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"I don't know what kind of Muslim I am.": RAMY (US 2019–2022), MO (US 2022–2025), and the Reappropriation of the "American Muslim" in Contemporary Prestige TV

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“I don’t know what kind of Muslim I am.”

RAMY (US 2019–2022), Mo (US 2022–2025), and the Reappropriation of the “American Muslim” in Contemporary Prestige TV

Abstract

This article examines evolving representations of Islam and Muslims in American television through case studies of the series RAMY (Hulu, US 2019–2022) and MO (Netflix, US 2022–2025). Drawing on a diachronic framework that traces portrayals of Muslim identities from the early 2000s to the present, the study situates these series within a broader historical and cultural context. Early depictions, as critiqued by scholars like Amir Hussain in 2009, often relegated Muslims to one-dimensional roles characterized by negativity and violence, reinforcing exclusionary narratives. In contrast, RAMY and its counterpart MO signal a significant shift toward more authentic and more complex representations. These series foreground intersections of race, religion, and cultural identity, offering narratives that are deeply personal and structurally aware.

Keywords

TV series, Prestige TV, American Muslim, RAMY (Hulu, US 2019–2022), MO (Netflix, US 2022–2025)

Biography

Ilaria W. Bianco, PhD, is a religious and cultural studies scholar and historian. She has held fellowships at leading Italian research institutes, including the Fondazione Luigi Einaudi (Turin) and the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Storici (Naples). She is co-editor of *Fantastic Religions and Where to Find Them: Gods, Myths, and Ritual in Sci-Fi and Fantasy Narratives* and editor of the forthcoming volume *Religion, Popular Culture, and the Nineties*. She is also the creator and curator of the public scholarship project *The God Gap*, a newsletter exploring religion, culture, and politics.

Introduction

In 2009, theologian and Islamic studies scholar Amir Hussain observed that American television largely portrayed Muslims in one-dimensional, negative terms. Writing in Diane Winston's *Small Screen, Big Picture*, he noted that Muslims were rarely depicted as ordinary citizens but instead presented as “dangerous immigrants with a religion that is both alien and evil”. Their “lived religion”, he argued, was reduced almost entirely to acts of violence, leaving “no other substantive practice that embodies Islamic faith on television”.¹

A decade later, the landscape had begun to shift. In 2019, the pilot episode of *RAMY* (Hulu, US 2019–2022) opened with its titular character attending prayer at a mosque before heading out on a date, where he debates with the girl how much “Muslim” he is – or is not. This marked a striking departure from earlier representations, signaling a move toward more complex and introspective portrayals of Muslim identities on American television. Alongside its spiritual successor *MO* (Netflix, US 2022–2025), *RAMY* exemplifies a broader reappropriation of the “American Muslim” in contemporary TV seriality. These series not only introduce multidimensional characters but also engage with intersections of religion, race, and culture, challenging the once-monolithic representations of Muslim identity in American media.

This shift in television representation aligns with a broader historical reality: Islam in the United States is neither a recent phenomenon nor a monolithic tradition. From the transatlantic slave trade to contemporary immigrant communities, Islam has long been woven into the nation’s religious and cultural fabric. Yet, for much of television and entertainment history, this diversity was flattened or erased, reinforcing exclusionary narratives rather than reflecting the lived experiences of American Muslims.

In the past decade, the evolution of TV seriality has created new possibilities for representing these complexities. *RAMY* and *MO* challenge the reductive identity frameworks that have often shaped Muslim representation on screen, resisting both stereotypical tropes and the flattening effects of neoliberal multiculturalism. Instead, these series depict protagonists who navigate racialized identities, lived religiosity, and the tensions between communal expectations and personal self-definition. By centering Muslim narratives in ways that are at once deeply personal and structurally aware,

1 Hussain 2009, 154.

RAMY and MO disrupt longstanding televisual conventions, offering a more expansive and nuanced engagement with Muslim life in the United States.

