

Which perspective does *Homeland* take in this debate? – An Imaginary Transcript

The following section shows an imaginary transcript of a discussion we both had on where we would position *Homeland* in terms of anti-Arab racism, within the discussion; *Zero Dark Thirty* also plays a minor role.

Eileen: “Where would you position *Homeland* with regard to ‘anti-Arab racism’?”

Judith: “I think *Homeland* is Islamophobic, to use the ‘old’ term. But there are also many scenes in which an anti-Arab attitude is being transmitted to the viewer, often related to questions of religion paired with outer appearances.”

Eileen: “Could you please specify what you mean?”

Judith: “Sure, but first I’d like to know about your opinion on the topic, so that I can try to make my points more clear to you.”

Eileen: “To me it seems to be challenging the prejudices that the viewers have about Islam and Muslims in general.”

Judith: “But how is that possible? Ultimately, every male Muslim appearing in the series turns out to be a bad guy.”

Eileen: “I would rather argue *Homeland* challenges the stereotypes. Since its broadcast from season one onwards, it got a lot of criticism from both sides – so to say being racist, Islamophobic and pro war on terror. But if we take a closer look, we can actually see that it does more than simply categorizing it into black vs. white, American vs. Arabian, good vs. bad portrayal. In fact, to me it is just the opposite. The viewers are forced to rethink stereotypes and that is what makes the show challenging. It would be too easy and somehow dangerous if the viewer accepts what he or she sees without further consideration, taking it as it is while not trying to get to the bottom of *Homeland*. To disprove what some of the *Homeland* reviewers criticize, I will give you one example. But first you have to answer this question: Would you say that every Muslim or Arab in the show is depicted as a terrorist?”

Judith: “Yes, I think that this is the case.”

Eileen: “Well, what about Danny Galvez? He is a Lebanese Muslim and works for the CIA and is suspected of helping Abu Nazir but he is never mentioned in any of the critiques that claim *Homeland* is Islamophobic.” (Rosenberg 2012)

Judith: “Okay, so there is one Muslim that does not fit into the cluster, which I do not find convincing. His attractiveness and ‘baby-face’ to me already seem to imply to the

viewers that he does not pose a threat to anyone. His appearance conveys the audience of the fact that he is not a dangerous character or villain. He does not wear a beard, an Islamic headscarf or turban. Furthermore, the suspicion occurs in the second season. So the first impression of the series that I had is somewhat clinging to my mind. I think we should also not forget that we only began to suspect Brody having something to do with terrorists when we learned that he has converted to the Muslim faith. Of course, I understand that this means thinking stereotypically about terrorists. The whole misunderstanding about the people who conduct terrorist attacks and their connection with Islam often lets people connect the dots wrongly, so that they ultimately suspect all Muslims to be terrorists. But it is a very frequent phenomenon and in the series this narrow way of thinking is enforced anew when the viewers are confronted with a praying Brody, uttering phrases that sound very unfamiliar to a large part of the viewers. In my opinion, anti-Arab racism is therefore even being fuelled by the way that the show presents its characters.”

Eileen: “I get your point but I wouldn’t judge Galvez based only on his appearance or looks. In my opinion I think a strong proof for the show being non-Islamophobic is Brody’s incentive to conduct Abu Nazir’s task of the terror attack. If one looks closely, one can promptly notice that Brody does not want to attack innocent citizens but is rather driven by personal reasons instead of political ones, which is normally the base of the terrorist attack. We should also keep in mind that he knows he is going to pay a price for it in terms of his life, his family’s life and other people involved. His one and only motive is Issah, who is Nazir’s young son to whom Brody had an intense connection which both established during the time Brody was teaching him English. Brody was a witness of Issah’s death when he was killed by a drone which had been assigned by Vice President Walden. So in conclusion, Brody does not do it because of Allah, the Islam or political reasons and maybe not even because of Abu Nazir if he had not given him the order. Possibly, he would have also done it out of just personal reasons. That’s why I wouldn’t say it emphasizes Islamophobia. Furthermore, I would also argue that the state of exception as we see it can be seen as a personal state of exception within Brody’s way of thinking since he is acting in that way because of Issah.”

Judith: “What about the character of Abu Nazir then? Although he does not appear that often in the first season of *Homeland*, he constantly poses a threat to US security, operating from the background. It is him who pulls all the strings and uses his power to

have his supporters carry out his dirty work. His motivation is strongly connected to Islam, being part of the terrorist network Al-Qaida.”

Eileen: “I can see where you are coming from. Abu Nazir is the biggest enemy and threat in the show for the viewer, but I would actually say this is in a constant shift between him and Brody since they are playing into each other hands. Brody can change into the new biggest threat in seconds. Since the show depicts the war on terror in the Middle East, it is just ‘normal’ that there is a need for the portrayal of Middle Eastern terrorists, namely Muslims and Arabs. But you should keep in mind that there are even more non-Muslim and non-Arab so to say ‘terrorists’ or culprits featured in *Homeland*, such as Vice President Walden or his crony CIA counter-terrorism director David Estes (Rosenberg 2012). So in conclusion, the show also casts the U.S. government representatives in a negative light and the viewer might be having hard times feeling sympathy for them as well. When the drone attack occurs, in my opinion, the show undergoes a dramatic change. Suddenly out of the blue, the good American guys become the bad corrupt men (Aucoin 2013). And this blending and blurring between good vs. bad, black vs. white and American vs. Muslim goes on in every episode that follows. And that is the reason why I think it challenges stereotypes, and by means of American stereotypes.”

