

Counter-stereotypical Images of Muslim Characters in the Television Serial 24: A Difference that Makes no Difference?

Counter-stereotypes in Hollywood's television entertainment

Hollywood has an extensive history of producing images of whites as an exclusive ingroup.

Whites' position in Hollywood's narratives is usually one of 'being in charge' or 'taking charge' of unfolding events. Richard Dyer (1997:3) confirms the dominance of whites in Hollywood's narratives, pointing out that research into television and film has repeatedly shown that in Western representation whites are "overwhelmingly and disproportionately predominant, have the central and elaborated roles, and above all are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard."

I would assert that a process of reorientation has transpired in Hollywood – a move towards a noticeable increase in representation of racial diversity in television shows (e.g. Diffrient 2011; Nishime 2011; Tierney 2013). Furthermore, the 'Hollywood rule' that the faces of stars featured as main characters in broadcast drama should be white appears to be less well-founded than before, as the number of non-Caucasian actors cast in starring roles of television series has risen in recent decades (Andreeva 2010). The phenomenon could be observed in US prime time television series as early as in the 1970s, as platoon sitcom shows with its major racial characters, for example *Barney Miller* (*Four D Productions/ABC* 1974-1982), became popular, and in the 1980s – particularly in crime dramas such as *Hill Street Blues* (*MTM Enterprises/NBC* 1981-1987) and *Miami Vice* (*Universal TV/NBC* 1984-1990). Two celebrated and very popular comedy shows in which people of colour were the protagonists were *The Cosby Show* (*Carsey Werner Company/NBC* 1984-1992) and *Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (*Quincy Jones-David Salzman Entertainment/The Stuffed Dog Company/NBC* 1990-2006). These shows were nevertheless largely racially segregated.

Dennis Haysbert's role as a black American President in the television serial *24* (*Imagine Entertainment/20th-Century Fox television/Fox* 2001-2010), is another example of an orientation towards raising the profile of roles played by non-white actors in US television series, which even caused some media commentators to speculate about the possible positive impact this high-profile casting may have had on the 2008 Presidential campaign of Barack Obama (e.g. O'Kelly 2010).

One important element in the shift in how people of colour are portrayed in US television series is the application of racial *counter-stereotypes* – which is to be understood as a distinct representational mode characterized by an attempt to negate a stereotypical view of a racial group by presenting members exemplifying the opposite of stereotypical traits usually associated with the group. This representational mode has become increasingly common in contemporary popular culture texts. Éric Macé (2009:10) defines it as 'a portrayal that takes on the opposite position to the stereotype by proposing a 'reverse' performance.' Racial counter-stereotypes are, for example, middle class people of colour having social prestige, as principal characters in television programmes. Stereotypical depictions of coloured people, on the other hand, work as distancing strategies that place certain groups so as to point up and perpetuate certain normative boundaries for social conduct, roles and judgements, thus distinguishing what is threatening and disturbing from what is regarded as acceptable and legitimate (Pickering 2001:174).

Racial counter-stereotypes are often members of racial minority groups that disconfirm existing stereotypes.⁷⁵ In contemporary US television series, counter-stereotypes are created by equipping characters who are members of a negatively stereotyped group with traits that run counter to the stereotypical ways in which they are generally represented in

⁷⁵ In addition to stereotypes, Macé (2009:7-13) presents two distinct representational modes of people of colour on television: counter-stereotypes and anti-stereotypes. Anti-stereotypes are, in contrast to counter-stereotypes, more present in a counter-hegemonic dynamic, as they "question and trouble stereotypes as part of a broader reflexivity about postcolonial ethnicities."

mainstream US television – they belong to the middle or upper-middle class, and occupy prestigious jobs in roles as the main characters. Counter-stereotypes can be understood as mediated images of a postracial world. They offer privileged images that tend to deviate from the social position to the group portrayed [cf. *The Cosby Show*, Jhally and Lewis 1992]. I would like to stress that applying counter-stereotypes in popular media texts can be an appealing strategy when representing people of colour, as it displays an attunement to today's multiracial society. Yet, we should bear in mind that the increase of counter-stereotypes in US television shows does not necessarily mean that racial stereotypes are being abolished.

