



## Terrorists or cowards: negative portrayals of male Syrian refugees in social media

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the (white, Afrikaans) pharmacist waves the wealthy young customers through. In their mockery of the impotent guard we see the intense disjuncture between this “new” black masculinity—signified by slang, expensive cars, disposable income, branded clothing, consumable materials like drugs and alcohol, Anglophone accents, and fashionable ennui—and “old” black masculinity, reminiscent of an apartheid-era imaginary—traditional, respectful, hard-working, low status, less proficient in English, a guard at a shop rather than a purchaser of expensive goods.

The first film uncritically lauds the depiction of the black South African man as both consumer and consumable object while the second laments the affective consequences of apathetic middle class adolescent modernity. Both construct versions of blackness that are largely shorn of any agency but the personal and that are divorced from a sense of the political. Collectively they suggest the development of a new polysemy in South African popular cultural representations of black masculinity that may move beyond historical hegemonic injunctions.

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## Terrorists or cowards: negative portrayals of male Syrian refugees in social media

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In 2015 Syrian refugees became increasingly visible to Westerners in both mainstream and social media as more and more refugees arrived in Europe. Social media are heavily used by Syrians themselves (Kari Andén-Papadopoulos and Mervi Pantti 2013; Carleen Maitland and Ying Xu 2015; Melissa Wall and Sahar el Zahed 2015), as well as by Europeans who are sympathetic to their struggle, but there is also a backlash that is evident in spaces such

as the Twitter hashtag #refugeesNOTwelcome. In this short commentary, we examine images and words shared on the Twitter hashtag #refugeesNOTwelcome to understand the portrayal of male Syrian refugees in a post-9/11 context where the Middle-Eastern male is often primarily cast as a potential terrorist. Queer theorist Jasbir Puar (2007) and Middle-East scholar Paul Amar (2011) provide us with a theoretical approach to make sense of the contradictions we see emerging in this social media context.

The claim that the Syrian refugees are primarily male is often repeated on #refugeesNOTwelcome through images of men with text highlighting the absence of women and children. This emphasis on visual displays of *male* refugees is particularly strong following the extreme spread of images of drowned children on European beaches in August and September 2015. In contrast to mainstream media coverage of the war against Afghanistan and Iraq, in which the war was justified in part through an explicit focus on images of oppressed women, on #refugeesNOTwelcome women are *less* visible. However, this lack of visibility operates in a similar way to highlight the desertion of women in the geographic location that the refugees are fleeing from, thus reaffirming the notion that Muslim nations are places where there are oppressed women to be rescued.

The stereotypical image of Middle-Eastern men in contemporary times often suggests that they are dangerous. However, in 2015 we have seen an increased sympathy towards Syrian refugees in Europe in many mainstream media outlets as well as in social media. This has led to a more nuanced portrayal of Middle-Eastern people. To coordinate support for the refugees, Welcome Refugees groups have been established on Facebook for countries, regions, and cities all over Europe. Welcome Refugees Norway, for instance, was established in the summer of 2015 and grew to over eighty thousand members within a few weeks. The group not only featured posts about how to help newly arrived refugees, it also included posts from Syrians themselves, which have received hundreds of likes and many comments from supportive people.

A seeming shift towards a self-staged testimony appears to offer a potential autonomous self-management of social media presence by the refugees themselves. Yet it is countered by anti-immigrant responses, as seen on #refugeesNOTwelcome. Anti-immigrant discourses work to discredit the autonomous social media output by casting doubt on the refugees and their integrity. "Infidel Angel"'s tweet on September 7, for instance, states that it "Won't be long before the rapes start. #refugeesNOTwelcome We all know their mindset. All Hell is going to be let loose, soon. #auspol" (Infidel Angel 2015). The discourse produced here attempts to reclaim and maintain the stereotype of Middle-Eastern masculinity as threatening.

If not rapists, male refugees are portrayed as terrorists. In one tweet posted to the hashtag #refugeesNOTwelcome, two images are shown side by side: a naked, starving African child stands in the red dust of a refugee camp. Men on a boat are talking together. "This is a real refugee," the text below the child says. The men are not, according to the text: "These are not. These are soldiers of Islam. Don't let the media fool you." The photograph of the African child is familiar to Western eyes from charity campaigns and calls for compassion. Such images contribute to the homogenizing imagery of third-world poverty that helps create sufficient distance. Compassion becomes easy. The dry dirt and the starving people, naked or wrapped in blankets, could never be confused for an image of Europe. The men on the boat, on the other hand, are dressed as Europeans dress and look much like Europeans. The text and the juxtaposed images tell us we must fear these men and that they are not true refugees.

A focus on the masculinity of Middle-Eastern men during times of unrest is not unique to the Syrian refugee crisis of 2015. Debates about how to respond to the visibility of the Middle-Eastern male in non-terrorist crises and uprisings were noted during the uprisings of 2011, in which observers “initially responded ... with shocked incomprehension” (Amar 2011, 29). Predatory sexuality and undisciplined male aggression were among several causes suggested to support claims that people in the Middle East were not ready for democratic self-governance. Even activists who support the refugees have at times made use of tropes that demonize Arab men as “sexually obsessed with buying young girls” (Katty Alhayek 2014, 698).

Another dominant theme in the images shared in anti-refugee hashtags is that of the Middle-Eastern man as coward. One image shared several times shows a crowd of men in a train station, walking between two blue trains, some with their hands up in a way that looks more anxious than threatening, with the text: “2200 immigrants arrive in Munich. No women no children. Apparently only men flee ‘war zones’?” This argument that presents the refugees as cowards who flee rather than staying to fight is expressed in text-only tweets as well, for instance: “If you’re a military age male who flees violence and leaves behind his women and children, you’ll never be an American! #refugeesnotwelcome.” One tweet shows a photo of six women sitting, smiling, at rest but dressed in fatigues. They wear their hair in pony tails and hold their rifles non-threateningly. The text on the image uses the capital letters of internet memes to state that these are “BRAVE KURDISH WOMEN FIGHTING ISIS.” The image is accompanied by a tweet: “These men aren’t refugees. They are cowards! #auspol #refugeesnotwelcome #LightTheDark” (Ryder 2015). Another tweet that says, “Kurdish women fight #ISIS in #Syria, why can’t #Migrants?” (Strength & Honor #WR 2015) is accompanied by a photo of dark-haired women posing formally for a group photograph in the desert wearing khaki uniforms and casual sweatshirts. They wear military backpacks and hold their rifles vertically for the photograph.

Discourse about the Middle-Eastern male as non-masculine is not new, and is based on a history of colonial framing of Middle-Eastern men as simultaneously effeminate (in comparison with Anglo-Saxon men) and threatening to women (as potential rapists of white women and abusers of brown women). A more contemporary post-9/11 “invocation of the terrorist as a queer, nonnational, perversely racialized other has become part of the normative script of the US war on terror” (Puar 2007), and feeds into a world-view about Middle-Eastern non-Jewish men, who are assumed to be Muslim by default. In the case of the Syrian refugee crisis, the question of what to do with the benign visibility of these non-terrorist Middle-Eastern men is further compounded by that fact that they do not conform to received visual expectations of what a “refugee” looks like. Their masculinity is put into question when they are not coded as terrorists or rapists. Our goal in this short essay therefore was to reveal how particular contradictory themes around the masculinity of Middle-Eastern men is fostered through their representation in social media.

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