to Muslim filmmakers and storytellers.”<sup>29</sup> Currently there is a push for diversity in film and TV in Canada, says Wani, but she explains, “What you see a lot is secondary or minor characters who are not necessarily written as people of colour, but it's like, ‘Oh, we can cast that person instead as diverse.’”<sup>30</sup> She goes on to say,

“With all these diversity initiatives, what tends to happen then is that there is a drive towards hiring a diverse writer or an actor or director and then that person is just seen as the diverse writer, actor, director. So it's like if you have just one person in the writing room who's diverse or like one actor in the ensemble cast, it's considered diverse. I think the diversity initiative sometimes also restrict us because then we see these people as only diverse and we don't see them as just actors.”<sup>31</sup>

At a time when diversity is a buzzword, one has to assess whether or not it is just a word that is being thrown around for publicity and profit, or whether it is a genuine effort to provide more opportunities to underrepresented individuals.

Currently, there are Muslim women who wear the hijab full time that are garnering a lot of attention in the media, for example: Halima Aden; a Somali-American model who gained popularity after being featured in Kanye West’s fashion show, Noor Tagouri; an American journalist who was featured in Playboy Magazine’s first non-nude issue; Amani Al Khatahtbeh; the founder and editor of MuslimGirl.com who was featured in Maroon 5’s “Girls Like You,”

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<sup>29</sup> Rua Wani (Producer) in discussion with the author, August 2018.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

video, Ihan Omar; the first Somali American elected to legislative office in the United States, and Ginella Massa; Canada's first hijabi TV news reporter on CityNews ... just to name a few.

However, the one thing they all have in common is that none of these women are actresses. They all represent themselves in their work and none of these women are ever, "Playing a character."

Whenever you do see a hijabi character in film or TV, it is often a non-Muslim woman who is asked to put on the hijab for the role, or it is a Muslim woman who does not wear the hijab in her real life but is asked to put it on for the role. For example: Nora El Koussour in *Layla M*, Helana Sawires in *Ali's Wedding*, Kiran Sonia Sawar in *Black Mirror*, and Mina El Hamman in *Elite*.

What are some reasons why non-hijabis are able to play hijabi characters? One of the reasons is that the hijab is not only an Islamic symbol but it is also attached to certain ideals, which indicates certain behaviours that can or cannot be done. For example, modesty is one of the ideals attached to the hijab, so subsequently a hijabi actress would not be performing a sex scene. So, if an action in a script cannot be done by the character because the the character is Muslim, the easy solution is to remove the veil so that the action isn't attached to the individual who is expected to behave in a certain manner. Simply put: Don't make the character Muslim. The other option is to have a non-Muslim actress play the Muslim character because the non-Muslim actress does that have that personal limitation. However, not only does this lack authenticity, but it takes opportunities away from Muslim actresses that do wear the hijab in real life.

In an interview with Laura Nordin, professor, actress, and filmmaker, I ask her about the immediate concerns with casting a Muslim woman in a hijab. She explains, "When somebody comes in with a hijab, there are things that do come up. If she has a certain way of life that she abides by and we can tell because she is wearing this, is this going against what she wants to do

or is this actually possible?”<sup>32</sup> She goes on to say, “If you walk in wearing a hijab, I’m wondering like what are some of the limitations that are a no? What are you willing to do to help tell the story if the story requires that. But I find that its not an issue for most characters.”<sup>33</sup> However, if there might be an issue, Nordin explains, “I might bring it up to you like, ‘Would you be willing to do this if it was part of the story?’ And if you’re like, ‘No.’ Then we’ve made our decision.”<sup>34</sup> One way to overcome this issue is to co-write, Nordin suggests. She says, “Then you can sit down and go over that and find another way to tell that moment ... what’s the essence of that? The importance to the story, or importance to the revealing of this character? And then you can collaborate on finding another way to tell that story.”<sup>35</sup> Nordin mentions that these conversations around an actresses’ limitations or perceived limitations will happen in the audition room. However, a producer or director doesn't bring actresses in for auditions. That is the job of the casting director.

A casting director receives a script from the production company and breaks it down to find a list of characters and descriptions of them. They then send those character descriptions out to agencies and asks agents to submit their actors for the roles. Casting directors receive a list of actors from various agencies, and on average they receive about 300-500 submissions, to which they then narrow it down to about 5-20 actors they want to bring into the audition. In an interview with casting director, Millie Tom, she explains why there is a lack of demand for hijabi

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<sup>32</sup> Laura Nordin (Actress, professor, filmmaker) in discussion with the author, July 2018.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



actresses, to which she says, “I think it's still an education for us in terms of how to tell the stories with them in it ... We don't want to offend, but also how to tell those stories and where to tell those stories.”<sup>36</sup> She goes on to say,