I employ the notion of the racial counter-stereotype as an analytical tool by presenting a study of two Muslim principal characters from the Middle East in the television serial, *24*, that have counter-stereotypical traits. The crux of my analysis centres on how the counter-stereotype operates in *24*'s text and what its key characteristics are. The *Fox* network's critically acclaimed serial functions as an ideal site on which to examine counter-stereotypes, providing an illuminating case study of television producers', writers' and actors' efforts to counterbalance or neutralize stereotyping by the inclusion of positive characters that confound the stereotypes. My aim in this study is to refine and add more layers to the concept by subjecting it to textual analysis. In the analysis I draw particularly on the notion of the 'postracial' – a concept that, as used today, often operates (intentionally or not) as a way to cloak or mask the persistence of racism in the United States by minimizing its importance (Ono 2010:230). The notion of the postracial influences the shaping of Hollywood's counter-stereotypical images. Moreover, it interconnects with the racial counter-stereotype in several ways. In the following I will provide a more detailed account of the postracial.

The postracial in the United States

As representations of people of colour in US television are arguably less uniform today, the question is what the new representations are, and how they fit into the postracial system that is being put forward and negotiated. The increase of racial counter-stereotypes in US television entertainment is part of an overall change in the representation of people of colour. They may serve as a distinct indicator of the blurring of colour lines in US popular culture, as they reflect a larger process in racial politics, where racial paradigms are changing. It is rather commonly held today that the United States is moving towards a 'postracial era'. According to this line of thinking, the racial categories that are central to identity politics in the United States are now more a matter of choice than ascription. The phenomenon of Barack Obama, the country's first black President, may be taken to imply that the United States has entered a postracial era, as his election supports the notion of a growing uncertainty about the significance of colour lines. Racial counter-stereotypes are equivocal, being characterized by 'colour blindness' – in both a positive and a negative sense. In the present article, their more detrimental facets are foregrounded. These are more prominent, I find. The application of counter-stereotypes seems to be connected to how the postracial discourse operates in contemporary US culture politics.

Some scholars are sceptical about what they describe as the myth of the postracial. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2010) and Tim Wise (2010), for example, both reject the idea that race has all but vanished as a factor for shaping the life chances of all Americans – the proposition that lies at the very heart of postracial liberalism. Furthermore, they criticize President Obama for propagating the postracial myth and 'colour-blind' politics. According to them, he has reached the level of success he has by making strategic moves towards racelessness by adopting a postracial persona and political stance. Bonilla-Silva (2010:179), an oft-heard voice among the critics, envisages instead of a postracial future in the United

States, an emerging triracial system which will be comprised of whites at the top, an intermediary group of 'honorary whites' (including most Middle Eastern Americans), and a non-white collective at the bottom. Hence, Bonilla-Silva deems postracial policies and politics inadequate for remedying continuing racial inequities.

A key objective to postracial discourse is to minimize the charge of racism. Along such lines, Kent A. Ono (2010:229) argues that postracism in the United States attracts unknowing subjects to adopt a preracial consciousness, which, in effect, enables them to continue carrying out more or less racist practices – now dressed in new clothes. Moreover, he asserts that the notion of the postracial functions as a discourse of distraction that fills up television screens with images and narratives of progress, while simultaneously ignoring valid information about racism and its consequences (Ono 2010:229-230).

In the analysis I will critically examine racial counter-stereotypes – a representational mode that arguably is part of the repertoire to postracial discourse – the main strategy of which is to forget race. The textual analysis sets out to investigate the racial counter-stereotype in *24* and how it becomes contained by, and embedded in, postracial discourse by making the invisible visible. Ono (2010:230) asserts that whether flying under the flag of 'colour-blindness', 'multiculturalism', or 'racial tolerance', contemporary postracial discourse cloaks or masks the reality of racism and oppression. It redeploys from the traditional racial discourse both racial chauvinism and white supremacy, but this is now portrayed in a rather elusive, inferential, yet pervasive manner. In the following I will elaborate on an important discourse of contemporary US identity – 'the discourse of whiteness' – as this often becomes intertwined with the notion of the postracial. Furthermore, the discourse contains certain traits that showcase key aspects of how racial counter-stereotypes may work in a popular television text.

