

# “Surviving” to Thriving: The Muslim Women On-Screen Test

Geena Davis Institute  on Gender in Media  
*If she can see it, she can be it.™*

 MUSLIM CASTING

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# About Us

## Muslim Casting

Creating spaces, adding new faces, MC is a casting company established in 2021 to increase visibility of Muslim talent in the TV/film and commercial industries. MC casts and consults alongside filmmakers, producers and more industry professionals to craft inclusive and authentic stories. They believe narrative change occurs through tangible actions—bringing storytellers and story conveyors together is just one of those actions. They maintain a database of several hundred Muslim talent in the arts.

See more at [muslimamericancasting.com](https://muslimamericancasting.com).

## Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media

Founded in 2004 by Academy Award Winning Actor Geena Davis, the Institute is the only global research-based organization working collaboratively within the entertainment industry to create gender balance, foster inclusion and reduce negative stereotyping in family entertainment media.

See more at [seejane.org](https://seejane.org).

## Pillars Fund

Amplifying the leadership, narratives, and talents of Muslims in the United States. They invest in community-focused initiatives, push back against harmful narratives, uplift Muslim stories, and give collectively to generate resources within Muslim communities for Muslim communities. They have also compiled a Muslim Artist Database.

See more at [PillarsFund.org](https://PillarsFund.org).

## Media Partners



# Introduction

Islamophobia is a significant social problem in the United States, and anti-Muslim prejudice and discrimination has increased over the last several decades.<sup>1</sup> Muslim women of color experience Islamophobia at the intersection of faith, gender, and race, which presents several forms of oppression.<sup>2</sup> Although there are numerous factors that contribute to this state of affairs, several studies over the past twenty years identify media as an institution implicated in normalizing, circulating, and upholding anti-Muslim prejudice, and harmful stereotypes about Muslim women, in particular.<sup>3</sup>

Although public opinion polls show that the vast majority (78%) of Americans believe that Muslims face discrimination in U.S. society<sup>4</sup>, their feelings toward Muslims are “cold” according to feeling thermometers that measure perceptions<sup>5</sup>, and these negative feelings towards Muslims in the U.S. are likely informed by media portrayals, according to academic studies.<sup>6</sup> As media representations have real world impact, it is therefore critical to analyze both the quantity and quality of Muslim women portrayed in U.S. popular media. One recent study of the state of Muslims on-screen today found that more than three-quarters (76.4%) of all Muslim characters were men.<sup>7</sup> But beyond the numerical underrepresentation of Muslim women in popular media, it is important to identify the quality of their portrayal. In this manner, a representation test to guide an assessment is useful.

# Assessing Inclusion with Representation Tests

The Bechdel-Wallace Test, one of the more well-known representation tests, is based on a 1985 comic strip that states to pass the test a film must have at least two women who speak to each other about something other than a man.<sup>8</sup> This test set a new standard for the portrayal of women and inspired other tests such as the Vito Russo Test and the Duvernay Test, which established baselines for other marginalized communities on-screen, such as the LGBTQIA+ community and Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC), respectively. Two prominent tests have been developed to evaluate Muslim representation on-screen. The Riz Test, named after Oscar-nominated actor Riz Ahmed, was launched in 2018 in the UK and the other, the Obeidi-Alsultany Test, was developed in the U.S. in 2020. Both of these tests have set new industry standards and provided a foundation for more nuanced storytelling, leading us to take a harder look at how women, specifically Muslim women, have been portrayed.<sup>9</sup> Creating a representation test centered on Muslim women will allow for their unique lived experiences to be highlighted in a media landscape where they are often relegated to victim roles merely “surviving” their circumstances or background roles that serve other’s storylines.

# Portrayals of Muslims, and Muslim Women On-Screen

Some tired tropes and stereotypes are still used in the media today, especially in stories about Muslims or Muslim-majority countries. For instance, existing research suggests that media often pit Western values against Islam, with Muslims shown as enemies instead of partners, and as a separate community instead of integrated with other communities.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, associations between Muslims and “foreignness” is a common plot. In popular media, “foreignness” is conveyed by showing Muslims primarily in historical settings, or as only speaking Arabic, and most prominently in their religious clothing.<sup>11</sup> Another common portrayal of Muslims in popular media is as dangerous immigrants.<sup>12</sup> This coincides with the U.S. “war on terror,” and perpetuates myths about Muslims as a threat to American security, culture, and democracy.<sup>13</sup> While these stereotypes and tropes about Muslims affect men and women, there are additional portrayals unique to Muslim women that stand out.