“What's been interesting since you and I had been communicating is that it's really opened my eyes to sort of just everything around me and where I see hijabi women and so that's been kind of neat too because I remember we were having this conversation about why can't they be the waitress? And then like thinking about who are the people that I interact with on a daily basis. So that's been really kind of interesting for me. But do they exist in the talent pool?”<sup>37</sup>

Tom reiterates this point several times, stating, “I have to be honest, in terms of the way Toronto's talent pool is at the moment, I don't see many hijabi women.”<sup>38</sup> Which is a fair argument to make. How can you cast hijabi actresses when there is a lack of them to choose from in the first place? Which then begs the questions, why aren't Muslim women in hijab becoming actresses and what are the additional barriers besides their personal limitations that are stopping them especially at a time when the film and TV industry is opening up to more diverse casting?

Actress Nicola Damude argues that the problem begins at a very young age for children of colour. Although Islam is a religion and individuals who follow the faith come from all different races and ethnicities, a majority of the individuals that follow Islam in North America are people of colour. In particular, in the United States, 60% of Muslims are people of colour.

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<sup>36</sup> Millie Tom (Casting director) in discussion with the author, August 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

This includes Black Americans, Asian Americans, and Latino Americans.<sup>39</sup> To add, 64% of Muslims claim immigrant status in the United States.<sup>40</sup> So if you are a hijabi actress who is a woman of colour and an immigrant, then you will likely face additional barriers aside from your personal limitations. Nicola Damude says, “I think the biggest stumbling blocks to moving forward with diversity in our training programs, and on our screens in general is definitely issues of systemic racism that exists in this city, in this country.”<sup>41</sup> She goes on to say, “With the immigrant communities where people who had access to great careers, who have had affluence where they're coming from come here and are starting from the beginning and can't afford the kind of programs and lessons and private classes that children from more affluent communities, often white communities have.”<sup>42</sup> She continues, “Children of colour didn't see themselves represented on television or on stage or in any form. So the parents of those children did not see that as a viable option for them. They can literally look at their screens and go, ‘You're not on there. So why would you do this with your life when there's no opportunity for you?’ And they were correct.”<sup>43</sup> During my roundtable discussion with two other Muslim actresses, Maryan and Asil, this was the one thing we all agreed upon. All of us had parents that worried about our future as actresses because there was a lack of opportunity in the first place. So as a result, we

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<sup>39</sup> "Muslims - Religion in America: U.S. Religious Data, Demographics and Statistics," Pew Research Centre, accessed June 20th, 2019, <https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/muslim/>

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Nicola Damude (Actress) in discussion with the author, October 2018.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

ended up pursuing another career for awhile until we decided to pursue what we loved much later on in our adult lives.

The issue is cyclical. Because there is a lack of representation and historically poor representation of Muslims, hijabi actresses might not be encouraged to pursue a career in acting. If they are not pursuing the career, there is a lack of hijabi actresses in the talent pool for casting directors to choose from. If casting directors are not bringing hijabi actresses into the auditions, then directors are not having conversations about how to integrate them into a story. If hijabi characters are not written into the stories, then production companies are going to tell stories about what is already being told about Muslims which is informed by what is being illustrated in the news and through foreign policy. If those same negative and ill informed stereotypes are being perpetuated in the media, then hijabi actresses are going to be discouraged from pursuing a career in acting. In order for the cycle to be broken, there needs to be a disruption in the system. I would argue that one of the ways to disrupt is by pursuing a career in acting, which I am doing, and am documenting this film.

## **Documentary Relevance**

Since I am inserting myself into my documentary and sharing my own personal experiences as someone who is aspiring to become an actress, I would argue that I am creating both a first person documentary and a performative documentary. According to Bill Nichols, “The performative mode stresses emotional involvement with what it is like to witness a particular kind of experience.”<sup>44</sup> He goes on to say that this mode, “Has been often used for autobiography and for films by members of ethnic minorities. For those who experience discrimination or prejudice because of their group affiliation.”<sup>45</sup> My film is about my struggles to become an actress due to my personal beliefs; my religion, and appearance; my hijab.

One example of a documentary work that exemplifies how my documentary fits within the documentary tradition is, *The Problem with Apu* by Hari Kondabolu.<sup>46</sup> The film explores the impact of Apu from *The Simpsons* on South Asians. Kondabolu speaks to other South Asian actors, his parents, *Simpsons* experts, and a former *Simpsons* writer. Throughout the film, audiences learn about the racist stereotypes the character Apu perpetuated and how these turned into micro-aggressions against the South Asian community. Interestingly enough, and more relevant to my thesis, we learn that a large reason why these stereotypes were perpetuated was due to a lack of diversity in the writers room. This film also explores how that is being countered today with the prominence of more South Asian actors and writers participating in creating their own narrative about their community. Similarly in my film, we see that there is a lack of nuanced

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<sup>44</sup> Bill Nichols, *Engaging Cinema* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company Inc., 2010), 124-125.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid

<sup>46</sup> Michael Melamedoff, *The Problem With Apu*. Film. Performed by Hari Kondabolu. 2017. United States: truTV. Web.

representation of Muslim women because there is a lack of diversity in not only the writers room, but network executives understanding the need for more accurate stories about Muslims.