The significance of whiteness

In his conceptualization of the counter-stereotype, Macé asserts that the representation of people of colour who act in a counter-stereotypical manner is instructed by the hegemonic point of view delineated by Franz Fanon (1952) in *Black Skin, White Masks*. There, Fanon accounts for the elementary characteristic that resides in the racial counter-stereotype – the imitation of whiteness. He explains the narcissistic indifference that exists in the colonial relation between black and white people. And yet, Fanon (1986:221) writes, “the Negro knows there is a difference. He wants it [...] The former slave needs a challenge to his humanity.” In the absence of such a challenge, Fanon (1986:221) argues, the colonized can only imitate, never identify. This is a distinction that can be further explained by the psychoanalyst Annie Reich: “It is imitation [...] when the child holds the newspaper like his father. It is identification when the child learns to read (Bhabba 1993:120).” In line with this, a key trait of racial counter-stereotypes is the imitation and taking up of white mores and norms. Hence, the appropriation of whiteness enables a character to act counter-stereotypically. Aspects related to non-whites’ performance of whiteness thus become a focal point in my examination of Muslim counter-stereotypes. I should underline, however, that this study seeks to avoid operating with a simplistic understanding of the notion of the racial counter-stereotype that lumps all people of colour into one group.

The racial counter-stereotype is connected to Daniel Bernardi’s (2001:xxi) understanding of whiteness as a performance about ‘passing as white’ – that it has to do with ‘acting’, ‘looking’, or ‘making’ white. A counter-stereotypical performance becomes therefore influenced by the desire to ‘pass as white’. A pivotal function of the discourse of whiteness is to give the ethnic and racial groups that are considered white an assurance of cultural superiority and symbolic power. The discourse can persuade human beings into believing whites are the norm for humankind. People of colour who try to ‘pass as white’

appropriate the cultural codes associated with whiteness in their striving to be included in the norm. The discourse of whiteness exercises a vital influence on counter-stereotypes as a disciplinary guidance for performativity. In the United States this discourse is entrenched in the implicit belief that whites almost single-handedly created America and that their economic success is due to their initiative, higher intellect and superior morality (Sanchez 2008:103).

To provide an understanding of how the power of whiteness has worked historically in the United States, I will give a brief account of what has constituted the focal point for whiteness as an area of study – David Roediger’s (2007) seminal work, *The Wages of Whiteness*. A study of the foundation of the white working class in the nineteenth century in the United States, Roediger’s work rehearses the history of the ‘whitening’ of Irish immigrants as a key case to comprehend whiteness as a social construction. Whiteness was here a compensatory wage that worked for the Irish immigrants to disrupt Chinese-Irish or black-Irish identifications in the context of industrial exploitation. Roediger’s project is a rearticulation of class struggle as an antiracist project. His approach to ‘whiteness’ focuses on a gesture of historical retrieval of not-yet-white ethnics, whose experience in the New World can be perceived not as one of ‘being’, but ‘becoming’ white.

Moving on to examining the counter-stereotype in relation to *24*, I will start by outlining a more general discussion of Western – and particularly United States and Hollywood’s – representations of Muslim peoples and Islam.

Unfavourable renderings of Muslims

Edward W. Said’s (1995) *Orientalism* is often used as a theoretical point of departure for studies of Western media texts that render Islam. His examination of nineteenth century literature and art works disclose some disturbing outcomes of Western encounters with the Orient. A key point in this study is that the Orient is constructed through Western

representations. Pictures of Turkish baths by renowned painters invoked for example racial hierarchies, where whiteness was most desirable and highly valued. Said reveals how Western images of the Orient established knowledge of the cultural Other and informed the Western self-perception as rational, developed and superior to the Orient.

John L. Esposito (1999) stresses the variety, different traditions and historical experiences of Muslim societies. In dominant discourses in US and European news and popular media, however, Muslims of Middle Eastern origin tend to be portrayed using negative stereotypical clichés and generalizations (Karim 2006; Pintak 2006; Richardson 2004; Miller 2006). The threat that a ‘State of Islam’ is furtively being established in Western secularized countries is a frightening scenario alluded to and brought about recurrently by certain Western political fractions. Said’s (1997) work on the limits of media framing regarding the understanding of Muslims and Islam provides a detailed assessment of the ways Western media contribute to knowledge of the Islamic world – often by turning to distortions and misrepresentation. Said (1997:xii) argues that a typical feature of Western media when representing Islam is to relate it to aggression, as if aggression stems from Islam. Islam’s role in hijackings and terrorism seems to play increasingly on Western consciousness, and ill-willed generalizations about Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of a foreign culture in Western countries. Particularly over the last few decades there has developed a set of stereotypical visual signifiers in Western media’s imaginaries of ‘Islamic fundamentalism’, conveying a vast amount of information without verbalizing it. These include the *hijab* worn by Muslim women, the turban and cloak worn by Muslim men, people prostrating in Islamic prayer, Arabesque designs, scimitars, deserts, camels, etc. (Karim 2003:68).