Judith: “I get your point but unfortunately there is still more to criticize in terms of *Homeland* transmitting a wrong impression of the Muslim community to its viewers. Not only are the people strengthened in their belief to think of Muslims as potential terrorists, stereotypes are reinforced for example by Jessica, arguing with Brody about his new faith in Islam, complaining that he believes in a religion that would not approve of their daughter being in contact with boys, a community that would ultimately assassinate her for it. When she throws the Quran on the floor and Brody buries it in the garden, this is another incident that does not represent current Islam practices, but lets the viewers think of the religion as being very unreasonable, maybe even appearing absurd.

Other misrepresentations of the Muslim world appear in the depiction of their way of living. Carrie’s visit of Beirut, which was actually filmed in Tel Aviv, might appear similar to “Hezbollah ghettos”, which is a theory proposed by Ahmad in an article for *TheProgressive*. He also states that Carrie’s proposition of meeting in Hamra Street, which is one of Beirut’s most westernized areas in the city, is completely misrepresented in the series. It is shown as a dangerous place where Carrie needs to hide behind her headscarf (Ahmad 2012). But the misleading representation of Muslim communities

seems to be a problem in many geopolitical dramas, now drawing a parallel to the text by Melley. Having watched *Zero Dark Thirty*, there are also many incidents that have turned out to be misleading for its viewers after having conducted intensive research on the topic. In the opening of the film, it claims that it is based in true events and therefore allows its viewers to expect true-to-life depictions of the actual hunt for Bin Laden. The difficulty of the geopolitical melodrama presented to 'uneducated' viewers is always dangerous with regard to their trust in media representations of 'true' events. There is, for example, a scene in which the local population of Pakistan uncannily resembles a zombie invasion. The Pakistanis coming towards a heavily-armed US soldier are protesting against the foreign intervention trying to find out what is going on there. Strangely, the only thing keeping them away from the place where the US operation takes place are not the warnings that the Navy Seal member utters in Urdu, but the ones in English. But this is not the only misrepresentation of Pakistanis: The language usage seems to be a highly problematic topic within language experts' evaluations of the film by Kathryn Bigelow (Azeb 2013). Why is there so much misinformation in a film that claims to be an account of the real events? Is this not a huge problem for the whole branch of geopolitical melodramas? Why do they make such fundamental mistakes in their representations of cultures mostly unknown to American viewers and why do they make the viewers believe that it happens in the same way as they saw it on TV or in the cinema? I think that this is highly problematic when it comes to uneducated viewers."

Eileen: "I do understand your arguments and have to admit that I also think it is ambiguous, and in a certain way dangerous to twist the fact in such highly sensitive topics such as politics and religion. Uneducated viewers like you mentioned earlier, can easily take the movie or series for granted and believe this is reality. In my opinion, we both showed our point of views and somehow recognize the two attitudes we have when it comes to *Homeland*. I think we cannot pigeon-hole the show into one strict category. In other words, *Homeland* questions Islamophobia while it also shows 'stereotypical' characters as well as that it calls into question the security state and the state of exception. Through showing scenes such as the drone attack where innocent people got killed, the show gives rise to discussions about moral principles which is in my opinion a great way to get people to rethink certain patterns, politics and their own mindset about the topic, which is still highly relevant nowadays as we will see in the next section. But still it is worth mentioning that the show portrays details about the Islamic culture and religion incorrectly: names are pronounced badly, rituals are

represented incorrectly (e.g. Brody buried the Quran after it falls on the floor in season 2 episode 1) as well as everyday life and reality in the Middle East is sometimes shown as easy and nice when it is definitely not the case. This wrong depiction is nothing new in Hollywood movies. But in the end, what matters most is if faith is shown in a good manner and this is, for me personally, the case with *Homeland*. The upside is also that there is always room for improvement and change and that is the reason why we discuss topics such as this or have seminars about it.”

Judith: “Yes, you are right. There are certain positive aspects, for example, the fact that Muslim faith in the case of Brody is not only portrayed as being dangerous, but I think it is highly problematic that the series gets some of the practices wrong. What *Homeland* definitely achieves is criticizing political decisions and US American security practices. Seeing fictional characters operating inside the CIA is something that the viewer gets to see in many other TV series, but there they are mostly concerned with solving crimes. The focus is not on terrorism and protection of the US American population from outside threats as shown in *Homeland*, only for the exception of *24*. Therefore, the series with Carrie and Brody as protagonists is important for the viewers to help them imagine how these operations that are mostly being carried out secretly, could be happening in real life. Let us conclude that *Homeland* does get its audience to think critically about certain aspects such as US politics but should definitely improve by transmitting more true-to-life depictions of foreign countries and Islam practices, so as to provide its viewers with the power to distinguish between stereotypical falsehood and real life facts.”

Works Cited for this Dialogue:

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