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FINAL PAPER

"Towards A Dawn of Knitting an Inter-Cultural Dialogue with Islam in the Canadian Media:
An Analysis of the CBC's Sitcom Little Mosque on The Prairie"

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Abstract:

Although multiple sites of media, including theatrical or cinematic performances highlight Muslim identities, this paper only examines the representation of Muslim identities as outlined in the 2007 television program *Little Mosque on the Prairie.* This presentation will shed light on how key historical and contemporary moments, and social relations impact the media. In 2007, the Canadian Broadcasting Cooperation (CBC) premiered its new sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie:* the first comedy portraying and discussing Islam, its followers, practices, behaviors, and everyday life since September 11. When asked about what she hopes to accomplish in her sitcom, the script writer, and CBC former producer, Zarqa Nawaz, stated that: "There is a lot of misunderstanding about Islam, and its followers. Through the comedy of *Little Mosque on the Prairie*, I hope a little light can be shed." This paper argues that airing such a controversial and sensitive topic in a public broadcasting channel is certainly a serious Canadian attempt to address the public's knowledge about Islam and Muslims, and to increase its knowledge about *"other"* cultural frameworks. Following September 11, Muslims around the world became victims of misrepresentation in both real life and the media, as they were portrayed as extremists, fundamentalists, and sometimes, terrorists. This presentation argues that CBC's production is a conscious effort to inform the general non-Muslim Canadians that, as stated by the script writer, "although different, we are all surprisingly similar when it comes to family, love, the generation gap and our attempts to balance our secular and

religious lives." This paper is aimed to critically analyze, through discourse content analysis, the first eight sitcoms, as well as the earlier feedback received pertaining to the airing of this comedy on CBC.

Media: Our "Windows" To the World

Following World War II, media studies became one of the important sites of social research. Among the earliest efforts to theorize the function of media in our society is the research of Rivers and Schramm (1969) where they explained that media help transmitting cultural and societal values from one generation to another and among members of society (pp. 14-15). Media also play a chief role in creating awareness and reinforcement of opinions and attitudes as well as informing the public on issues of interests.

The Canadian Marshall McLuhan, one of the media most famous theorists, envisaged the creation of a *global village* since the wide spread and constant advances in the field of media technologies since the late 1950s. Even in recent years, media have been arguably seen as "'divisively' changing the traditional perspective of older media versions" (Appadurai, 1996, p. 3). For that, claims have been made to underline the role of media as one of the pervading forces in our modern societies that resulted in our heavy dependence on their different forms (such as newspapers, magazines, television, radio, etc.) to receive information about communal, national, and international society: "Our understanding of and attitudes toward people, events, and problems are greatly influenced by the information and views communicated though these media" (cited in Brawley, 1983, p. 12).

Furthermore, the effects of media are not only a means of information, rather as a tool of cultural domination, struggle and resistance as Michèle Martin explains in her book *Communication and Mass Media* (1997). Detailing the process of the social construction of events in the media, Martin squarely emphasizes that "mass media content is not a simple reflection of society, but a product that is intended to achieve a specific goal" (1997, p. 5). Such position implies that there is some ominous motive of different messages transmitted in the media. For that, Martin adopting a Gramscian perspective, argues that media messages tend to be dominated by the dominant culture that is "powerful enough to impose its norms, values and ideas on the cultural practices of an

entire society in terms of both the activities of *everyday life* and artistic creation" (1997, p. 72, *emphasis added*). Within the one society, media not only help transferring events or information, rather than *producing* the symbolic system of language built-in in a given society. Stuart Hall argues strongly in favour of this account emphasizing that:

> Events on their own cannot . . . signify: they must be *made intelligible*; and the process of social intelligibility consists precisely in those practices which translate "real" events . . . into symbolic form . . . [and hence,] There are significantly different ways in which events - especially problematic or troubling events . . . can be encoded.
>
> <div align="right">(1977, p. 343, emphasis in original)</div>

In others words, media are *selectively* assigning a particular meaning (or code in Hall's understanding) to signify a given event within a particular context. An issue that becomes seriously important given the topic in hand, the role of media in presenting events in a particular sequence; correlating it to a particular negative meaning, and hence framed it within the societal codes of rejection; underestimation; or at least categorizing it in the rejected list of attitudes and behaviours in society. Lull confirms that media imagery is key in reconstructing "essential axes of cultural distance - space and time. . . [as it] permits new perceptions and uses of cultural time" (2000, p. 242). For that, today's electronic media (i.e. films, audio and video production, etc.) have transformed the cultural re-interpretations in society. As the audience turns out to consume the cultural production in a more "temporal and spatial contiguities" than it used to be in the print media eras. Shortly, media have become indeed our windows to the world as we depend on their screens, pages, images, and interpretations to know the reality that we can experience and importantly that we *cannot*.

Media in Canada: A site of struggle or a tool of liberation?

In June 2008, many observers, human rights advocates, journalists, Muslim groups, and media professionals in Canada have been curiously following the trial of Mark Steyn (a senior columnist in the *Maclean's Magazine* and a severe opponent of the idea of multiculturalism in Canada) on promoting hatred against Islam and Muslims in his 2006

published article "The Future belongs to Islam". The Canadian Islamic Congress accused Steyn and *Maclean's* of "flagrantly Islamophobic" asserting that a total of 18 articles published in *Maclean's* between 2005 and 2007 "subject[ed] Canadian Muslims to hatred and contempt" (Levant, 2007). Although the case was dismissed by the Ontario Human Rights Commission, it has clearly stated that, in canada:

> While freedom of expression must be recognized as a cornerstone of a functioning democracy, the Commission strongly condemns the Islamophobic portrayal of Muslims, Arabs, South Asians and indeed any racialized community in the media, such as the Maclean's article and others like them, as being inconsistent with the values enshrined in our human rights codes. Media has a responsibility to engage in fair and unbiased journalism.