American Muslims, Americans and Muslims

The evolving representation of Muslims in American media cannot be understood without situating it within the broader historical and sociopolitical landscape of Islam in the United States. While television has often flattened Muslim identities into monolithic or antagonistic tropes, lived Islam in America has always been plural, shaped by histories of forced displacement, voluntary migration, and the intersecting legacies of race and religion. From the presence of enslaved African Muslims in the transatlantic slave trade to successive waves of migration from the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa in the 20th century, Islam has been an integral part of the United States' religious and cultural landscape for centuries.² The emergence of African American Islamic movements – most notably the Nation of Islam in the 1930s and the later expansion of Sunni and other Islamic traditions during the Civil Rights era – underscores the diverse genealogies of American Muslim identity. Figures such as Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali not only brought Islam into mainstream consciousness but also linked it to broader struggles for racial justice, disrupting dominant narratives that framed Muslims as perpetual outsiders. These histories complicate simplistic portrayals of Muslim identity in the United States, highlighting its heterogeneity and its inextricable ties to American social and political movements.

Today, American Muslims form one of the nation's most ethnically and racially diverse religious communities. The estimated 3.85 million Muslims in the United States comprise South Asians (33%), Arabs (25%), and African Americans (24%), along with growing populations from Southeast Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa.³ This diversity is mirrored in the geographic distribution of Muslim communities, with major urban centers like New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Detroit hosting vibrant cultural and religious networks. Mosques, community centers, and Muslim-owned businesses function as spaces of belonging and negotiation, reflecting the ways in which Islam is continually reinterpreted within the American context. Immigration

2 Curtis 2009; GhaneaBassiri 2010; Al-Kuwari 2024.

3 Pew Research Center 2017.

remains a key factor in the demographic and cultural landscape of American Islam, with approximately 55 percent of American Muslims born outside the United States.⁴ However, second- and third-generation American-born Muslims are also pivotal in this evolving identity, as they navigate faith, race, and nationality in distinct ways.

Despite their long-standing presence and contributions to American society, Muslims have remained highly racialized subjects, particularly in the post-9/11 era. Islamophobia, surveillance, and discriminatory policies have reinforced their status as perpetual outsiders, subject to political and cultural anxieties that cast them as threats rather than citizens.⁵ However, in response to these structural exclusions, American Muslims have also mobilized strategies of reappropriation – asserting agency over their representations and carving out new spaces in civic, cultural, and political life. From increasing political representation to the flourishing of Muslim-authored literature, film, and television, these acts of reappropriation resist reductive narratives and redefine what it means to be both American and Muslim.

Understanding this dynamic is crucial for analyzing the shifting portrayals of Muslims in contemporary television. As series like *RAMY* and *MO* demonstrate, American Muslims are no longer simply subjects of representation but have become active agents in shaping how their identities are mediated. These productions move beyond tokenism or mere visibility, engaging with the complexities of religious, racial, and cultural hybridity in ways that challenge dominant framings. In this context, reappropriation is not just about reclaiming narrative space but about reconfiguring the very terms through which American Muslim identity is imagined, negotiated, and lived.

The representation of Islam in American culture has undergone significant transformations, reflecting broader social dynamics, political realities, and the evolving self-perception of Muslim communities. Central to this evolution is the concept of cultural reappropriation, which involves reclaiming and reframing identities, symbols, and narratives that have historically been imposed or distorted by dominant power structures. The process of cultural reappropriation has been central to the evolving representation of American Islam and the trope of the “American Muslim” or “Muslim in America”, particularly when contextualized within the fraught history of Muslim portrayals in the United States before and after 9/11. This sociopo-

4 Institute for Social Policy and Understanding 2020.

5 Ernst 2013; Love 2017; Beydoun 2018.

litical strategy enables marginalized groups to redefine terms, symbols, or representations that were previously imposed upon them in a derogatory or reductive manner. Reappropriation extends beyond linguistic reclamation to include strategies for social and political empowerment, fostering in-group cohesion and challenging hegemonic narratives by creating alternative ones.⁶

This concept is particularly relevant to media representations, which serve as a battleground for negotiating identity and authenticity. By reappropriating a term or representation, a group not only reclaims its identity but also challenges the dominant power structures that previously controlled the narrative.⁷ Internally, this shift fosters cohesion, self-esteem, and a sense of agency within the group, while externally, it reshapes societal perceptions, encouraging the public to reconsider preconceived notions. In this way, reappropriation has the potential to disrupt established ideological frameworks and offer a counter-narrative to dominant discourses. It serves as a powerful tool for marginalized communities to resist oppression, shift power dynamics, and catalyze broader social change.