Another example of a documentary work that is similar to mine is *Hoop Dreams* by Steve James.<sup>47</sup> It follows two African American boys who are recruited by a scout to attend a predominantly white school with an esteemed basketball program. It documents their struggles of trying to improve their athletic skills along with adjusting to their social environment. The film raises questions about race and education. Similar to my thesis, it discusses how a race intersects with the opportunity to pursue your dreams which is often reserved for rich white students. During my roundtable discussion with two Muslim actresses, we unpack some of the struggles we faces when trying to pursue acting which largely stemmed from a lack of opportunity trying to receive arts education. We all collectively found that our white counterparts had much more support and training, which allowed them to pursue a career in acting faster than we could.

A final example of a documentary work that shows how my documentary fits within the documentary tradition is *Speechwriters* by Ryerson University Documentary Media MFA alumni Andrew Bateman.<sup>48</sup> The film looks at the role of script writers in Canadian Federal Politics. The structure of the film was broken down into five components: archival footage of the speeches juxtaposed by re-enactments by the speechwriters, reflections from the speechwriters on the speechwriting process and the state of Canadian politics, interjections from an actor who performs a story from the novel, *Seeing*, and lastly, reflexive gestures in which the director

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<sup>47</sup> Steve James, *Hoop Dreams*. 1994; Chicago: Kartemquin Films. Film.

<sup>48</sup> Bateman, Andrew. *Speechwriters*. Film. Directed by Andrew Bateman. 2017. Toronto: Ryerson University. DVD.

makes his presence.<sup>49</sup> The structure of this film is similar to what I have in my documentary as well. My documentary is about performance artists, specifically actresses, and I have scenes of performativity in my film as well. Due an lack of access in certain spaces, for example audition rooms and acting classes, a lot of the experiences we discussed during our meetings had to be recreated.

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<sup>49</sup> Bateman, Andrew. "Speechwriters: Performing Politics in Documentary." (Master's thesis, Ryerson University, 2017).

## **Methodology**

### **D1: Inspiration**

When I applied to the Documentary Media MFA program, I initially intended to make a film about spiritual performance art, more specifically, religious dancing. I was hoping to study Muslim whirling dervishes and explore the relationship between physical movement and prayer. I was also considering looking into theatre and its religious origins as another option. For my project I wanted to possibly explore theatre in the east and see if it had religious roots.

When reflecting on why this would be a topic of interest to me, I realized it is because of my own personal experience as a performer and the arguments I would get from my community regarding why I could not be an actress and a practising Muslim. In the past I tried combat this argument by starting my own Muslim dramatic arts organization during my undergrad to prove that a Muslim individual can perform and still abide by their faith, all of which could be seen through the open mic nights I held and the films I showcased at the end of each year. When considering a masters research project, I wanted to look at the historical context of this issue by looking at specific religious practises surrounding performance art. However, I still felt disconnected to my topic and I asked myself why. The answer lies in the reason why I decided to pursue a Masters of Fine Arts in the first place: to escape becoming an actress ever again. I was unhappy about the treatment I received in acting and film classes while wearing the hijab, and told myself to complete a quick two-year masters degree and then quit being an artist. So I thought to myself, why not confront this issue one last time when I have the chance. I wanted to tell my story.

In my initial pitch, I began describing to my class all the set backs I had during my pursuit to become an actress. I also recalled some arguments I received as to why I couldn't become an actress because of religious limitations. I intended to make a documentary film that was a mix of my personal testimony of the barriers I faced and short vignettes of me acting to counter the arguments I received as to why I couldn't become an actress. The pitch was rejected right away. The argument being: my sole testimony isn't enough proof that Muslim women in the hijab would have a hard time becoming actresses, and that I needed to reach out to other Muslim actresses with a similar story to mine to prove my point. I was then directed to speak to Laura Nordin, and Nicola Damude because they regularly advocate for diverse casting in films.