> (9 April 2008, http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/resources/news/macleans)

Such controversial trial exemplified to a great extent the debate surrounding the role of media in the Canadian society, and the question of whether they are a site of struggle or a tool of liberation, especially in the case of Muslims and Islam. Numerous studies investigated the role of media in this debate taking several intellectual and philosophical turns. One important contribution is the work of Sherene Razack in which she argues that western media are producing "a discursive apparatus that entrenches notions of Western superiority and Third World inferiority" (1998, p. 91). In other words, and applying such understanding in the case of non-western cultural communities, there is indeed an ambiguity in viewing cultural forms and backgrounds with suspicion, if not exclusionary narratives. In her *Territory, authority, rights: From medieval to global assemblages*, Sassen asserts the importance of using religion and culture as important social and political dynamics of the discourse of nationalism. She argues:

> Use of religion and "culture" rather than citizenship, to construct membership may well be a function of the changed relationship of citizens to the state and the insecurities it produces. In this regard, use of religion is not an anachronism but a formation arising out of particular changes in the current age.

> (Sassen, 2006, p. 414)

In this case, empirical studies on this subject showed how media represent one of the important means of constructing identity especially for immigrant, diasporic, and minority groups[1]. For that, one of the main objectives of media production (i.e. news reporting, or audio/video productions.etc) is not only to "understand" it as van Dijk asserts, rather building *a system of meanings and representation* (1991, p. 229). He adds that such social representations are generalized to the "organized clusters of socially shared beliefs . . . and so are ideologies" (1998, p. 46). Thus, the very nature of ideology according to van Dijk manages how certain groups (or group relations) are represented in the media of a given society. Indeed, it is not only a "mirror-image" rather framing relationship between one ideology and another as in two camps "us" versus "them"; and naturally, "us" are represented as "good" whilst "them" are represented as "bad"[2]. Van Dijk adds that "positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation seems to be a fundamental property of ideologies" (Ibid, p. 69).

In constructing imaginaries, it is always important to differentiate between two processes: "types" and "stereotypes". As the first is a "general and necessary classification of persons and roles according to local cultural categories" , whereas "stereotypes" are seen as "vivid but simple representations which reduce persons to a set of exaggerated, usually negative, character traits. Thus, 'stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes 'difference' " (as cited in Barker, 1999, p.75). It is undeniably true that in the last few years, Islam could be easily categorized under the second kind especially in the western media that tend to view Islam —as van Dijk's "the other" – and simply as "a unitary phenomenon like no other religion" that is not "capable of development, reflection, or self-knowledge, and above all anti-woman" (Mir-Hosseini, 1999, p. 4). In

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[1] For example, and following the work of Anderson where she asserted that different media forms are capable of forming of what she termed to as *Imagined communities* (1983) where electronic online media tools facilitated the communication between home and new homeland for many immigrants of minority groups in the world. Marie Gillespie's main assumption in her *Television, ethnicity and cultural change* was that communication technologies can melt distance and overcome time. Her results concluded that the use of media "[allows] people to escape from forms of identity forged by the relation between person and the 'symbolic place' identical with geographical locality" (1995, p. 16).

[2] Especially in the portrayal of religious ideologies where van Dijk explains that "religious ideologies represent Us as (good) believers and Them as (bad) non-believers (infidels, heathens, etc.)" (1998, p.68).

short, media tend to construct, represent, and enforce particular practices in societies[3]. Stuart Hall maintains that media representations is a *"practice*, a kind of 'work'"* (1997, p. 26, *emphasis added*), that includes however "the use of language, of signs and images which stand for or represent things. But this a far from simple or straightforward process" (Ibid, p. 15). Drawing from these positions, one can wonder how media construct and represent Islam? The work of Edward Said's (1935-2003) represents indeed a watershed in the post-colonialism literature, for it has characteristically produced a general dissatisfaction in the intellectual sphere concerning the relationship between different cultural forms and the various types of imperialistic misrepresentations that emerged after WWII especially towards the de-colonized cultures.

Islam in the Media Imaginary: A Saidian lens

> Islam *has* been fundamentally misrepresented in the west - the real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they *are* representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer. If the latter alternative is the correct one (as I believe it is), then we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is . . . implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides the 'truth,' which is itself a representation.
>
> (Said, 1979, p. 272, *emphasis in original*)

Said has studied the notion of "culture" in a way not seen before as his discourse of cultural imperialism is not just a critique of modernity, of global capitalism, of media imperialism, of the discourse of nationality, or an empirical analysis of imperialism's history. Rather he has created his own discourse, turning the relationship between culture and imperialism into a historical textual discourse, thereby fashioning an academic tool that helps scholars and/or activists to continue their struggles in the post-colonialism

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[3] For that some scholars argue that media audience "do not function in a social vacuum". Rather, their "socio-cultural situatedness can and must be assumed". They are "social subjects of a particular class, society or culture, as family members, and it is not difficult to see their behaviours, including media consumption and interpretation, being shaped by the membership" (Harindranath, 2000, p. 154).

period where media imperialistic practices become an integral element in the makeup of our current post-colonial powers.

Said has transcended Frantz Fanon's idea of situating culture and media as tools of struggle against misrepresentation practices. Earlier, Fanon has legitimized the use of communication media (such as radio and newspapers) in the Algerian struggle for independence from France. Similarly, Said, argues that culture could be used in two different ways in the resistance movement. The first is through creating different communication patterns or practices to defend culture and its existence; such as the emergence of one culture's cinema, theatre, poetry, and literature is an "assembly of cultural expression that has become part of the consolidation and persistence of . . . identity" (in an interview with Barsamian, 2003, p. 159). However, he puts much emphasis on the use of culture as a "critical" discourse that analyzes history and critically investigates its consequences, not only in the past but as a future illumination. He asserts, "The power to analyze, to get past cliché and straight out-and-out lies from authority, the questioning of authority, the search for alternatives. These are also part of the arsenal of cultural resistance" (Ibid).