Before the events of September 11, 2001, American popular culture largely portrayed Islam through the lens of Orientalism, presenting Muslims as exoticized “others” or homogenized stereotypes. Films and TV shows often placed Muslims within a binary of mysticism and menace, reducing their cultural complexity to simplistic tropes.⁸ These depictions, influenced by geopolitical events like the Iranian Revolution and the Gulf War, cast Muslims as symbols of foreignness, violence, and religious fanaticism, aligning with externally imposed derogatory labels designed to marginalize the group and reinforce existing power structures. This portrayal reinforced the perception of Islam as a monolithic tradition.

The events of 9/11 further entrenched these portrayals, embedding the Muslim figure as an existential threat in the American imaginary. Muslims became hyper-visible, often cast as potential threats to security. This securitization was mirrored in cultural productions that framed Islam in oppositional terms, reinforcing the “clash of civilizations” narrative.⁹ TV series like *24* (Fox, US 2001–2010; 2014) and *HOMELAND* (Showtime, US 2011–2020)

6 Romano 2022.

7 Galinsky/Wang/Whitson/Anicich/Hugenberg/Bodenhausen 2013.

8 Shaheen 2015.

9 Bleich/van der Veen 2021; Qamar/Sadaf/Raza 2024.

constructed Muslims almost exclusively as antagonistic figures, a phenomenon Hussain critiques as a form of cultural violence perpetuated by the entertainment industry.¹⁰ Even when attempts were made to move beyond negative stereotypes, these narratives often merely camouflaged discriminatory tropes, reinforcing ideological frameworks that equated Islam with danger and justified policies of surveillance and exclusion.¹¹

However, in the past decade, the emergence of Muslim creators in American media has begun to shift this narrative. In response to reductive portrayals, American Muslim communities have actively engaged in cultural reappropriation, redefining their identities with a focus on authenticity and agency.¹² Figures like Hasan Minhaj, Riz Ahmed, and later Ramy Youssef and Mo Amer have leveraged their roles as creators to contest and reframe dominant narratives.

This shift coincided with a broader societal recontextualization. As explored by Galonnier, American Muslims have increasingly contested external definitions of Islamic authenticity, whether cultural or religious, by reframing these definitions within the complexities of American racial and social hierarchies. The discourse surrounding authenticity reveals strategies such as acculturation, exculturation, and inculturation, which navigate the interplay of cultural and religious fidelity within the American context. These strategies, Galonnier notes, highlight the tension between being “truly Islamic” and “truly American”, while challenging hierarchical structures that impose singular definitions of identity.¹³

The rise of Muslim-authored media marks a critical juncture in the reappropriation of American Islam. Unlike earlier portrayals, which imposed narrow perspectives, these creators draw on their lived experiences to depict the diversity and contradictions within Muslim communities. This shift signals a broader cultural and discursive change, where Muslims in America are no longer passive subjects of representation and have become active participants in its creation. As these narratives gain visibility, they challenge existing cognitive frames, reshape societal perceptions, and foster a more nuanced understanding of Islam in the American context.

10 Hussain 2009.

11 Guarinos/Berciano-Garrido 2022, 125.

12 Pennington 2024.

13 Galonnier 2023.

Religion and Islam in TV Seriality

The evolution of television over the past few decades has been shaped by major shifts in production, narrative complexity, and thematic ambition. One of the most pivotal transformations was the rise of the Second Golden Age of Television¹⁴, characterized by a move away from formulaic storytelling toward more intricate, serialized narratives. In the mid-1990s, Thompson coined the term “Quality TV” to describe shows distinguished by layered storytelling, morally complex characters, and engagement with socially and politically charged themes.¹⁵ This trajectory of TV development continued into what is now referred to as “Peak TV” (or “Prestige TV” or “TVIV”), which began in the 2010s with an explosion of high-quality scripted content fueled by streaming services and audience fragmentation.¹⁶ Unlike earlier network television, which sought broad appeal, Peak TV targeted niche viewerships, embraced cinematic production values, and often featured morally ambiguous or deeply flawed protagonists.