Post 9/11, the divide between ‘us’ and ‘them’ has deepened in both Middle Eastern and Western media – a dichotomy that has helped to strengthen simplified ideas of a

collective self versus the cultural Other (Sisler 2008). Muslims and Arabs living in the United States have arguably suffered from a kind of collective punishment after the spectacular terror attack on the country carried out by Al-Qaeda. Bonilla Silva (2010:194), for example, draws an analogy between the historical position of US Arabs post 9/11 and that of Japanese Americans during World War II. They may suffer a collective stigma, being regarded as terrorists, as fundamentalists, as uncivilized.

In the following I will outline *24*'s official explanation of why the producers chose to include positive Muslim characters. But first I will briefly present relevant research in the field indicating how Hollywood has represented and represents Muslim and Arab characters.

For the last four decades Jack G. Shaheen has been the main contributor to this field. According to Shaheen (1984:4-5), the traditional Muslim Arab stereotype in US television resides in Hollywood's 'Middle East', and he demonstrates how its image is easily recognizable through recurring visual elements. In an analysis of how Muslims and Arabs are portrayed post 9/11 in Hollywood television shows, Shaheen (2008:45) concludes that the profusion of damaging Muslim stereotypes continues post 9/11, with the exception of *Lost*'s (*Touchstone Television/Bad Robots/ABC* 2004-2010) Iraqi character, Sayid Jarrah. Yet, I find that Shaheen neglects several other Muslim characters portrayed in a quite positive way in the shows he analyses – for example Darwyn Al-Sayeed in *Sleeper Cell* (*Showtime* 2005-2006) and Nadia Yassir in *24*.

Hollywood occasionally exhibits ambivalence towards its use of stereotypes when representing racial and ethnic minorities. I will point out that when *24* was confronted with accusations from Muslim interest groups about its stereotyping of Muslims (see Parry 2009; CAIR Chicago 2005), the producers and writers declared in various US media an intention to change their ways (Ackerman 2005). Simultaneously, however, they defended the way they had portrayed Muslims up to then. For instance, the writers claimed to counter the depiction

of Muslim terrorists by showing contrasting situations (Bennett 2008). The racial witch-hunt against Muslims in Season 6, initiated by the White House, was countered by the storyline of a wrongful arrest by the FBI of the Director of the Islamic American Alliance. Furthermore, at the time Season 4 was broadcast, the producers assured Muslim advocacy groups that the portrayal would become more even-handed. According to Scott Grogan, a *Fox* network spokesman, this was reflected in the positive portrayals of Muslims in Season 6 (see Reddy 2007). This shift involved the inclusion of a few 'heroic' Muslim characters, such as Hamri Al-Assad – a former Islamic terrorist leader who becomes Jack Bauer's partner in the hunt for Islamic terrorists. Muslims are depicted along similar lines in Season 8. The 'stockpile' Islamic terrorists are predominant, but additionally the storyline about a peace-oriented Muslim President and his family constitutes a crucial part of the overall narrative.

Many Muslim interest groups lodged complaints about Season 4 and the storyline of a 'sleeping' terrorist cell in the guise of an ordinary Muslim family living in Los Angeles. For example, the Muslim Council of Britain was so angered by the theme that it asked the media regulator, *Ofcom*, to examine the TV serial thoroughly, accusing the show of breaching broadcasting codes by misrepresenting ethnic minorities (Doward 2005). *Fox* responded to the criticism by announcing an offering of public service announcements during the season on local television stations in the United States, funded by *The Council on American–Islamic Relations*. *Fox* cooperated with CAIR to produce spot announcements in which Kiefer Sutherland, the star of *24*, cautioned the show's viewers not to stereotype Muslims (Halse 2013:5). Despite this effort, co-creator and executive producer Robert Cochran claims that the team did not alter the contents of Season 4, because the representation of the family as terrorists was 'balanced' (Dilullo 2007:17).