Undeniably, Said's understanding of cultural resistance especially in opposing media *mis*-representation—such as the case of Muslims in the west—offers an excellent explanation of the reasons behind the degree of success that *Little Mosque On the Prairie* achieved in the Canadian media. This cultural "Canadian" production has to a great extent *resisted* the different powers to exploit a particular image of Muslims as "enemies" or "the other". For that the work of Said informs the discussion of this sitcom as a cultural production as he was mainly interested throughout his career in examining how the different Western literary and cultural forms are central in forming "the imperial attitudes, references, and experiences" in the 19th and 20th centuries' modern empires and political systems.

> Culture is a concept that includes a refining and elevating element, each
> society's reservoir of the best that has been known and thought . . . in time,
> culture comes to be associated . . . with the nation or the state; this
> differentiates "us" from "them" almost always with some degree of
> xenophobia.
>
> (1993, p. xiii)

Ontologically, there is no discrepancy in the peculiar view between the "West and the rest of the world" (Said, 1993, p. 108), while ethnographically, Said believes that there is a "codification of difference" on the linguistic and historical levels where certain codes are given to describe the difference between the civilized and the primitive peoples/nations. Such categorizations can be easily seen in the dichotomy between "superior or civilized people" on the one hand, and "savage, natural [people]" on the other. For instance, stories and novels for Said —as examples of cultural productions—are integral to the explorers' imagination to know certain places in the world on the one hand, and as a tool of struggle in these places where people defend their existence in the historical sphere. Not only does Said explain such practices historically, but he even argues that the cultural production (i.e. novels) have even encouraged imperial powers to claim that it is their responsibility to lead the less-developed regions to a more prosperous fate, to freedom, and liberty, but in a "western" version. Said quotes Conrad as saying "we are number one, we are bound to lead, we stand for freedom and order" (Ibid, p. xvii).

For that, Said strongly maintains that various theorists (such as Arendt) opposed novelists like Conrad for instance who tend to present the *non-Western* world the way that *gratifies* the "exotic tastes" for the west in general (1993, pp. xvii-xix). He elaborates on this particular idea in his *Orientalism* in which, and following Foucault's *Archeology of Knowledge*, looks at the Orientalism concept as a discourse.[4] For him, Orientalism is a condition that has had a long history, and it is not simply the product of today's problems of representation (such as the current representation of Islam). Rather, he notes that Orientalism can be traced back as far as eighteenth century and Napoleon's knowledge about Egypt before his expedition to that country. Said argues that what Napoleon knew about the Orient was written in the tradition of Orientalism, which "made the Orient possible. Such an Orient was silent, available to Europe . . . and unable to resists the projects, images, or mere descriptions devised for it" (1978, p. 94). What Said wants to explain here is the profound impact of the Occident culture on the Orient culture and

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[4] Said argues that "without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European cultural was able to manage – and even produce – the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period" (1978, p. 3).

traditions, since it was believed that the power always comes from the West to the East[5]. Said adds that even after becoming independent, in the eyes of the Occident or the west, the Orient is still unable to adopt modern changes in different realms, such as in politics. For example, he says:

> In practice this notion has meant that . . . Orientals have never understood the meaning of self-government the way "we" do. When some Orientals oppose racial discrimination while others practice it, you say, "they're all Orientals at bottom" and class interests, political circumstances, economic factors are totally irrelevant. [Therefore, for the west] history, politics, and economics do not matter. Islam is Islam, the Orient is the Orient, and please take all your ideas about a left and a right wing, revolutions, and change back to Disneyland.
>
> (1978, p. 107)

Therefore, according to Edward Said's analysis, Orientalism is not just a belief that a given culture and its people are following the path or destiny designed by a superior and/or more powerful culture. Nevertheless, the concept of Orientalism holds that the Orient with its cultures and peoples are rigid, and not capable of change. "Orientalism has taken a further step than that: it views that Orient as something whose existence is not only displayed but has remained fixed in time and place for the West" (Said, 1978, p. 108).Thus, the West is convinced that the Orient is incompatible with the Occident, since the Orient's culture production cannot by any means be compared to West in an equivalent fashion: "Consequently, the "Arab and Islamic world[6] [as one example]. . . as a whole is hooked into the Western market system" (1978, p. 324).

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[5] For Edward Said, Orientalism is, "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident". Thus a very large mass of writers . . . poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorist, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on" (1978, pp. 2-3).

[6] More particularly, according to Said, the West is not the only party responsible for Orientalism for the Middle-East, for example, residents of the region are themselves participating "in [their] own Orientalism" (1978, p. 325) through their selective choices and consumptions of both the "material and ideological" American products.

Collectively, one can see how the work of Said informs this discussion since his account proved to be very informative on the media practices of spreading cultural images portraying the West as the hero and the rest of the world as the villain[7], especially after the September 11th attack; and hence the spread of the cultural image of the Muslim as terrorist is undeniable. Such argument is certainly evident in many western media production, as if we take *Disney Aladdin* movie as one example, one can see such depiction of Islam, its distant oriental place, its settin in the dessert between the caravan and camels, and its practice as "barbaric"[8] even if framed in a musical format and directed to children as audience:

> Oh I come from a land, from a faraway place
>
> Where the caravan camels roam
>
> Where it's flat and immense
>
> And the heat is intense
>
> It's barbaric, but hey, it's home
>
> (Arabian Nights lyrics, *Aladdin Disney* movie)

A timely question here is to wonder whether such interpretation can be *changed*. And what would be the main factors that can possibly enforce such transformation in the mainstream media? Scholars maintain that "Muslims in the media have no voice, no platform, so they cannot object or explain" (Akbar, 1992, p. 256). Can we apply the same argument in Canada? In the following section, I overview a Canadian public media attempt to *reconstruct* such media imaginary of Islam and Muslims through the case study of CBC *Little Mosque On The Prairie* (2007).