On screen, Muslim women are portrayed in a limited number of ways. One prominent historical depiction of Muslim women is as exotic, highly sexualized, and promiscuous, often portraying a wife, belly dancer, or an enslaved sex worker.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, another common depiction of Muslim women is as an obedient, submissive, and/or silent wife to an oppressive Muslim man.<sup>15</sup> This power imbalance portrays Muslims as regressive and out-of-touch with modern society. Reinforcing the common stereotype that Muslim women are restricted by a patriarchal community or their families, storytellers continue to produce content that shows Muslim women as oppressed and intolerant.<sup>16</sup> Muslim women were also found to be compared to women from Western societies, which not only pits Muslim women against non-Muslim women, but also Western ideas against those from the East.<sup>17</sup> Finally, in these stories of oppression, we see Muslim women highly victimized. This further implies that Muslim women are in need of rescue, whether that be by a white man<sup>18</sup> or a feminist girlfriend.

## Overused Tropes of Muslim Women On-Screen

Below are additional problematic storylines that embody common, overused tropes in entertainment media to depict Muslim women and limit the potential by which they are viewed. Muslim Women are rarely portrayed outside of these contexts. As a result, these stories are generalized over an entire community of 1.9 Billion Muslims and influence attitudes, policies, and in some cases have dire consequences on these communities.<sup>19</sup>

- The Exotic and Sexualized Woman. A Muslim woman who is shown as “exotic,” seductive, and mysterious. Usually a minor character.
- The Woman Who Needs Saving. A Muslim woman who needs to be physically rescued from a dangerous situation or mentally rescued from an oppressive or “backward” religion or ideology.
- The Victim. A Muslim woman whose life is extremely difficult due to being a survivor of domestic violence/sexual assault, a refugee, or victim of terrorism or war.
- The White Savior and the Runaway. A young, attractive, poor Muslim woman falls in love with a progressive tender-hearted white man, but her intolerant parents keep them apart. However, she is a rebel at heart and runs away, throwing her faith, family, and hijab away.
- The Anachronistic Muslim Woman. Muslim women appear in an episode/film that takes place in a historical era or time that reinforces that they are seen as an “other,” “backward,” and/or “out of touch with modern society.” These portrayals present Muslim women as members of outdated and nostalgic societies.
- The Aspiring Wife. A Muslim woman who is solely focused on finding a husband and being the perfect wife and mother.
- Good Muslim vs. Bad Muslim Woman. The patriotic hijab-wearing Muslim woman in a law enforcement capacity versus the terrorists.

Depictions of Muslim women in popular media also largely fail to reflect their intersectional identities. For example, Muslims comprise the most racially diverse religious community in the United States, with over a quarter identifying as Black or African American, about a quarter identifying as East Asian, 19% as White, 14% as Arab or Middle Eastern, 8% as Hispanic or Latinx, and 2% as Native American.<sup>20</sup> Despite this reality, in a study of films from four countries, 66.7% of Muslim characters on-screen were Middle Eastern or Arab.<sup>21</sup> Additionally, Muslim women possess other identities – they are people with disabilities, identify as LGBTQIA+, practice their religion in various ways (e.g. not all Muslim women wear hijabs), and are of diverse body types, and ages. However, this diversity and plurality of identities that Muslim women bring to the table are underexplored, particularly in U.S. popular media.

Given the diversity of experiences that Muslim women live, it is important for storytellers to accurately portray the ways in which they exist within their various communities in the United States and abroad. With this in mind, we have created the first representation test of its kind to look deeply at the quality of representation of Muslim women on-screen.

# Muslim Women On-Screen Test

This test is a guide for film industry professionals and film enthusiasts to test depictions of Muslim women in TV episodes/series or film

**DIRECTIONS:** To evaluate this film, episode, or series on its representation of Muslim women on screen, follow these 5 Steps:

- STEP 1: Record the title.
- STEP 2: Identify if the film includes a Muslim character or storyline and check if it also includes a prominent Muslim woman character.
- STEP 3: Evaluate **Harmful Portrayals** of Muslim women on screen.
- STEP 4: Evaluate the **Nuanced Portrayals** of Muslim women on screen.
- STEP 5: Subtract the number of Harmful Portrayals from the number of Nuanced Portrayals. The raw score corresponds to a letter grade in the key listed below.

## STEP 1

**What TV Series, Episode, or Film are you rating?**

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## STEP 2

**Identify if the film includes a Muslim character or storyline and check if it also includes one or more prominent Muslim women characters.**

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- A Muslim woman character, identified by verbal or non-verbal cues;<sup>22</sup>
- Who is shown prominently on screen.