Before I proceed to the textual analysis where I examine how *24* represents two counter-stereotypical Muslim characters, I would like to introduce Nadia Yassir and Omar

Hassan in terms of the similar character traits they possess that points to a counter-stereotypical representation. Hence, they should constitute the opposite of what Shaheen (2008:25) describes as contemporary Hollywood's projection of Muslim and Arab stereotypes, depicted as "the unkempt, unscrupulous enemy Other"[...] as Villains, Terrorists, Maidens, Sheikhs, and Cameos." Yassir and Hassan, Muslims committed to combating Islamic terrorists, are both part of the season's main cast, have a steadfast belief in Western ideals and values, and are prominently placed in *24*'s official promotional material (Islamic terrorists are given very limited exposure here). Both actors are non-white, but neither is Muslim or from the Middle East. This insensitivity to casting Muslims to play Muslims is unproblematic when viewed from the perspective of *24*'s story world, where it is very difficult here to identify distinctions among the characters labelled as Muslims. The producers and directors make few, if any, distinctions between Arabs, Arab Americans and Muslim Arabs, between Muslims and Muslim Americans. These subtleties are almost always blended together.⁷⁶ In this way, *24*'s stories about the Muslim characters with Middle Eastern origin seem to confirm Esposito's (1999) suggestion that stories about the Muslim world all too often assume the existence of a monolithic Islam out there somewhere.

A model image of the counter-stereotype

According to Shaheen (2008:47), the few times Muslim and Arab-American women appear in contemporary Hollywood television entertainment, they are usually silent and submissive. Or they surface briefly as wild, repressed women. Yassir is at odds with this description. The character's departure from established ways of depicting Muslim women is emphasized by Marisol Nichols, the actress playing Yassir. Nichols told the press that she had been assured that there would be no stereotyping of her character, as Nichols made it clear that she would

⁷⁶ The terms Muslim and Arab are not inevitably comparable as not all Muslims are Arab and not all Arabs are Muslim. Furthermore, neither Arab nor Muslim is a culture, and Muslim is not a race.

not be party to ‘typecasting’ (Jacobs 2007). The character, Yassir, was born in Pakistan and raised in America, and is featured in every episode in Season 6. To a certain extent, this character conveys the opposite of the visual signifiers in Western media’s imaginaries of Islamic fundamentalism. She is portrayed as an attractive and career-oriented woman in keeping with how principal female characters are often presented in US television series: young, single, with model-looks, highly educated and working in a major American city in open office spaces that constitute an ideal arena for encounters with the opposite sex. The character seems to suggest that US television shows’ traditional portrayal of stereotypical female bit-part Muslims and Arabs is now remedied, as the representation is in accordance with the postracial discourse’s reproduction of the old mythology of US exceptionalism under capitalism: by pulling oneself up by one’s bootstraps through achievements based on a hard work combined with ability and talent, the American dream of success is attainable for everyone (Ono 2010:228).

Nichols is of Mexican/Latino origin. The decision by *24* to cast her in a major role as a Muslim of Middle Eastern origin is in line with the elusiveness of the US postracial discourse. The use of a racial counter-stereotype maintains a purportedly antiracist stance (Ono 2010:229). Nichols, whose racial and ethnic background is inconsistent with the character she plays, is set to facilitate the representation of an inclusive model of assimilation.⁷⁷ I would argue that there is a paradox in the proclaimed sensitivity displayed by *24* and Nichols, in view of the prevailing asymmetry in representational power in Hollywood’s entertainment. Because of this asymmetry, casting of a non-member of a minority group in the United States has come to be regarded as an insult by minoritarian ethno-racial communities, as it implies

⁷⁷ The United States constitutes a special case regarding multiracialism and its proliferation. Multiracialism and multiculturalism originated in this country from the failure of ‘Americanization’ policies to succeed in replacing ethno-racial cultures with an American one. The resurgence and reaffirmation of ethno-racial identities in the United States resulted in a multiculturalism that led to a quest for ‘public status’ for ethno-racial identities (Joppke 1996:449).

that the community is unworthy of self-representation and that no one in it is capable of representing them (Shohat and Stam 1994:190). The problem with *24*'s casting is that it forwards the message that if the actress is non-white she will do.



Illustration 1: "I like not having the woman be the bad guy," the actress Nichols says about her character: "Strength does not equal bad" (Bennet 2008:24).

Yassir's acquaintance with Islamic culture is addressed in the first episode. In a split-screen conversation she is engaging key Islamic terrorist Abu Fayed on the telephone. He threatens to withdraw from the agreement he has made with Yassir and the Counter Terrorist Unit (CTU) to give them the location of another Muslim terrorist. Replying to this, Yassir changes to speak in Arabic and asks him where his honour is. Her communication with the terrorist about 'honour' suggests that the character cannot easily be labelled as a Western ingroup member, as the expression signifies an origin from the same cultural community as the Islamic terrorist. Furthermore, 'honour' is a cliché used in Western discourse to

characterize a key Muslim trait, and in this context it denotes a dedication to an alien and archaic value system. The concept of ‘honour’ (*izza* in Arabic) is nevertheless central in most Muslim cultures, particularly in the Middle East, and means that every individual has an obligation to defend the honour of the family and the community. However, according to Western public discourse, Muslim ‘honour’ allegedly lies behind disturbing developments in contemporary multiracial Western societies – especially the so-called ‘honour killings’, which has aroused intense public debate in, for example, Germany and The Netherlands (Chapman 2007; Korteweg and Yurdakul 2009).