Little Mosque On the Prairie: Towards Media Inclusion of Muslims in Canada

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[7] Drawing from Said's work, Karim in his analysis of a group of Canadian newspapers confirms that dominant images of Muslims (and Arabs) continue to focus on being "all fabulously wealthy; they are barbaric and uncultured; they are sex maniacs with a penchant for white slavery; and they revel in acts of terrorism" (2000, p. 62).

[8] Karim continues to prove in his analysis that Northern discourses over the last 14 centuries centers on "the Muslim's depiction as a villain [that] carries a high level of plausibility in cultural entertainment that portrays the struggles of the good against the bad" or simply the negative image of the "other" as the enemy, rival, and villain (Karim, 2000, p. 65).

It is argued here that the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC)'s sitcom *Little Mosque on the Prairie* is a serious attempt "made in Canada" that seeks to visibilize Muslims in the Canadian mainstream media. Following September 11, Muslims seem to represent a sensational topic in the media by highlighting the inherited clashes between western and Muslim cultures[9]. Thus, this sitcom portrays for the first time the daily human interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims residents of a fictional town in Saskatchewan-Canada "Town of Mercy". Yet, one can wonder why Zarqa Nawaz, the script writer, picked to replace the classical American "Little House On the Prairie" by a *mosque*? Besides being the place of worship for Muslims around the world, scholars argue that mosques have become "the most prominent institutional symbols for Muslims in Canada" (Abu-Laban, 1983, p. 79). As they represent for many Muslim-Canadians a communicational space and a social and communal institution where they not only pray but importantly interact especially in a non-Islamic environment like Canada.

What is even more, Zarqa Nawaz tried to explain that "in Canada, the mosque [as an Islamic institutional symbol] may be the only Muslim space available to women" opposing the traditional view of it as "exclusively male space" in many Islamic countries (Hussain, 2006, p. 125). She started her first documentary "*Me and My Mosque*" – distributed by the National Film Board of Canada (2005)—in which she relates her concerns on the North American Muslim women's space in the mosques. She elaborated more these tensions and relationships in her *Little Mosque* sitcom premiered in the fall of 2007. Still, her top priority is to mend the stereotypes of Muslims and simply shows that first they *can* laugh, and second that they *can make* people laugh:

> Anyone who belongs to a faith community can recognise the stereotypes
> that exist in a mosque because they also exist in their houses of worship.
> So the primary motive was to make it fun and humourous and to get
> people to laugh. Ultimately if it's not engaging and entertaining, people
> won't watch it and we won't get the ratings to get renewed. That,
> ultimately, was our priority.
>
> (Nawaz in an interview with Amanullah, 2007)

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[9] Among the many aspects that attract media coverage in this respect is the portrayal of Muslim women as "suppressed, repressed, oppressed, and depressed because of Islam" (Siddiqui, 2001).

What is more, she went even to problematize her mosque by plotting it to be rented in the town's Anglican Church parish hall resulting in hilarious situations that exemplified the media constructed images of Muslims. For instance, when a contractor visited the church, he was shocked to see Muslims (women in veils, and men in turban) praying. Instantly, he ran outside to call the "Terrorist's Attack Hotline", yet, when he met Reverend *Magee*—the priest of the Anglican Church—he explained that he "saw them bowing just like CNN" accusing the priest that he "rented our parish hall to a bunch of fanatics!" (Episode 1, *Little Mosque On the Prairie*, aired on 9 January 2007.).

Such discourse denotes to a great extent the effects of the media on constructing the imaginary of Muslims for their audience. For that, Nawaz says to *Maclean's Magazine* that: "The Muslim community is dying for a portrayal of Muslims that is more dynamic and more nuanced than the traditional terrorist villain" (Intini, 2006). The stereotype of Muslims and their confirmed connection with terrorism was clearly projected in one of the sitcom scenes when one of the Canadian characters insists that being a Canadian-Muslim contractor doesn't refute a confirmed link to terrorism and underlines that "Osama Bin Laden runs a construction company too!" (Episode 1, *Little Mosque On the Prairie*). Interestingly, the Muslim-Canadians and their connection to Bin Laden was one of the questions fired to Nawaz in one interview: "How much are you paid by Al Qaida to produce your show to try to soften up the Canadian public for an attack? The idea is to reduce our suspicion of these lovely humourous Moslems so they can do their worst" (*The Globe and Mail*, 9 January 2007)[10].

Here, it becomes important to explain that CBC sitcom has created an unusual media attention not only in Canada, but in the global public discourse. Al-Jazeera English for instance praised the cultural and social effects of the sitcom on the Muslim-Canadian immigrants that were portrayed surprisingly in a *positive* manner:

> They're not terrorists, they're not religious freaks. There's nothing odd or
> menacing about the Muslim characters on *Little Mosque on the Prairie* -
> they're just like any other Canadian citizens. . . The show tells universal
> stories about the interactions and relationships between people and familiar

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[10] Nawaz, the "FUNdamentalist", humorously replied to this question by saying: "I don't think Osama is going to be very happy with this show, because I think he'd rather Muslims be fearful of non-Muslims. So, unfortunately, I don't think we'll be getting any funds from his organization" (*The Globe and Mail*, 9 January 2009).

topics about immigrants. It is enlightening. People will come away with an understanding of a misrepresented group.