These phases of TV development also led to significant changes in the representation of religion within serialized narratives. Historically, television was either indifferent or resistant to religious themes, often rendering faith as “a rather invisible institution” and rarely depicting it as central to characters’ lives.¹⁷ When religious elements appeared in the 1990s, they were often generalized and noncontroversial, avoiding complexities.¹⁸ In the 2000s, television began embracing more morally complex storytelling, engaging more directly with religious themes, influenced by the post-9/11 cultural landscape, which intensified discussions around faith in the public sphere. This shift led to more varied and at times provocative religious representations, moving beyond the sanitized portrayals of earlier decades.¹⁹ Winston’s *Small Screen, Big Picture* (2009) highlights how television in the early 21st century began to reflect lived religion, integrating characters’ ethical dilemmas and spiritual struggles in ways that resonated with individual and communal identities.

14 *The Second Golden Age of Television* refers to the subsequent exploration of Thompson’s concept of Quality TV in the 1980s and 1990s.

15 Thompson 1996; McCabe/Akass 2007.

16 Schlütz 2016; Friedman/Keeler 2023.

17 Skill/Robinson/Lyons/Larson 1994, 265.

18 Clarke 2005; Roof 1997.

19 Howell 2020, 9.

By the 2010s, Peak TV was further reshaping how religious and spiritual themes were woven into narratives. Three developments were key. First, some shows delved deeper into lived religion, focusing on themes of identity, authenticity, and personal faith journeys, particularly within the comedy and dramedy genres – that is the case for the shows considered here.²⁰ Second, a growing number of series spotlighted nonreligious characters and narratives, reflecting broader cultural shifts around secularism and spirituality.²¹ Third, the rise of what can be termed postsecular television introduced a new dimension to storytelling, blurring the lines between religious and secular worldviews and incorporating elements of science, mysticism, and existential inquiry into storytelling.²²

While television’s engagement with religion has evolved significantly, the representation of Muslims in American media, particularly post-9/11, has followed a distinct trajectory shaped by socio-political events. In the early 2000s, portrayals of Muslims in television primarily cast them as threats to American society. As already noted, series like *24* and *HOMELAND* often propagated Islamophobic stereotypes, portraying Muslims as terrorists or cultural outsiders and relegating them to roles that reinforced fear and suspicion. These narratives typically framed Muslim characters in binary terms, either as villains to be defeated or as allies aiding counterterrorism efforts. Even when attempting to provide more balanced portrayals – such as showing “good” Muslim characters opposing terrorism – the narrative structure often positioned Muslims primarily in relation to national security concerns.²³ Similar patterns emerged in crime procedurals like *NCIS* (CBS, US 2003–present) and *LAW & ORDER: SVU* (NBC, US 1999–present), which often depicted Muslim characters as potential threats, reinforcing the dichotomy between moderate and extremist Islam. These portrayals contributed to a limited and problematic understanding of Muslim identity in the American cultural imagination. Even shows like *SLEEPER CELL* (Showtime, US 2005–2006), which sought to nuance these portrayals by exploring Muslim diversity, remained entrenched in a counterterrorism framework. *SLEEPER CELL* was one of the earliest shows to center a Muslim protagonist, in this instance an undercover FBI agent infiltrating terrorist networks.

20 Bianco forthcoming.

21 Bianco 2023.

22 Hodkinson 2020; Bianco 2024.

23 Nurullah 2010; Hake 2015.

While it attempted to humanize Muslim characters and critique both terrorism and Islamophobia, it still adhered to the broader discourse of security.

It was not until the late 2010s that more diverse and nuanced representations of Muslims began to emerge, largely driven by Muslim creators. The rise of Prestige TV allowed greater diversity in storytelling, with more Muslim writers, directors, and showrunners contributing to the narratives. This shift enabled more complex portrayals of Muslim identity, moving beyond the confines of terrorism and national security concerns. The emergence of Muslim creators like Ramy Youssef and Mo Amer marked a turning point in representation. These creators use their platforms to explore the complexities of Muslim identities, addressing themes of faith, culture, race, and belonging in ways that challenge traditional stereotypes. This transformation is not just about greater visibility; it also embraces agency and authorship.