## **D2: Pre-interviews:**

I held pre-interviews with 8 different individuals in the acting and film industry. First, I spoke to actress and filmmaker, Laura Nordin. She admitted that film is a visual medium and that assumptions will be made as soon as I walk into the audition room wearing a hijab. There would be a lot of questions surrounding what actions I can and cannot do. She suggested that as long as the objective of the scene stays the same, the action that gets to that point can be changed to accommodate a Muslim actress. I spoke to professor Brian Damude and asked him what he thought of that suggestion. He said that instead of changing the action, justify why a hijabi would get to that situation in the first place. After those two conversations, I was thinking about having some type of workshop in my film. I thought about taking scripts and seeing where my limitation would get in the way, and brainstorming some ways to get around it. I also thought of having multiple workshops, with Muslim writers, writers of colour, and white writers, where I would take pictures of myself in different costumes and then ask the writers to create a story with that



as a prompt. When I pitched the latter idea, my classmates worried that the writers might feel like I'm tricking them into exposing their lack of knowledge about what a hijabi character would be like. So I decided not to do it.

Next I spoke to Nicola Damude, and she broke down some of the structural barriers that people of colour face when trying to become actors. She spoke a lot about the lack of opportunities in trying to get an arts education because of systematic racism. She also spoke about trying to lobby the government to give incentives to filmmakers to tell stories with a diverse cast. When I spoke to Brian Damude the second time around, he echoed the sentiment admitting that there is a huge lack of diversity in film programs. It was then that I started thinking about my film through a different lens. What might be some systemic issues that are making it difficult for Muslim women in hijab to become actresses? So I knew I needed to speak to: educators, agents, casting directors, filmmakers, and producers. Nicola suggested I speak to Lisa Michelle and Samora Smallwood next. They are the co-chairs of the ACTRA diversity committee and actresses themselves. Both Lisa and Samora talked about the importance of having a demo reel where hijabi actresses are playing unconventional roles to open the eyes of agents and casting directors. Which made me want to go back to my initial idea of creating vignettes of me acting as different characters. But I didn't quite know where to place that in my film just yet.

I met with Laura Nordin a second time and she suggested I speak to Millie Tom, a casting director. She also suggested I reach out to TAMAC (Talent Agents and Managers Association of Canada) to find an agent I could speak to. TAMAC connected me with an agent who was more than happy to do an interview with me. But after our pre-interview in person, she sent me an

email about a film with a hijabi character who wanted to do burlesque. I thought the film was a bit offensive for several reasons, mostly because it played on old Orientalism tropes and when I wrote her back explaining that, she contacted me three weeks later saying she wasn't interested in being a part of my film anymore. After that, I spoke to Millie Tom and she had a lot of insight to share about the casting process. She said that there is a lack of education about Muslims and in particular Muslim women in hijab and that we need to keep an eye out as to where we see hijabis and then make the effort to try to cast them more. Finally I stumbled upon Rua Wani, a Muslim woman who works as a scripted development manager at a production company. She spoke a lot about the optics trying to get a film or tv show on a network, but concluded that the biggest disparity comes from the fact that we aren't writing in enough Muslim characters.

### **D3: Three Meetings**

I intended to shoot the expert interviews over the summer, and use the information I garnered from them to make short fictional vignettes of me as different characters I could potentially play as an actress. I met with Professor John Tarver to ask him how to make something look, “Cinematic,” for the vignettes. As I was explaining the concept of my film to him, he asked me if I had a supervisor and offered to be mine. Then he suggested I actually document my own experience trying to land a role or get an agent here in Toronto. He also told me to compare my experience to a white actresses and a Muslim actresses that didn't wear a hijab. He recommended that these two other women should be around the same age as me, and had relatively the same acting experience.

I found a Muslim actress much faster than a white actresses. I made a Facebook post looking for a Muslim actress who didn't wear the hijab, was around my age, and didn't have an

agent, but had acting training. Immediately, a friend from high school introduced me to Ameena Iqbal and within a couple of days, she agreed to be in the documentary. I made a similar post looking for a white actress that was around my age and didn't have an agent but had acting experience and I wasn't having the same luck. Then, I personally reached out to some friends I had in the undergraduate Film Studies program, and asked them if they had cast any white actresses in their films that would be interested in taking part in my documentary. However, everyone they recommended to me had agents which admittedly, I found surprising. I heard through word of mouth that it was becoming increasingly difficult for white actors to find representation because agents want more diverse actors. It ended up taking me over a month to find Rachel Salsburg. I reached out to a boy that used to attend my student club's events that decided to become an actor and he recommended Rachel and one other woman. Rachel was the only one who responded. When I first spoke to her on the phone, she told me that she was struggling to find an agent and some of the responses she was getting was that there were women that already looked like her on various agencies rosters and they didn't want competition within the roster, so she decided to wait and expand her demo reel before trying to look for representation again.

I met with Rachel and Ameena three times. The first time we met, we introduced ourselves to one another. I asked them when they knew they wanted to become actresses, what training they've had, if they've been to any auditions or reached out to agents, and finally what they anticipate will happen with their careers over the filming of this documentary. The second time we met, we took new head shots that we could use to submit to casting calls and talent agencies. I asked the ladies to describe what kind of roles they could be cast in, depending on the

headshot they took. I decided to take three head shots, because I wear my hijab in 3 different ways, and I knew that as a result, I would be seen as three drastically different character types. Finally, I met with them for a last time to ask them if they had any luck with the head shots. I was the only one who landed an audition with the head shots I took, and got an agent.