<div align="right">(Al-Jazeera English, 2 October 2007)</div>

Little Mosque's tides of success reached many places around the world, where audiences requested either to see the sitcom, translated it in their language, or to produce a version of it. In France, the French broadcasting company (*Canal Plus*) signed an agreement with WestWind Pictures—the production company—to distribute *Little Mosque* in France considering it one of the top TV hits resembling *Desperate Housewives*, *Will & Grace*, *Weeds* and *The Simpsons* shows. Similar deals have been signed in Switzerland, Israel, West Bank, Gaza, Finland, and the United Arab Emirates. Recently, FOX announced that they will import *Little Mosque* to the United States (Surette, 10 June 2008). Within Canada, *Radio-Canada* has also agreed to air the Francophone version of the sitcom "*La petite mosquée dans la prairie*".

It is important to underline here that *Little Mosque* is unique attempt that differs from other endeavours in North America such as the Muslim stand-up comedy of Preacher Moss and Azhar Usman and their first Muslim comedy tour in the United States "*Allah Made Me Funny*". Or like "*Aliens in America*" the sitcom produced by CW Network—a joint venture between Warner Bros. Entertainment and CBS Corporation—that premiered around the same time of *Little Mosque*. Philip Bennett, the Managing Editor at the *Washington Post* admitted that with such Muslim presence in the American media,

> Muslims in the US are on the march from being "them" to being "us." Journalism plays a role in transforming "others" into us. This is not necessarily a happy story; it does not mean papering over conflicts or uncomfortable truths. It does mean crossing boundaries -- sometimes on a map, sometimes in your head -- to engage honestly with how we are all influencing each other's lives.

<div align="right">(Bennett, 2008, p. 11)</div>

As assumed in the title, Muslims were *aliens* in America where only one single character –*Rajaa* the Pakistani exchange student—visited the United States. Contrasting that, *Little Mosque* integrated different Muslim characters in the sitcom's plot (a physician, university

professor, student, restaurant owner, government employee, contractor, among others) as part of the social tissue of multiculturalism. Despite the success of *Aliens in America*[11], CW confirmed recently its cancelation of the sitcom's second season in the time that *Little Mosque* reported a top rating[12] that even other established Canadian comedy sitcom did not hit—like the CTV's *Corner Gas* (Macdonald, 2007).

Interestingly, *Little Mosque* venture resulted in some Muslims' appeals to have a similar media production in Europe. Sardar for example wonders why "do our TV executives [in Britain] not realize that Islam on the box has reached the point of diminishing returns?" (2007, p. 28). He asserts that there are more than ethnic sitcoms in Britain that vary from black, Indian, and gay sitcoms, yet, there is no attempt to broadcast any Muslim sitcom. He adds that the British broadcaster is more "obsessed" with Sharia and conservative Muslims to the extent that BBC aired in October 2007 a 3-hours long episode on the reality show *Sharia Street*. He clearly points out that such media focus should be terminated to adopt the "other" perspective: "The goulash fanatics, the sharia schlock, the ex-Islamist, the burqa-clad evangelical have now become banal and boring. It's time to satirise them out of existence. So, bring on the comedians and the sitcoms" (Ibid).[13]

From the foregoing discussion, one can argue that there is a *new* movement in the media in Canada towards the reconstruction of the Muslim imaginary that many scholars

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[11] Bennett asserts that "the US news media has failed to produce sustained coverage of Islam to challenge the easy assumptions, gross generalizations or untested rhetoric that shape perceptions of Muslims" (2008, p. 3).

[12] This doesn't refute the fact that there was some dissatisfaction with *Little Mosque* that came from "within" Canadian Islamic organization. Tareq Fatah, the founder of the Muslim Canadian Congress (MCC) criticized the sitcom believing that it represents "a step backward" (Al-Jazeera English, October 2, 2007).

[13] Zarqa Nawaz was asked a similar question concerning the difference between the Canadian and the European vision on the Muslim visibility and portrayal in the media. She answers in a quote that worth quoting in length: "I think the reason it wasn't made in Europe was because the Muslim experience in Europe has been very different than the Muslim experience in North America. For the most part, the Muslim community has been far more assimilated and has integrated more successfully in North America. The rates of employment and income are much higher and therefore you have a different population which doesn't have a lot of anger on its shoulder. And I think comedy has to come from a good place, a place where someone is fairly well adjusted and happy with her surroundings. Those combinations together, I think, resulted in the show coming out of Canada first" (*The Globe and Mail*, 9 January 2007).

identified in earlier studies. For example, Karim maintains that the image of Islam as "the deadly enemy of the West and the source of terrorism regularly appears in American, British, and Canadian press articles" (2000, p. 80). For that, he advocated the idea of ethnic media that assumingly serve the minority communities in Canada preserving their cultures, rituals, and languages (see Karim 2002). Such position is sound and might be productive; yet, I argue that it continues to draw the distinction between the Canadian society as "we" versus "them", *our* media and *their* media, *our* programming and *their* programming. *Little Mosque* on the contrary has pioneered a new kind of media production that simply portrayed Muslims-Canadian as a part of the whole multi-culture mosaic that can be seen with close-ups, listened to its music, and also laughed at.

Such position is promoting what might be termed to as the diversity in the Canadian air; an idea that has been underlined in the *Canadian multiculturalism Act 1985*, article (*3g*) stating that "promote the understanding and creativity that arise from the interaction between individuals and communities of different origins" (Canada Department of Justice). The question remains as to what would be the practical mechanism to apply such utopian ideals? The Public broadcast might be one solution, yet, not everyone agrees on this position.

The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation for the Public Interest?