### STEP 3

## Harmful Portrayals

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Select all that apply - Does the show or film portray a Muslim woman that is:

- Oppressed.** A Muslim woman is shown as oppressed by, subservient, and/or obedient to a man.
- Rejects Identity.** A Muslim woman who is shown to simply reject her identity or religion as her **only** storyline.
- Monolithic.** A Muslim woman is shown only being from one race, ethnic group, sect, geographic region of the world, or hijab style (e.g. Muslim women are only Middle Eastern or Arab). Muslim women are usually shown as monolithic, despite the diversity of Muslim women's realities.
- "Othered."** A Muslim woman is depicted as "other," or "foreign," from non-Muslim characters around her. Common devices for showing Muslim women as "othered" are language barriers (e.g. speaks with a strong accent or uses broken English as device for "foreignness") and customs that are shown as unnatural or strange.
- Objectified.** A Muslim woman is used as either a mysterious, hypersexualized or virginal reward/goal for a man or other entity in the episode/film.
- Primitive.** A Muslim woman is shown as being primitive, backward, or otherwise out of touch with modern society (e.g. lacking modern technology, wearing outdated clothes, intolerant of other's ideas, Muslims only being placed in historic times or portrayed as barbaric).
- Connected to Terrorism.** Storylines that connect Muslim women to terrorism are harmful and perpetuate false and dangerous stereotypes.

**TOTAL # OF HARMFUL PORTRAYALS:** \_\_\_\_\_

## STEP 4

### Nuanced Portrayals

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Select all that apply - Does the show or film portray a Muslim woman that is:

- Lead Role.** A Muslim woman is portrayed as the lead or co-lead of the film/episode (e.g. the main plot revolves around her character).
- Varying Approaches to Muslim Identity.** A Muslim woman whose identity or storyline is not defined solely by her relationship to Islam (i.e. total rejection or total acceptance). Instead, her character is allowed space to explore and accept herself for who she is. If she chooses, she could own her identity and traditions proudly (e.g. chooses to keep her hijab on, embraces Muslim traditions), instead of always portrayed as in opposition. And if she chooses to question parts of herself, it is not done to further a non-Muslim person's storyline.
- Intersectionality of Islam.** The intersectionality of Muslim women is shown (e.g. Black Muslim women, disabled Muslim women, queer Muslim women, Non-hijabi Muslim woman, Uyghur Muslim women, etc.).
- Integral to Community.** A Muslim woman is shown as an integral part of her residential community, not being separated by the fact that she is Muslim (e.g. showing that a Muslim woman can exist as both Muslim and American, she belongs to both equally).
- Leader.** A Muslim woman shown with the ability to "lead," influence, or guide other individuals, families, and/or organizations. She may, or may not, occupy a formal leadership position (e.g. Senator, CEO).
- Joy.** A Muslim woman is allowed the space to experience *joy* (e.g. in herself, her surroundings, her friends, her family, her faith and her life). For marginalized communities in the media that are often shown as being oppressed, experiencing tragedy, and escaping trauma, expressing joy is an act of resistance.
- Muslimah in Motion.** A Muslim woman is shown in various spaces (e.g. hiking, scuba diving, at a concert, on vacation) and not limited to being solely inside the home.

**TOTAL # OF NUANCED PORTRAYALS:** \_\_\_\_\_

#### Bonus point ▪ Behind the Scenes:

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Did this production have a Muslim woman/women on staff as a writer, director, producer, showrunner, etc.?

## STEP 5

### Quality of Representation Score:

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Total Nuanced (\_\_\_) - Total Harmful (\_\_\_) = \_\_\_ raw quality score

**Quality of Muslim Women's Portrayal: Representation Assessment**

5 or more	2 to 4	-1 to +1	-4 to -2	-5 or less
A	B	C	D	F

\*Raw scores range from -7 to +7.

Based on the **Muslim Women On-Screen Test**, this episode, series, or film received a grade of

A B C D F

for its portrayal of Muslim women on-screen.

### Resources:

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**If the episode, series, or film scores a C or below, here are some additional resources to learn more about crafting nuanced portrayals of Muslims and Muslim women:**

- The Pillars Fund - The Blueprint for Muslim Inclusion (<https://pillarsfund.org/content/uploads/2021/06/SOURCE-The-Muslim-Blueprint.pdf>)
- Think Tank for Inclusion and Equity - Muslim Fact Sheet ([https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f8a09a4bd8bae2e8075da0b/t/5fac308482b16a4c5a4504a5/1605120133696/TTIE\\_Factsheet\\_Muslims\\_November2020.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f8a09a4bd8bae2e8075da0b/t/5fac308482b16a4c5a4504a5/1605120133696/TTIE_Factsheet_Muslims_November2020.pdf))
- Institute for Social Policy and Understanding - Covering American Muslims Objectively and Creatively ([https://www.ispu.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ISPU\\_MediaGuide\\_digital.pdf?x46312](https://www.ispu.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/ISPU_MediaGuide_digital.pdf?x46312))

#### To find Muslim Artists:

- Muslim Casting Talent Database (<https://www.muslimamericancasting.com/talent>)
- Pillars Muslim Artist Database (<https://artists.pillarsfund.org/>)

#### To find Muslim writers:

- Muslim Women Writers in Film and TV is a database of Muslim women screenwriters who primarily reside in California.
- TTIE's Crescent List is a database of Muslim TV writers.
- The Muslim List, created in partnership with MPAC, Pillars Fund, and The Black List in 2021, highlights the very best unproduced scripts written by at least one Muslim writer.

## ENDNOTES

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