The Spiritual Journey of RAMY (US 2019–2022)

Ramy Youssef's *RAMY* offers a groundbreaking exploration of the American Muslim experience through its eponymous protagonist, Ramy Hassan, an Egyptian-American millennial navigating faith, identity, and desire. Across its three seasons, the series delves deeply into the tensions between personal spirituality, communal expectations, and the secular realities of contemporary American life. The show explores spiritual uncertainty, cultural in-betweenness, and the search for self-definition, presenting Muslim religiosity as a lived and dynamic process and exploring the contradictions, questions, and struggles inherent in balancing personal faith with societal pressures and familial expectations.

The show's opening episode vividly illustrates these tensions. Ramy's mother encourages him to find a girlfriend at the mosque, juxtaposing familial and cultural expectations with religious practice. In another scene, Ramy's visible discomfort during ablution at the mosque reflects generational divides and cultural tensions within his own community. These moments underscore his ongoing negotiation between the desire to honor his heritage, the need for a spiritual dimension, and his immersion in the secular millennial culture of contemporary America. The first season revolves around Ramy's inner conflict: his yearning for a deeper connection to Islam exists alongside his struggles with sexual relationships, partying, and self-discipline. A pivotal episode, "Do the Ramadan" (S1E5), portrays Ramy's

attempt to fast during Ramadan as he simultaneously pursues a romantic relationship. The narrative juxtaposes his physical deprivation with his moral lapses, culminating in a night out that ends in guilt and confusion. This episode employs close framing to capture Ramy's vulnerability, such as lingering shots on his face during moments of spiritual reflection and indulgence. Through this tension, the series highlights the complexities of practicing Islam in a secular environment, where personal desires and societal pressures often conflict with religious ideals.

The second season deepens its exploration of the intersection of faith and race by situating Ramy's spiritual journey within broader racial and cultural dynamics in the United States. The introduction of Sheikh Ali (Mahershala Ali), a Black Muslim Sufi leader who becomes Ramy's spiritual mentor, complicates Ramy's understanding of Islam, forcing him to confront not only his own personal and moral failings but also his implicit biases as an Arab-American Muslim. The season critiques Ramy's often self-centered approach to faith, exposing how his spiritual aspirations are entangled with unexamined racial hierarchies within the Muslim community. Through this, *RAMY* interrogates the racialized landscape of American Islam, highlighting the ways in which different Muslim communities experience faith, marginalization, and belonging. In season three, Ramy's existential crisis and his growing estrangement from both faith and family reach their peak. The season's opening episode, "Harry Potter" (S3E1), reveals the collapse of his spiritual aspirations following his failed attempt to embrace Sufism. Instead, he immerses himself in material pursuits, including launching a questionable business venture with Israeli diamond dealers.

Beyond Ramy himself, the series widens its lens to include the perspectives of other characters, such as his sister Dena, who grapples with misogyny within both Muslim and secular spaces. Additionally, the narrative of his mother, Maysa, highlights the alienation experienced by first-generation immigrants as she navigates her role as a Lyft driver in a society that often dehumanizes her. These storylines enrich the series by showcasing a diversity of Muslim experiences, complicating monolithic representations of Islam and offering nuanced depictions of identity, gender, and belonging within contemporary American society.

Youssef has described the show as a reflection of his "internal dialogue" about reconciling heritage, religious values, and youth in America. As Youssef explains, "I actually want to hold on to where I came from, and also I want to

be at this bar in Brooklyn, even if I'm not drinking at all."²⁴ This nuanced depiction challenges earlier media trends that often portrayed young Muslims as either wholly rejecting their faith or entirely submitting to it. Instead, *RAMY* occupies a middle ground, portraying religion as an evolving, personal journey. The show's willingness to delve into Ramy's missteps, contradictions, and moral quandaries enriches its portrayal, presenting faith as an integral but non-monolithic aspect of identity. The show's humor, often oscillating between satire and anguish, reflects the disjointed realities of navigating faith in a pluralistic society. By situating its characters within these liminal spaces, *RAMY* not only redefines Muslim representation in American television but also invites audiences to grapple with universal questions about belonging, morality, and the search for meaning in a fragmented world.