#### **D4: Roundtable discussion**

One of the first pieces of advice that I got was to reach out to other Muslim women to see if they had a similar experience to me in the acting industry. I didn't mind reaching out and speaking to other Muslim women, I just didn't want to make a documentary film that focused solely on how poorly we got treated. I didn't think it was productive, and I believed it would be discouraging for hijabi women who wanted to get into the industry. I wanted to make sure that the conversation was about how to better integrate Muslim women into film and TV, and what our limitations were as actresses, as well as how to work around that. I also know that religiosity comes on a spectrum, and Muslims differ in the degree to which they practise their faith. I was hoping to illustrate to audiences that not all Muslim actresses have the same limitations. I began my search for Muslim actresses by making a video asking Muslim women to sign up for a roundtable discussion about how our religion affects the craft of acting. The video got 4 thousand views and 43 shares on Facebook and 15 Muslim women signed up. I picked 5 that I wanted to speak to, but one dropped out because she couldn't get to downtown Toronto. Then, on the day of, and an hour before the roundtable discussion, two of the women said they couldn't make it because they were apparently sick. So I was left with two Muslim actresses, plus myself. I began by asking them about when their acting dreams started, and what their experience has been so far. I wanted to see if there was any similarities in our upbringings and our journey to pursue this

career. All three of us recalled our immigrant backgrounds, and our parents' disdain for us chasing this career path, but their eventual support once they saw how much we loved acting. I then moved on to ask the girls about what their limitations were, starting with the type of costumes they were comfortable wearing, to certain actions they felt comfortable performing (such as: swearing, violence, and etc), to certain characteristics they felt comfortable embodying (for example: mean spirited, aggressive, and etc). I finished the conversation by asking them about the roles they believe they would be typecast in, and what roles they dream of playing.

#### **D5: Post production editing**

I began by editing the three meetings with Rachel and Ameena first. I wanted my film to centre around that because they were reoccurring characters. For the first meeting that we had, I wanted to include their backstories and in particular mention their childhood dreams of becoming actresses. I wanted to show audiences that the dream to be an actress transcends race, religion, and ethnicity. Instead of using archival images, I shot vignettes that would illustrate what it would have looked like when they were young dreamers. However, the feedback I got was that it was confusing because I never show their faces in the vignettes. I didn't put their faces in the vignettes because they're obviously not children anymore and I wanted to depict them as young girls, so I didn't show their faces. That ended up backfiring because people were confused, regardless of the voiceovers. As well people weren't interested in their history as much as they were interested in mine. As a result, I decided to just mention briefly Rachel and Ameena's acting background and show one archival image for each of them. I also decided to show more archival images of myself as a child, and young adult pursuing acting. Adding the archival images made the film more personal, and increased the stakes because acting was

something that I not only dreamed about ever since I was a kid, but have been working towards my entire life.

For the second meeting, I wanted to draw attention to the fact the Ameena and Rachel felt similar to one another simply because their hair was showing, as well as the fact that Rachel felt like they had, “Neutral looks.” It is a good moment of reflection on what it means to classify someone as “neutral” person. I also added some images of hijabi characters from TV shows and films to show how the media portrays hijabi women and I compared those images with images of Muslim women on social media to show how hijabi women chose to represent themselves in real life.

Then I edited the roundtable discussion. I intended this discussion to serve as a conversation about the craft of acting and how our limitations could get in the way or not get in the way of our performance art. This was less about casting and more about our personal choices while acting. When editing this sequence, and considering how it fit within the entire film, I noticed that it added to the plethora of talking heads I already had. I needed to find a way to illustrate our conversation so I decided to keep the parts of the conversations that were referencing images of hijabi women in popular media, for example: in commercials and in tv shows. As well, the sequence before this roundtable discussion is where I am taking head shots and I discuss how I could wear my hijab in different ways to accommodate the different characters I could potentially play. In that sequence, it’s just an oral testimony of me saying I could play a character while wearing my hijab in a particular style, and then following that, I have the roundtable discussion where we directly reference examples of Muslim women using different types of head coverings in different scenes (ie: the towel in the TV show and the pyjama

hood in the commercial). Therefore, I have my argument for wearing the hijab in various ways, followed by examples of how that's already been done. Finally, I had one of my subjects, Asil, talk about why it's important for hijabi women to become actresses to which she said that it's validating to see someone like you in front of and behind the camera. This opened up the film to another issue which was, what are additional structural barriers that make it difficult to integrate hijabi actresses into film and tv. This was a great segue into my expert interviews with Lisa Michelle, Rua Wani, and Nicola Damude where they spoke about issues in casting, writing, and education. I also found that it became a bit confusing to differentiate the meetings with Rachel and Ameena with the meeting with Maryan and Asil. So I used voice over narration to clarify and fill in the gaps. As well, in the beginning of my film, I have a voice over narration introducing the audience to the film, as well as myself so I continued to use this narrative device to structure the film.