As public service broadcasting is a key component in establishing and enforcing the democratic dialogue in society. However, others believe that Canada *does not* need a public broadcaster, the question remains to what degree can a public broadcast acts as a mean of social inclusion of Muslims as one group in the Canadian visible minorities?

Raboy and Taras pinpoint in their 2007 *On life support: The CBC and the future of public broadcasting in Canada* a crucial albeit central problematic in the future premise of the Canadian broadcasting system. Namely, the challenges that surround the Canadian broadcasting system in the era of globalized cultural productions and its effective dissemination via the different media technologies (such as the internet, satellites, etc.). Raboy and Taras explain that given the Canadian multi-cultural, multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, and multi-tastes in society, Canadians received broadcasting signals that vary from worldwide places, to our southern borders American top tempting programming.

Still, it becomes critical to question the time when such multiple choices can be produced and "made in Canada"? The authors squarely maintain that while it is predominantly important for Canadians to receive such cultural production via non-Canadian carries as part of their unquestionable rights, still, it is equally important that such rights will not be "at the expense of the country's need to communicate *with itself* to keep its own channels of communication open and available" (2007, p. 85, *emphasis added*).

It is indeed a heated debate. Critics advocated the distinction between the use of public broadcaster on the one hand, and what "*it is in itself*" on the other (Attallah, 2008, p. 11, *emphasis in original*). Particularly, this opinion strongly maintains that democracy has been and will be part of our world whenever we have and/or could provide open channels of debate, corresponding regulative bodies, and dynamic public sphere among others apparatus. It doesn't necessarily *require* a broadcasting system to practice such dynamics. Furthermore, broadcasting—particularly television broadcasting—proved to manipulate its audience mostly in relation to politics, political images, and political process. It transformed politicians to "actors" turning political debates into "entertainment". For that, it has been strongly stated that although it is a "noble argument" to view the "public broadcasting [as capable of airing] unconventional, controversial, or challenging materials. . . [,] can speak for those who are disenfranchised, marginalized, or ignored by private broadcasting . . . [and that can] treat viewers as citizens rather than as consumers . . . [yet, such argument is] unfortunately . . [is] . . . inaccurate" (Ibid, p. 12).

Despite how sound the previous position is to some extent, it is however not practical and does not offer a solid basis for the marginalized and minority citizens who have the absolute civil rights to self-representation of their cultural production in a *Canadian* broadcast as part of the Canadian mosaic. Besides, alternative private and commercial broadcasting proved, at least historically, to be driven principally and solely by a consumerism approach. The work of Robert Babe argued that the Canadian political discourse maintain a solid assumption that it is possible to preserve "sovereignty" by means of communications that primarily served to grant credence to a group of ideological myths widespread as of 1960s in Canada. An important one, is the myth of the *Market* which was clear in the process of governmental privatization movement, deregulation, revoking social programs arguing that these are not necessary or important, and especially the notion that the "market will allocate resources in the best of all

possible ways" (Babe, 1995, pp.75-80). To that extent, this situation justifies the strong opposition from many public interests advocates for the enhancement of a Canadian public broadcasting system to act as the "vital mirror and exhibitor of national cultures" (Raboy & Taras, 2007, p. 84). What is more, that these positions proved that during the last few years, private broadcasters have "largely failed to produce programs that link people to their national experience and that address their needs as citizens" (Ibid). Still, the question remains whether it is fair to accuse CBC as the public broadcasting that is "distrustful of public taste . . . [adopting a] . . . paternalistic pattern" (Attallah, 2008, p. 13)?

Drawing from these positions, I am arguing quite the opposite; CBC holds an absolute duty to represent all Canadian public with their ethnic and religious backgrounds. In fact, public broadcast has successfully proved some previous important experiences trough hosting religious programs at *Vision Television* (the multi-faith programming channel); *OMNI1* and *OMNIII* TV; the *Aboriginal People's Television Network* (APTN); *Fairchild* (for Cantonese and Mandarin), *Telelatino* (for Italian and Spanish); *CHIN* radio that airs more than 30 languages, among others. I have argued elsewhere that such practice is an absolute enforcement of both the *Canadian Multiculturalism Act* of 1989 and the advocacy of the right of *other cultures* to communicate in the prime public airtime Canada (Dakroury, 2006; and Dakroury 2008). In this manner, the Western world has reassessed its view on the role of public broadcasting believing in its key role in the civil engagement in the social democracies as John Ralston Saul puts it

> Everybody who is smart in bureaucracies and government around the Western world now knows that public broadcasting is one of the most important remaining levers that a nation state has to *communicate with itself.*
>
> (as cited in Taras, 2008, p. 6, *emphasis added*)

Marc Raboy in his *Missed Opportunities* (1990) maintains that the Canadian broadcasting experienced many conflictual and competitive forces since its early days. Yet, it has proved that is "one of the privileged arenas of struggle" (p. xii) in such battles. Since its creation in the mid-1930s, CBC struggled with competing forces, ideas, and groups. What is important to pinpoint here is that the basic deriving force to initiate and create CBC is the concept of equal opportunity for accessing the Canadian airwaves. Cook and Ruggles

explain that the concept of balance was initially launched by the Aird Royal Commission to "prevent abusive and one-sided comment on religious and political matters" both in forms and programming content (1992, pp. 1-2).

Furthermore, it is true that the CBC has recently lost more than one battles (such as the rights of the broadcast of Vancouver 2010 games to CTV for example), yet, the CBC proved an excellence in more than one arena until now. For instance the children programming, production of documentaries, coverage of details of public happening in society, and covering governmental debates and ceremonies that scholars state that such media items are not tempting enough to be carried by the private broadcasts, Taras confirms that "the new goal of **public broadcasting** is to build social capital by 'bridging', 'bonding,' and 'witnessing,' but most of all by treating audience members as citizens rather than as consumers" (2008, p. 6, *emphasis in original*).

