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Quranic Weavings: Islamic Identity and Film

Islamic observance exists along a continuum; it cannot simply be boiled down to “fundamentalist” as opposed to “secular” (Wiktor-Mach 3). In contemporary times, especially since the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001, Muslims in America have been forced to reconcile two distinct identities, American and Islamic, which often compete right at the soul of the self (Smith xii). A crystal-clear example of this is found in the journey of the protagonist, Tariq, in the low-budget film *Mooz-lum* as he makes sense of himself as someone coming from a home in which traditional Islamic observance is stressed, but the reality of human living, including being a clearly identifiable Muslim, divorce (and with it, the role of women and *ideal* family life in Islam), education, and abuse all provide intense pressure on Tariq's Muslim identity – causing him, at least on the surface, to lose his Muslim identity.

The film opens with snapshots of childhood bullying; Tariq is clearly Muslim from his garb and his name. A teacher taking attendance mispronounces Tariq's name, causing his classmates to erupt in jeering. According to the National Education Association, bullying against Muslims is not uncommon, and author Sarah Holcomb specifically mentions having a Muslim-sounding name or adorning Muslim-looking clothes as a risk factor for ridicule (Holcomb). In their quest to resolve this issue, Tariq's parents face an irreconcilable split on education, prompting his mother to plainly state, “I want a divorce.”

With the divorce comes a clean decision in regards to custody of the children: Tariq is to go with his father because, as his mother says, he needs a man in his life in order to learn how to be a good man. While this terse statement may appear offsetting to Western ears as misogynist and patriarchal in nature, despite its reputation, Islam is in fact not a misogynistic religion in its most orthodox (i.e., according to the Islamic texts themselves, *not* according to how Islam is actually lived out, which is orthopraxis). As noted, it was Tariq's mother who asked for the divorce. In fact, sharia law provides women with a number of options for divorce; rather than a lack of options, the real issue appears to be a lack of knowledge of those options (Smith 144). Scholar Jane Smith notes that “in general, the roles are seen as complementary rather than identical” (Smith 130). In the film, this is manifest in that men are put into a caregiving position for their women. For example, Tariq's father is the breadwinner, and his mother is a homemaker, providing a solid foundation in Islamic practice for her children. Smith affirms the reality of this existence, but contends that many Muslim men want a marriage with equal responsibilities (Smith 140-141). On the other hand, this rigid structure in Islam and in Islamic cultures is reason for Western suspicion (Smith 141).

The divorce highlights a rift between father and son, and as an adult when he was talking to his family, Tariq notes that he and his father do not agree often and do not speak of much anything on the telephone except of Islamic studies. According to Jane Smith, this generational divide on assimilation and religious identity is common, although it occurs with more frequency between older generations – presumably immigrant generations – and American-born teenaged Muslims (Smith 155). In any case, Tariq's moving in with his father serves as a “spring-board” for more socioreligious tensions that break Tariq's spirit.

An educational disagreement was the secondary reason for divorce, with religious tensions being the primary cause of the split. In the car outside school, Tariq's parents heatedly argue about schooling and Muslim identity. Tariq's father contends that he *must* attend a *madrassa*, or a strictly Islamic school, because it will preserve his Muslim identity. According to Jane Smith, such a concern is not uncommon amongst Muslims, and arguments within the Islamic community about just how to educate Muslims have been ensuing since at least the 1970s (Smith 155). His mother, by contrast, feels that his father's concerns about Tariq's assimilation are exaggerated. She acerbically states that although *he* [i.e., Tariq's father] witnessed a heightened cocktail of racism and Islamophobia after his immersion in Islamic culture with the rise of Malcom X in the 1960s, mainstream society was not in fact as prejudiced as his father made it out to be. In the end, the father wins, and Tariq is enrolled in a *madrassa*.