Lastly, I edited my third meeting with Rachel and Ameena. In this meeting, we touched base after a month to see how successful our head shots were when trying to get an agent or landing an audition. The two biggest things that happened for me was that I attended an audition that turned out bizarre and that I got an agent. What I decided to do was take the most interesting story in my film, which was the audition I went to, and put it in the beginning of the film as a hook to introduce the audience to the overall theme of the film. When I was discussing my agent, I mentioned that he drew all over my head shot and resume. At first, I intended to keep this in the film to create a funny story arc, which showed that I failed with the headshot but successfully landed an agent. I got mixed reviews with this part of the film because some people felt like it decreased my credibility by showing this mistake that I made. To some people it looked like I

didn't do enough research on what a headshot should look like, and this could be offensive to people who work really hard to try to become actors. Someone also said that it just looked like the agent was giving me a hard time over something menial. All in all, the majority of the feedback was negative so I decided to leave it out of the film. Instead, I mentioned how I came across the agent and his comment about my hijab limiting my roles. Another important part about this sequence was the comparison between the types of roles Ameena was submitting herself to and the types of roles Rachel was submitting herself too. Earlier in the film Rachel and Ameena agreed that they could play the same characters, but in this sequence, we saw that Ameena admitted to specifically submit to South Asian roles, which subsequently resulted in her attending more commercial auditions. Rachel admitted that she never even attended a commercial audition and only auditioned for independent or student films. This was one of the most revealing parts of the film to me. It spoke to the commercialization and profitability of diversity. It's a fair argument to make that the purpose of commercials is to sell a product, and though storytelling might be involved, the outcome is to essentially make money for the business. That isn't to say that film and TV shows do not want to make money as well. However, one must reflect on why there is more diversity in commercials and less in film and TV shows. If we can see with commercials that diversity makes money, why isn't there more diversity in film and TV shows? What's the difference between storytelling in commercials and storytelling in film and TV shows? What purpose does storytelling serve in film and TV shows? Why do certain people only get to participate in the telling of certain stories? After filming this documentary, and before finishing this degree, I went to one TV show audition and nine commercial auditions. My



hijab and as such my diversity is used to sell products to make money for companies but is not used to connect on the human experience through storytelling in film and TV shows.

#### **D6: Acting videos**

In the end, I made a documentary about acting without showing anyone, including myself actually acting. The first time this issue was brought up was during a critique in class where someone mentioned wanting to see examples of Rachel and Ameena's demo reel to which I decided to opt out of and instead put images of them during their acting training, ie: theatre school for Ameena and Seneca's acting program for Rachel. I didn't want the audience to make a judgement about whether they would be good subjects for my film depending on their level of skill because I didn't chose them as subjects because they were better or worse actresses than me. Rather, I wanted to see how our race/religion/ethnicity/look would effect our opportunities in the industry. As such, it is fair to say that my film may not be about the art and craft of acting, but what informs and effects the acting industry from education, to casting, to production, to the cultural zeitgeist.

To add, I initially wanted this film to have vignettes of me acting. The scenes that I wanted to make were not going to be a means to show my acting skills but rather to situate a hijab wearing woman in certain spaces to see what narrative you would attach to the image of the hijab. I wanted the scenes to be a way to disrupt what we've already been seeing and critique if it was possible to see a hijabi in a scene or a genre she otherwise wouldn't be cast in. I didn't want the acting in my film to be an audition for the world because I didn't get a chance to audition in the industry. As well, I shot the film a year ago, in August 2018, and the last time I'd been in an acting class up until that point was April 2017. So it was over a year of me not acting or training,

and I would not have been able to make a good case for my skills. I worried that if the acting in my film was not good, my thesis might not have been as credible. My fear was that someone would argue that the rest of the points in my film about the factors relating to hijabi women not getting cast would not be valid at the end of the day because I couldn't act. What I wanted to explain with my film was that regardless of how good or bad I can act, even before you get a chance to see me perform, you see the hijab, and attach certain narratives — often problematic narratives.

## **Conclusion**

“Keep dreaming, Kiddo!” is my own personal motto that I created for myself when I was in high school. It represents two ideas. It is a reminder that whenever there is an achievement, to remember that there’s still a long way to go. It is also a reminder to never lose my child-like wonder and honour the little kid inside me that had a dream to become an actress by never giving up. In my documentary, when I landed the commercial audition, I felt like I won the lottery because I believed I was the perfect fit for the role. However, even though it was good that they were looking to cast Muslims, there was still some work to be done in terms of bringing the appropriate actors into the audition. Additionally, as I compiled the archival images of myself and listed all the ways I worked towards my dream to become an actress, it served as proof that I deserved to continue in my pursuit because of the hard work and dedication I already put into it.