Even outside Canada, studies concluded that broadcasting systems have accepted the need to represent minority cultures in their media outlets (such as the BBC) and hence, they have developed new digital radio and television stations that dedicated their programming exclusively to black and Asian audiences. Similarly in the United States, Arabs, Indians, among others minority groups can receive satellite programming on their speciality channels receives. Yet, what about smaller minority groups who cannot afford paying such speciality channels over either dish receivers or over the internet? Some scholars advocated the view that such programming are not exclusively intended to the target audience only, rather for their fellow members of the same society so they get to know them and their cultures more closely:

> As the cost to address smaller target audiences comes within reach, it is possible for people to tune out the global media and tune in media that address only our particular ethnic, religious, political, linguistic, and racial interests. So we stop learning about others and focus only on ourselves and those who like us, allowing us more opportunity to feed our prejudices and ignorance.
>
> (Ogan, 2002, p. 222)

For that, it become very important to highlight that the attempt of the CBC to air a prime-time sitcom discussing and portraying Canadian Muslims is a move that should be applauded for on many fronts. Among them as Raboy and Taras argue, that the Canadian

"public expectations of the CBC run high"; that the CBC as the Canadian broadcasting carrier "is meant to be all things to all Canadians" (2007, p. 85). Indeed, CBC is "an innovator", yet, two problems associate with its attempts. The first related to the regulations where it is not up to the CBC to decide rather to the CRTC as its regulator which is arguably "would like it [CBC] to focus on conventional services" (Ibid). The second is the audience changing taste and the need to build entertaining albeit serious issues in the Canadian society that require huge budget and production houses.

Reconstruction of Existing Frames: What Is The Possibility?

The foregoing discussion of *Little Mosque* being produced, sponsored, and aired in *prime time* Canadian national public broadcast contradicts to a great extent the established scholarship on media representation of Islam and Muslim in Canada. For instance, Karim argues that mainstream "cultural workers" in the west (i.e. writers, film-makers, producers.etc) are producing images that *conform* to the "dominant stereotypes" of Muslims and Islam. Even when an alternative narrative appears, it tends usually as Karim adds to be placed in the "back pages" (2000, pp. 111- 117). Similarly, Jiwani asserts that while mainstream media channels and their efficacy in achieving what is hoped in media practices "is highly debatable", she nonetheless proposes to depend on alternative media channels and considers such action as "an urgent matter" (2006, p. 60). Jiwani confirms however that Canadian regulatory bodies (such as the CRTC, the CAB, and other media advocacies) "support and uphold the principles of objectivity, balance, and impartiality in media organization" (2006, pp. 60-61).

In this chapter, I argued that CBC (as one of the mainstream cultural industries in Canada) is countering such interpretations through airing an unconventional portrayal of Muslims—as non terrorists per se—in the prime time public service broadcast. An initiative that supports greatly public service advocates who call for a Canadian *self-communication*, for a Canadian production "from within" the society especially for the minority groups under or misrepresented in the media. In fact, Nawaz confirms this argument by pinpointing that in Canada:

You know, we were one step removed from 9/11 so that rawness wasn't there in the country. The networks were more willing to take a chance on a

subject like this. Also, the network here is the CBC (the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation), which is a publically owned and funded television station. It's a not-for-profit station so they don't have to worry about profit-making as much as representing the diversity and the regionality of the country.

<div align="right">(The Globe and Mail, 9 January 2007)</div>

In other words, one can see the main challenge for such an effort to continue is our age of giant media conglomeration and private media which merely concerned with their consumerstic vision of media. An idea that strongly diminishes hopes for changing the status-quo. Yet, with the success that CBC *Little Mosque* gained in less than two years, and the extent private media (in and outside Canada) were interested to air this sitcom certainly shows some hopes favouring the public interest debate. It is true that in our post September 11 society, it is difficult to change all constructed stereotypes of Muslims as "the militant martyr or suicide bomber . . . [even] the veiled woman . . . depicted as both oppressed by and subjugated under Islam" (Jiwani, 2006, pp. 198-199). Yet, alternative media frames can possibly reconstruct such images and stereotypes if 1) aired in prime time to gain the high viewership; 2) sponsored by a public broadcaster to gain the credibility of sources; and 3) framed in a attractive genre of writings to grasp wide audience attention. Such factors were the credentials for Little Mosque's success; after all, "laughing is a human nature, not a cultural phenomenon" and by instinct, Muslims are "allowed to laugh" (as cited in Dakroury 2008).

This program has shown that a public broadcast can be a means of "inclusion" by disseminating and facilitating the enhancement of public/community communicational discussion. Further, the social dialogue pioneered by this new CBC sitcom can be seen as boosting social networks, creating a community that is not merely bound by space or geographical location, but rather is connected through an aware public broadcaster. [i] Contradicting van Dijk's paradigm of representation which argues that media outlets have a significant role in "self-serving positive- self-presentation and negative other-presentation."[ii] By analyzing the first eight episodes of *Little Mosque*, we can see that the characters are an extreme representation of different social, cultural, and intellectual

elements in Canadian society which range through positive, to neutral, to negative behaviors of Muslim-Canadians. On the other hand, it also accurately represents the different intellectual and religious Muslim positions. I have identified five different positions in this show: Reformist, traditional, moderate, conservative, and non-practitioners, a dissection that refutes the claims that CBC has drawn a "false picture" of the Muslim community.[iii]

For instance, the reformist in the mosque is the young "Imam", who is born, raised and educated in Canada. He builds a friendly relationship with the Anglican priest in whose church the mosque is located. Although different in religion, they go out for movie, discuss the same controversial issues (such as gay marriage in episode 6), and help each other when it comes to crisis to one or the other's group or community. We can identify a traditional position in the character of Fatimah, the restaurant owner who is a widow from Africa. She believes that Islam must following "tradition" and regards it as an "imported" religion from Saudi-Arabia where the Muslim Holy places exist. Rayanne, on the other hand, is a clear moderate practitioner and feminist Muslim; she represents the second generation Muslim-Canadian who is following the spirit of Islam while enjoying multicultural Canadian society. Of course, Baber, the "extremist" is also the funniest character in the show; he is somewhat of a parody, zealously adhering to the tenets of Islam in his clothes, ideas, and behavior. Finally, a representation of "non-practicing" Muslims can be seen in Yasser and his wife Sarah who very occasionally practice Muslim rituals, yet are still strongly affiliated with the Muslim community.