Mo (US 2022–2025): Bridging Cultures and Identities

In *Mo Amer's MO*, the titular character, Mo Najjar, a Palestinian refugee in Houston, navigates the challenges of life in Texas while awaiting asylum. The series blends humor and poignancy to explore themes of displacement, systemic injustice, and cultural hybridity, centering on the lived realities of an undocumented Muslim protagonist in a contemporary American setting. While *RAMY* delves into spiritual introspection, *MO* emphasizes the socio-political aspects of Muslim identity. Mo's struggles with the labyrinthine immigration system and his attempts to find belonging in an often-hostile environment shed light on the broader challenges faced in America by Muslim immigrants – as both an individual negotiating his own identity and a member of a transnational diasporic community.

The series draws from the personal experiences of creator and lead actor Mo Amer, himself a Palestinian refugee, infusing the narrative with autobiographical elements, resulting in a story that is both deeply personal and widely resonant. *MO* offers a nuanced exploration of immigration, identity, and resilience. Like *RAMY*, the series uses comedy not just for entertainment but as a tool for tackling difficult topics. As Amer has noted, humor fosters connection and empathy, allowing the series to balance moments of profound vulnerability with levity.²⁵ This tonal fluidity captures the absurdities

24 Sperling 2019.

25 Vognar 2022; Fadel/Harrell 2022.

and heartbreaks of life as a refugee in America while resisting the reductive tropes that often characterize mainstream representations of Muslims on U.S. television.

The pilot episode introduces Mo as a quick-witted hustler who takes on a series of odd jobs while struggling with his undocumented status. When legal barriers prevent him from securing stable employment, he resorts to selling counterfeit designer goods in a parking lot. The show also explores intergenerational and diasporic tensions, particularly through Mo's relationship with his devout mother, Yusra, whose allegiance to Palestinian customs contrasts with Mo's hybrid identity, shaped by his American experience. While Yusra remains committed to traditional religious practices, Mo's approach to faith is more pragmatic, often interwoven with humor and self-reflection. Beyond his family, Mo's interactions with non-Muslim communities further highlight the transnational dimensions of his identity. Mo's relationship with his Catholic Mexican-American girlfriend Maria becomes a site of cultural negotiation, highlighting how Muslim Americans navigate religious boundaries while maintaining cultural authenticity. Episode six, "Holy Matrimony", encapsulates this tension through Mo's attendance at a family friend's wedding. The event becomes a microcosm of the diasporic experience, oscillating between moments of cultural continuity – such as the traditional *dabke* dance – and cultural dissonance, as Mo attempts to reconcile familial expectations with his Americanized sensibilities. These scenes reinforce the series' depiction of identity as dynamic and relational, shaped by both local and global influences.

The second season deepens the engagement with the complexities of Muslim American identity, displacement, and the precarious status of asylum seekers in the United States. Mo's undocumented status leaves him stranded in Mexico, drawing parallels between Palestinian refugees and Latin American migrants. While Mo's predicament is unique – rooted in the statelessness that defines the Palestinian diaspora – the series frames his experiences within a shared global condition of displacement. Upon his return to Texas, the show shifts focus to the internal conflicts within immigrant and Muslim communities, concentrating on cultural authenticity, assimilation, and the commodification of identity. The show complicates these dynamics through Mo's relationship with his now ex-girlfriend Maria and her new relationship with an Israeli-American chef, Guy, highlighting not only the personal pain of loss but also the fraught intersections of food, culture, and colonial histories. The show plays with this tension through humor –

most notably in the misheard exchange where Mo's anger over "hummus" is mistaken for "Hamas", a moment that underscores the ever-present misperceptions and racialized anxieties surrounding Muslim identity in America.

The season culminates with the family's visit to the West Bank, their first visit since displacement. Here, MO juxtaposes the lived reality of occupation with the diasporic longing for home, refusing to romanticize either. The show resists the binarity of suffering and resistance that often defines representations of Palestinian identity, emphasizing instead the right to joy, community, and self-definition. As Yusra's daughter, Mo's sister, poignantly asserts, "We owe it to them to live, too", pushing against the expectation that Palestinian narratives must be defined solely by trauma.