This process has been difficult and emotionally draining. I felt very vulnerable at times when questions surrounding my hijab and my religion came up. I wanted to inform people about my religion without getting into debates about the religion itself. I was scared to talk about why the hijab was so important to me out of the fear that someone would say, “Your reason isn't good enough and you don’t deserve to be accommodated.” However, I needed to remind myself that Islam isn’t as readily discussed historically, culturally, socially, and institutionally as Christianity, for example. I needed to remind myself that people will only know about Islam if I tell them and they won’t go out of their way to learn if they don't have to. Which meant I needed to have these difficult conversations in order for people to understand my choice better. Luckily, there were people in the program who knew about Islam, and it was nice to rely on their support when I felt misunderstood. To add, I wanted to make a film that was a good balance between educating

people in the industry that didn't know about hijabi actresses, while educating hijabi actresses about the industry. From my experience working within my own community, I knew that there was a lack of knowledge about how to become an actress. As a result, I initially wanted to make a film for my own community in which I didn't have to explain the hijab at all. However, for change to occur, people within the industry, who are largely non-Muslim will need to be educated about Muslims and Islam too.

What I've learnt from this experience is that people are open to having more hijabi actresses exist and thrive in the industry, but there is still some work that needs to happen for this to be possible. There is misinformation about our limitations, and our lives as Muslims in general. Though hijabi actresses simply cannot portray any and every character, what I do believe is that hijabi actresses can express varying human experiences that will be relatable to all people. The issue is that we've only seen hijabi actresses express certain experiences and people are having a hard time visualizing them in different situations. A part of that is lack of knowledge about Muslims and Islam. If people knew more about the varied lived experiences of Muslim women, then the possibility of casting them in unconventional roles would be possible.

One of my original ideas for this documentary was to have little fictional vignettes of me acting and I think that would've been helpful to visualize the the range of characters a hijabi actress could play. This would not only serve to educate people who are currently in the industry and are casting actresses, but it will also inspire Muslim women in the hijab to pursue the career. Hijabi women see themselves represented in certain, often negative and inaccurate ways, that the motivation to act is usually not there. It takes a lot of strength and support to pursue a career that is already so difficult and so competitive for the average person, so to have an additional barrier

makes it feel even more impossible. However, I believe that hijabi women who want to pursue acting but are hesitant to do so will feel slightly more encouraged to do it once they see not only myself, but Asil, Maryan, and Ameenah pursue acting as well. Before making this film, I myself felt alone and alienated in my journey and genuinely believed that I would have a hard time not only finding industry professionals that would support me but I believed that I would have a hard time finding Muslim actresses like me. I simply believed they didn't exist. So as I found the Muslim actresses for my film, the possibility of me pursuing a career in acting seemed higher, and it was reassuring to know that I wasn't alone and it encouraged me to keep dreaming.

I hope to have an acting career that extends from television, to film, to theatre. Growing up, the best part of high school was going to rehearsals everyday after school. Performing live is exhilarating and I hope to have an opportunity to be a part of a theatre production at least once in my life. I hope to perform in films, a little more so than television series so I get the opportunity to portray a wide array of human experiences. I suspect that in future a lot of roles for hijabi women will be about the everyday lives of Muslims, but I hope I get to work on projects that are a bit more unconventional. My dream is to be in a sci-fi, or fantasy, or cerebral film. I am particularly interested in characters that have to battle between good and evil within themselves. Darker characters in darker situations are fascinating to me, and I think the hijab will make the character nuanced and complicated. My dream role would be to play a villain in the Batman universe. There has been a shift in the way these characters have been portrayed from Tim Burton's quirky depiction to Christopher Nolan's humanistic depiction that I have no doubt we'll see a hijabi villain in Batman one day. That villain will be played by me.

**Word count: 8922**

## **Appendices**

### **Appendix A: Interview Questions for experts:**

*Laura Nordin*

1. Film is a visual medium, and people make assumptions as soon as you walk into the door. From a filmmaker's point of view, when an actress walks into an audition, or a casting director suggests an actress for your film, what do you look for? Neutrality? A specific look? A surprise?
2. If a Muslim woman walks into an audition, what would be the immediate concern? And what would be the possibilities?
3. Could you speak more about what you think the current perception is of what a Muslim actress can or cannot do in film/tv? What are the current perceptions of our personal limitations?
4. To what degree is the following statement true: An actor or actress is a neutral individual that can be moulded into a character? Is it expected for an actor or actress to have the least amount of limitations as possible?
5. If an actress can't do a single thing in a scene, when is it okay to change the script and when is it better to part ways?
6. A filmmaker collaborates with many different departments, i.e.: Sound, cinematography, set design, costume, etc. To what degree does a filmmaker collaborate with an actor right now? To what degree *should* they be collaborating with them? Is it even fair for an actor to ask?
7. Does storytelling change when the actress is a racialized individual? Examples? When is it okay if the story changes? When is it not?