Illustration 2: Yassir stands accused of being the mole inside CTU, hence a white male co-worker tortures her during interrogation.

In line with *24* being a show with a generic and narrative format that in general leaves women with little to do, in the first half of the season Yassir is given limited narrative space. At this stage, her part in the narrative seems exclusively to ensure that the rest of the CTU

staff adheres to the male director's orders and directives. Based on Janet McCabe's (2007:158) assertion that women in *24* can be divided into two categories, either as vulnerable damsels needing rescue or helpmates assisting the progress of male action, I find that Yassir is firmly placed in the second category. Yet, in episode fourteen a switch of mode in the representation occurs when she is put in a dire situation that befittingly needs male rescue. This scene, where she is tortured by a co-worker, is decisive, as in the aftermath she moves from the fringes to the centre of the narrative, becoming involved in subplots which have a function in the overall narrative thrust – metamorphosing into a counter-stereotype.

In the lead-up to the torture scene, she is accused of being a mole inside the CTU because of her background. In a disturbing scene, she is tortured to force her to reveal information about the terrorists' whereabouts. It is standard procedure in *24*'s diegetic world for CTU agents to apply torture, but until now it has not been used on one of their own. As other CTU workers watch the unfolding drama on their computer screens, an agent becomes violent during the interrogation by taking a stranglehold on her (see illustration 2). The delineation of the character as a quasi-masculine and thoroughly professional CTU analyst breaks down here, as her face suddenly reveals an abundance of sweat. Yassir's powerlessness is underscored by the white, male torturer standing in the dark part of the room, whereas her position in the room is highly lit, suggesting she is there to be scrutinized not only by the interrogator, but by the other CTU members watching their screens. The sense of terror is accentuated by distressing sound effects. Another agent, Milo Pressman, who has previously exhibited an interest in her, intervenes and prevents the interrogation from proceeding.

In the next episode information is retrieved which documents Yassir's innocence. In this episode, Yassir seems to be back to normal; she continues to carry out her duties as if nothing had happened. Still, the depiction of the way Yassir apparently ignores, or suppresses,

what she has been exposed to defies common sense. That she shortly thereafter becomes romantically involved with Pressman is unfathomable. In this sequence, a moment of interracial passion is underscored by extradiegetic music, as they embrace, kissing fervently, in a protracted close-up shot.

The representation of Yassir's behaviour can be explained by the notion of the racial counter-stereotype. As a counter-stereotype Yassir could almost 'pass as white', with the fact that she is a Muslim being reduced to the merely incidental, due to the character's appropriation of a white set of mores and norms. Yet, Yassir can only do this by ignoring Muslims' experiences of day-to-day discrimination in the United States. It is the character's failure to question the injustices done to her, and additionally her efforts to incarnate white standards of normalcy that enable the character to function as a counter-stereotype. The things the character has to sacrifice in order to pass as white undermine its credibility in the position it occupies in the narrative. Principal characters in quality television serial drama are constructed along the lines of the 'individual' – a particular, more complex and individuated character construction situated in time and space. A few episodes later, Yassir even develops a close relationship with her torturer. We viewers cannot 'understand' her behaviour. The rendering of such 'flaws' in character raises questions about the motive behind *24*'s efforts in including a 'positive' Muslim main character. In effect, Yassir gives an image of a difference that does not make any difference.

True to the television genre of action series, *24* is characterized by rugged individualism and a male hero capable of applying extreme tactics in the line of duty. In *24*, this is pitted against another essential feature of the genre: the fate of the individual 'under' technologization and bureaucratization (Miller 2008:29). In connection with the sacking of the CTU Director (episode nineteen), Yassir accepts the position as Acting Director and becomes notably more conjoined with the negative features commonly associated with

bureaucrats. In contrast to the former male Director, Yassir's performance is marred by her inability to make decisions, relying on others – especially male figures with authority – to tell her what to do. She is portrayed as one who strictly follows the organization's official guidelines, rules and laws. Hence, she becomes one of a category of people who, in the *24* universe, are seldom rewarded.