This show accurately portrays small-town Canada: a coffee shop where members of the community have their coffee and bagels while reading the morning newspapers, and listen to the morning talk show on the radio; a working scene in the mayor's office or the town's medical clinic; a community meeting in someone's house; day-to-day scenes where families discuss and argue their lives; and finally, scenes of worship in the mosque or the church. Thus *Little Mosque* truly portraying how Muslims live and work in Canada. In the show, Muslims are seen as the doctor, the waitress, the lawyer, the town public relations officer, the local contractor, and even the university professor (Baber's character who is constantly criticizing the hegemony of the West through a critique of *Desperate Housewives* and *Canadian Idol* and a call to smash all idols). These characters are not portrayed in a less flattering light than the non-Muslim characters, i.e., the radio journalist, the mayor, the priest, etc. In fact, often quite the opposite is true as the

Muslims face the town's lack of information about their culture.The show has focused also on the Muslim community's inherent mosaic characteristic, through representing different, races, ethnic background, and language. Thus, Fatimah comes from Nigeria, Baber from Pakistan, Yasser from Lebanon, and Rayanne, Laila, and Ammar are the second generation born in Canada and raised as Muslim-Canadians.

Further, for a program produced in the West, it has clearly shown the misconceptions that currently surround Islam and Muslims in a very natural and funny way. For example, putting the words "Allah's plan," "suicide," and "bomb" in the mouth of the young Imam in the airport resulted by him being arrested in the first episode. In reality, this might well happen anywhere in the world, not just Canada. Nevertheless, Islam and the Orient, despite the positive experience shown by the CBC, remains an exotic mystery to many in Canada. In episode 1, the mayor when attending the *Iftar* was surprised to find cucumber sandwiches; she instantly reacts by saying "I thought that Ramadan meals are more...exotic." Edward Said and his *Orientalism* showed that "Islam *has* been fundamentally misrepresented in the west -- the real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they *are* representations, are embedded first in the language and then in the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer." [iv]

CBC's *little Mosque* has shown that Muslims might be the "other" in many ways to non-Muslim Canadians. They wear head-scarves, they are not allowed to date, they fast a whole day for a full month. Yet, the program has genuinely interpreted the voices of many Muslim-Canadians who want to maintain their religion and its rituals but at the same time also want to live in an integrated fashion within their larger Canadian communities by showing a "Canadian" solution in each instance. Wearing the head-scarf (*hijab*) didn't interfere with Rayaane's choosing to become a doctor, nor is fasting a big deal since by the end of the day the whole community, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, are eating together. "Halal-loween" was the *Little Mosque's* interpretation of the kids' favorite festival, even if they were dressed up as "terrorists!" It is just the Canadian multi-cultural lifestyle. [v]

It is correct to argue that the right to communicate as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in the 1940s interpreted the dominant view of media at that time as "one-way" media without "interference" or "frontiers." Yet, today, as the multicultural Canadian experience shows, that right consists of more than the media

simply sending information; without two-way communication, this becomes an exclusionary right that merges differences and creates disrespect of the "other," whomever that might happen to be.

Thus, two important conclusions can be drawn from the CBC's airing of *Little Mosque*: firstly, it is fair to argue that the concept of the right to communicate born 59 years ago has its reflection to the current practices of media, especially the right of visible minorities to voice their language, culture, rituals, and opinions in the publicly owned media, as is the case in Canada. A recent poll conducted in 23 western countries showed that Canadians are the most accepting nations of the "other," especially Muslims. According to this poll, only 6.5 per cent said they would not like to live beside a Muslim neighbor, a result confirming what this CBC sitcom tried to do, i.e., fostering tolerance and promoting different communicative patterns in society.[vi] Secondly, the CBC airing of *Little Mosque* in prime time has significantly represented minorities' cultural and social communicative patterns by breaking new ground in the North American mainstream media.

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[i] See Price, 2001, The 2001 Graham Spry Memorial Lecture, In the 2001 Spry Memorial lecture, Monroe Price says, "If only the public sphere could be enhanced, if only there were more understanding of the role of public service broadcasting in enriching national identity, if these margins could be improved, societies would cohere and citizen participation be enhanced." available at: <http://www.fas.umontreal.ca/COM/spry/spry-e.html> (25 March 2007).

[ii] See van Dijk, p. 317.

[iii] See Fatah and Hassan, Mon, February 12, 2007, *Toronto Sun* available at: < SUN http://www.torontosun.com/Comment/2007/02/12/3596198-sun.html> (25 March 2007).

[iv] See Said, 1979, p. 272.

[v] As the program's creator, Zarqa Nawaz says in an interview in the Maclean's magazine in December 11, 206: "The Muslim community is dying for a portrayal of Muslims that is more dynamic and more nuanced than the traditional terrorist villain."

[vi] See, Boswell, *The National Post*, 8 February 2007. Available at: <http://www.canada.com/nationalpost/news/story.html?id=8f3f1110-fc7c-488c-b023-c55b12e7010f>