*Millie Tom*

1. A casting director is often the middle man between the agent and production. Could you describe the role of a casting director and their relationship to actors/actresses?
2. When an actor/actress walks into an audition, what does a casting director look for? Neutrality? A specific look? A surprise?
3. To what degree is the following statement true: "An actor or actress is a neutral individual that can be moulded into any character." Is it expected for an actor or actress to have the least amount of limitations as possible?
4. If a hijabi actress walked into an audition, what would be the immediate concern or perception, and what would be the possibilities?
5. You mentioned that you can't necessarily ask what someone's religion is, just like you can't ask someone their age, so instead a casting call would say, "Looking for a middle eastern ...". Since Muslims come from all different races, how do you think it would be appropriate to ask or look for a hijab-wearing actresses?
6. Are demo reels effective when trying to convince a casting director to cast them in a certain role? For example, if you can't imagine me playing an action hero because of my hijab and the perceptions that come with that, but in my demo reel I'm doing a cool combat scene, would that change your mind?

7. As a casting director, what do you look for in a headshot? Neutrality? A specific look? A surprise? How would your perception change if I wore a turban vs a regular hijab in my headshot?

*Rua Wani*

1. Could you describe the role of a producer? Are producers the ones that provide funding? or platforms for the film/tv show to be showcased on?
2. The film/tv industry is profit driven. How does one prove that a show will sell?
3. What would be a minimum number of people that should be watching a tv/show or movie? How does one prove that a show will bring in an audience?
4. Does casting effect whether or not a film/tv show will be produced? If a film/tv show casts a character that is not typically represented, does that lower the chance of film/tv show being produced? What should one do in that situation to get the piece to be made? Where does one go?
5. Depending on the tone of the script, producers look to see, “What channel could the piece live on.” Could you explain that concept a bit more?
6. You mentioned that Netflix doesn’t look for a specific tone for something to be produced. Do you feel that streaming services are the best places for more diverse casted tv/shows and films to be produced and showcased?
7. What are the pros and cons of having something produced on a streaming service like Netflix vs tv-network like CBC or HBO — specifically for a community that doesn't see themselves being represented.
8. Scholarly research argues that post 9/11 films were just propaganda to push the War on Terror. To what degree do you think that’s true? To what degree do you think government funding of the arts plays a role in how Muslims are perceived in the media? Why do you think filmmakers use certain tropes about Muslims? Do you feel it’s to support a certain political climate or to make easy money off of current existing perceptions of Muslims?

*Nicola Damude*

1. An actor or actress is expected to be a neutral individual that can be moulded into any character. True or false?
2. Even before the audition, or landing a role, do you find that the acting industry is fixated on how you look? Could you speak more about the the importance put on your looks, whether its ethnicity or weight, etc...
3. What do you think are the barriers for POC when trying to get into theatre schools, or any type of acting training?
4. Do you believe that going to an acting school is better than trying to get into a theatre school and why?
5. What do you suggests agents and casting directors do to help create more diversity in the acting industry?
6. At what point is it fair for an actor to ask for a scene to be changed or to collaborate with a writer when they are unable to do something in a scene or in a film/tv show ... and at what point is it fair for the actor to just walk away?

*Lisa Michelle*

1. To what degree is the following statement true or false? “An actor or actress is expected to be a neutral individual that can be moulded into any character.” Is this something you hear often as an actress?
2. I was often told that it was in the audition process a casting director would explore what it would be like to cast a woman of colour/hijabi woman. However, the audition process is quick. Could you speak a little more to how quick the process is, why that’s so, and how to disrupt that process?
3. Building off of that ... when advocating for casting a person from a certain group (ie: Hijabi women), where does the work begin? Is it in the audition room, is it in the demo reel, is it in the writing, is it external ... etc. What do you suggest?
4. How can a demo reel be used to convince someone to cast you?
5. Why is it important for casting calls to ask for a specific ethnicity vs “open ethnicity.”
6. Why is it not helpful to tell people of colour that if they want to act, they should also write/produce?

**Appendix B: Roundtable Questions:**

1. Why did you want to become an actress?
2. What is your experience so far?
3. What are some of your limitations? (ie: clothing, swearing, violence/combat, personality traits, etc.)
4. Discussion about who currently represents Muslim women.
5. Why do you think it's important for Muslim women to become actresses and represent themselves?
6. What roles do you think you'd get type casted in, and what roles would you want to play?



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