Women in *24* must display unquestioning loyalty and obedience to the male hero, rather than to the organization (McCabe 2007:156). Yassir's gender implies narrative punishment as she repeatedly refuses to adhere to Bauer's advice and guidelines. In the *24* universe, Bauer constitutes the iconic centre of the story world. He is the superior, and his take on a situation always proves to be correct. Appointed as Director, Yassir becomes not only an obstacle to Bauer, but an antagonist. The following thumbnail synopsis of a storyline in episode twenty demonstrates the point: Bauer's traumatized girlfriend is being brought back to the CTU for interrogation, as she carries vital information on the whereabouts of Chinese terrorists. A psychiatric specialist is called in to shock her out of her catatonic state. Bauer, however, underlines that he is capable of retrieving information from her. When Yassir is presented with this possibility, the doctor tells her that it is not her call to make. Submissive to, and contained by, this expert, Yassir stresses the need to follow protocol. Bauer manages to break out of a holding cell, and crucial information is obtained when he manages to get his girlfriend to talk. Yassir admits that she should have stood up to the psychiatrist. However, the representation of her behavioural mode does not alter notably, as she later refuses to listen to Bauer several times – a *modus operandi* which proves fatal to both civilians and members of the CTU.

Yassir endures profound narrative punishment when Pressman, the co-worker she kissed, is executed. The CTU staff is being held hostage by Chinese terrorists, who demand to be told who is in command. The shot first centres on Yassir – who gives an image of a damsel

in distress, too terrified and weak to respond – cutting to a short sequence depicting other CTU personnel's reactions and then back to the CTU Director, who remains silent. Pressman then claims to be the Director, whereupon he is shot in the forehead.

The scene can be interpreted as an articulation of punishment of the white male for the transgressive act of inciting an intimate relationship with a woman of colour (Foster 1999:184). Yet, in terms of counter-hegemonic politics, this interracial pairing is far more contained and less transgressive than the pairing of a white woman with a man of colour. Thus, *24*'s portrayal of Yassir and her narrative punishment by becoming a scapegoat more likely hinge on the character's double 'Othering', as Yassir is marked by two labels of categorization that prefigure an Othering process. In *24*, both Muslims and women are generally confined to the narrative margins, and are usually defined as a problem. When these labelling devices are present in a single character, who, what is more, lays claim to the narrative centre stage, it disturbs the white and patriarchal culture's position in the narrative – that of the dominant group in *24*. This group's occupation of the centre stage is based on the fixing of the Other – to separate what is seen as threatening and disturbing from what is regarded as acceptable and legitimate.

24's representation of Yassir's loyalty towards this group and her non-acknowledgment of her own shortcomings and wrongdoings and, more importantly, the fact that she does not appear to be affected by the undermining demeanour and attacks by white male co-workers, allow her to remain included in the ingroup of American characters working at the CTU. Yet, Yassir is seldom represented in a way that can be associated with 'Americanness', i.e., of being American – defined by traits such as initiative, high intellect and superior morality. Instead, she is depicted as an ideal incarnation of a racial counter-stereotype.

The counter-stereotypical Muslim President

So far we have considered the representation of Yassir as a model image of a counter-stereotype. The arguments presented there are further elaborated in the analysis of a second Muslim character in *24*, Omar Hassan. Before moving to my analysis of key instances in Season 8 involving Hassan, I will provide a brief account of the main narrative in which he figures.

Omar Hassan, President of the Islamic Republic of Kamistan, a fictitious Middle Eastern country, is about to sign a peace treaty with the United States. The domestic opposition, however, perceiving this as siding with the Western enemy, attempt to assassinate him to undermine the agreement. Hassan, who is married and has a daughter, is romantically involved with an American woman, a journalist. The President's brother and the opposition know about the affair, and they take advantage of it to frame the reporter to be used as a scapegoat in their assassination plan. The assassination attempt fails, however. Later in the storyline, Hassan surrenders himself to the terrorists in an effort to stop a nuclear attack on US soil, and is executed.