In the *madrassa*, Tariq is subject to frequent and horrific abuse at the hands of his teachers – the abuse entailed severe beatings that left noticeable scars still visible years later. Tariq's mother senses that something is wrong and goes to take her son from the institution. Upon attempting to take him, the head of the school tries to slap her. Jane Smith explains that although the Qu'ran does use the term “beating” as a form of corporal punishment for one's wife is ideally quite rare. “[N]o reputable Muslim interpreters would suggest that it should involve anything more than the lightest of taps as a reminder to the wife of her conjugal responsibilities”, Smith writes, and she continues on to stress that actual beating is *never* permissible in sharia law (Smith 141). When Tariq witnessed an attempt to assault his mother, he acted as Muslim men are instructed – he retaliated in an attempt to protect her. It can also be inferred that his explosion of rage can be seen as an attempt to exact revenge for the abuse *he* himself faced at the hands of this schoolmaster – beatings for not remembering the Quran

perfectly, for example. Nevertheless, the abuse had an irrefragable impact on Tariq's Muslim-American identity in a most dramatic way: it fragmented the “American” and the “Muslim” aspects of him, and his religious identity and upbringing is relegated to a kind of closeted status.

Traumatized by what he felt and observed in his childhood in his nuclear Islamic family home, as a single child of his father, and finally, with the egregious abuse at the *madrassa*, Tariq abdicates all aspects of his Islamic upbringing, save for using traditional Arabic greetings with his family. However, it is undeniable that he is a Muslim: his very name suggests an air of exception. Indeed, visceral reactions to Arabic names are not uncommon. Journalist Geneive Abdo reflects that when she travelled door-to-door observing how San Franciscans treated a Congressional candidate named Maad Abu Ghazalah, the first thing would-be constituents noted was his name (Abdo 2). However, this self-loathing is directly confronted when Tariq takes a comparative religion course in college.

Tariq enrolls in a studious four-year university where he is only one of a handful of Muslim students. He takes a comparative religion course with an eccentric yet affable professor who is known to his students simply as “Professor J”. On the first day, Islamophobic tensions come up in class with an ignorant comment from a privileged student. These comments are challenged by a female student, who is clearly a Muslim, as she is wearing the traditional headcovering for women known as a *hijab*. Tariq simply sits in silence. Yet throughout the semester, numerous developments arise to refine Tariq's Muslim-American identity -- none so dramatic, though, as the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in September 2001.

For all Americans, the tragedies of September 11, 2001 are burned onto the national consciousness as a tragedy that shaped a collectivist, unified identity. Yet Muslim-Americans, although also despondent about the tragedies of the day, are left with a bitter taste in their

mouths, as many feel that the ensuing “war on terror” actually blossomed into an overall war on Muslims, Muslim-Americans, and even Islam itself (Abdo 3). Such post-9/11 tensions are accurately depicted in *Mooz-lum*, namely through anti-Islamic writing and for Tariq, a brush with physical violence and mob rule.

In the aftermath of 9/11, Muslims have had growing concerns about anti-religious inspired violence based on a misunderstanding of what Islam really is about – in their view, peace (Smith 189). This view is clearly articulated during a clash between Tariq and his sister during which she states, “that’s [i.e., violence is] not what Islam is about!”. As the film goes on, a group of female Muslim students is shown walking with their *hijabs* on, and a disagreement about whether or not to keep the *hijab* on ensues. Finally, the more devout student declares, “Allah [God] will protect us”, and the students keep their *hijabs* on. Unfortunately, they are accosted by a group of students wielding sticks and other primitive weapons. At this moment, Tariq becomes aware of the situation and steps in – and in the process, becomes a victim of violence. The crowd disperses, and Tariq is visibly shaken by the experience. Unsure of what to make of it, he returns to his room, where he later reunites with his family.

In a poignant reunion, the Mahdi family gathers in Tariq's dorm room, where his mother cries out at seeing the marks on her son's back. She is outraged at her ex-husband, who offers only shallow remorse for his son's abuse. The American desire for a happy ending is satisfied, though, as the entire family embraces for a group hug. As for Tariq, his identity is still ambivalent – is he a devout *Mooz-lum*, as the dean mocked the pronunciation of “Muslim” to Professor Jamal in an altercation, or is he a proud *Muslim*, as his mother and religion professor appear to be? That question is left unanswered but in the mind of Tariq, and as for his viewers, it is plain that he struggles with what it means to be both a Muslim and an American.

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