Through its sharp cultural commentary and its insistence on multidimensional Muslim and Palestinian American characters, the series challenges reductive narratives that often flatten immigrant and refugee identities. It ultimately presents a vision of Muslim American life that is neither idealized nor victimized but shaped by everyday negotiations of faith, family, and survival. The show's blend of comedic and dramatic elements reflects the liminal space occupied by Mo as a refugee, a Muslim, and "an American", offering a reimagined narrative of the Muslim experience that is as deeply personal as it is politically resonant. Ultimately, MO reclaims Muslim representation in U.S. television by presenting a protagonist who defies easy categorization, thereby challenging audiences to grapple with the complexities of faith, identity, and belonging in an interconnected world.

Reappropriation to Representation

While *RAMY* and *MO* both contribute to the reappropriation of Muslim representation in American television, their methods and focal points reveal distinct approaches that underscore the multifaceted nature of the Muslim American experience. *RAMY* probes the introspective and personal, charting the protagonist's spiritual journey as he grapples with faith, morality, and identity in a secularized context. This internal exploration reflects a universal struggle with self-definition even as it remains rooted in the specificities of a young Egyptian-American Muslim navigating generational and cultural expectations. By contrast, *MO* takes a more outward-facing perspective. The series uses a wide lens to view systemic issues such as immigration, cultural displacement, and economic precarity. By weaving humor and

pathos into a narrative of resilience, *MO* highlights the intersections of personal identity with structural inequalities, emphasizing the wider societal challenges faced by displaced and diasporic communities. Together, these approaches reflect the rich diversity of the American Muslim community, encompassing a wide range of racial, cultural, and religious experiences, each shaped by unique histories and contexts.

By offering narratives that are at once specific and universal, these series challenge Islamophobic stereotypes and expand the boundaries of contemporary TV storytelling. Their success not only highlights the power of authentic representation but also signals a growing appetite for stories that reflect the richness and complexity of Muslim identities in America. This nuanced portrayal sharply contrasts with earlier representations of Muslim identities in American media, which often homogenized and flattened the complexities of these experiences. Even critically acclaimed works like *MASTER OF NONE* (Netflix, US 2015–2021) and *THE BIG SICK* (Michael Showalter, US 2017), authored by Muslim creators, offered depictions of Muslim characters who distanced themselves from their faith or cultural heritage, implicitly framing these elements as barriers to self-realization or inclusion.²⁶ By comparison, *RAMY* and *MO* reclaim faith, culture, and heritage as integral and dynamic aspects of their characters' identities. Rather than positioning these dimensions as obstacles, the series celebrate their potential to enrich the characters' lives and deepen their connection to community and belonging.

Crucially, this shift is not merely about “positive representation”: it is about authenticity and complexity. *RAMY* and *MO* eschew the simplistic binary of “good Muslim” versus “bad Muslim” that often framed earlier depictions and instead present characters who are flawed, nuanced, and profoundly human. In doing so, they humanize a long-misunderstood community, bridging gaps of understanding while resisting the reduction of Muslim identities to static, monolithic categories. As Hussain has argued, the negative portrayals of Muslims on television have far-reaching implications for how these communities are perceived and treated in broader society.²⁷ The success of *RAMY* and *MO* underscores the power of nuanced, authentic storytelling to disrupt these prejudices. By offering richly textured depictions of Muslim lives, these series foster empathy, challenge stereotypes, and

26 Sheikh 2019.

27 Hussain 2009, 169–170.

contribute to a broader reimagining of what representation can achieve in contemporary television. Beyond their immediate impact, *RAMY* and *MO* set a precedent for future narratives, opening the door to even greater diversity in the stories told and the communities represented.

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Filmography

24 (Created by: Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran, Fox, US 2001–2010; 2014).

HOMELAND (Created by: Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa, Showtime, US 2011–2020).

LAW & ORDER: SVU (Created by: Dick Wolf, NBC, US 1999–present).

MASTER OF NONE (Created by: Aziz Ansari and Alan Yang, Netflix, US 2015–2021).

MO (Created by: Mo Amer and Ramy Youssef, Netflix, US 2022–2025).

NCIS (Created by: Donal P. Bellisario and Don McGill, CBS, US 2003–present).

RAMY (Created by: Ramy Youssef, Ari Katcher, and Ryan Welch, Hulu, US 2019–2022).

SLEEPER CELL (Created by: Ethan Reiff and Cyrus Voris, Showtime, US 2005–2006).

THE BIG SICK (Michael Showalter, US 2017).