I find few visual signifiers that link Hassan to the stereotypical image of Muslims in Western popular culture. He has, for example, the style and appearance typical of Western elites: trimmed beard and slicked-back hair, elegantly tailored dark suit (see illustration 3). Anil Kapoor, the actor who plays Hassan, explains the producers' intention to avoid the Muslim. When Kapoor, of Indian origin, agreed to play Omar Hassan, he wanted to make sure he would not be typecast. Kapoor considers Hassan to be a good person who has come to the United States on a peace mission.⁷⁸ That his character is a peacemaker was what sold him on playing the role, he says (Lacob 2009). Hassan is represented as an idealistic, liberal political leader with firm ethical principles and oriented toward Western values. This is underlined by

⁷⁸ After having co-starred in *24* as President Omar Hassan, Kapoor plays the Indian version of the character Jack Bauer in an Indian adaptation of the show.

his American counterpart, President Allison Taylor, who states that he is different from other Middle Eastern leaders in that respect.



Illustration 3: There is a striking visual similarity between Anil Kapoor as the game show host Prem Kumar in Slumdog Millionaire (2008) and as President Hassan in 24.

Hassan and the reporter share a mutual love, which is highlighted by close-up shots of them in an affectionate conversation with moments of silence between each sentence (episode four). This sequence captures precious seconds before they have to part. 24's application of a clichéd trope of heterosexual romance is underlined by Hassan's gesture, as he, in a moment of hesitation after having stated the impossible nature of their relationship, grasps her arm when she is about to leave and halts her for a few seconds. 24's delineation of this romantic side to Hassan sets him apart from Hollywood's typical depictions of male Muslims. The relationship he has developed with the reporter illustrates a secular and 'Western' understanding of love, not the stereotypical portrayal of the backward, male Muslim's indulgence in sexual excess (Karim 2003:62).

In contrast to his brother, the President exhibits a firm belief in the principles of Western democracy and the rule of law. Consequently, he is convinced of the necessity to transform Kamistan into a more secularized country. A crucial step toward this goal is the peace treaty so that the United States will lift economic sanctions. Here, Hassan confesses his marital infidelity to American authorities, admitting to the CTU Director that he gave the reporter a key card to his private residence. He discloses this sensitive information to the Director 'in the name of justice', as he is convinced of his mistress' innocence of the assassination attempt. The Director asks if this certainty is based exclusively on personal feelings, and Hassan confirms this. Unconvinced, the Director still considers the woman a prime suspect. The abiding trust that a President of a Middle Eastern country exhibits for an American intelligence operative, on the one hand, and his white American mistress, on the other, while being accused by the West of developing nuclear materials, suggests that he is both naive and neglectful of his duties as President, placing private matters before national interests.

24's representation articulates how the character's counter-stereotypical performance centres on an emphasis on 'Americanness', as the character on this and other occasions displays a deference towards American national values like individualism and US patriotism. Furthermore, if the sensitive information he conveys were to become a public matter, it would have calamitous political ramifications for the people supporting Hassan's political cause. Yet, 24 portrays him as an honourable, but unwitting character, who is guided by his personal feelings. This is underlined by what the US President's trusted adviser labels as Hassan's two major attributes: 'passion' and 'charisma'. Accordingly, it is these qualities that have made an improbable career as a political reformist in Kamistan a success. However, Hassan is not depicted in line with attributes commonly associated with Western political elites, such as strategic and rational thinking. Hassan exhibits a white performance through his adaptation to

a set of normative cultural practices and symbols that are in alignment with whiteness. Still, a striking flaw in Hassan's efforts to 'pass as white' is the character's display of unchecked passion, which is at odds with the essence of the aspiration to whiteness: an absence of affect (Dyer 1997:213).

The last episode in which Hassan is featured (episode sixteen) is pivotal and demonstrates how the character's closure epitomizes his position within *24*'s diegetic world. President Hassan has been taken hostage by Islamic terrorists, and the episode starts with him being transported to a safe house where he is to be executed in a live transmission over the Internet. Hassan is hauled out of the trunk of a car and led to a murky room, a defeated figure with bowed head and hair in disarray. Even though the room's intended function is to be used as a space where the terrorists can hide from the government agencies, rays of light enter the room from a window and light up Hassan's face and body. Because of this error the CTU analysts manage to detect the terrorists' location.

The Islamic terrorists' expressed aim is to force Hassan to 'confess his crimes'. Therefore, the interrogator and lead villain, Samir Mehran, tortures Hassan using a combination of beatings, electric shocks and chemical injections, but without success. Still, the way in which Hassan responds to torture is in some respects Othered. How he reacts physically bears little resemblance with how the hero in *24*, Bauer, responds to similar torture. Bauer's face is not covered in sweat, nor does he shiver, tremble, cry or scream. In the sequence where the President is subjected to electric shocks the actor throws himself from the chair onto the floor in a very dramatic fashion; a type of response bordering on slapstick comedy. White heroes like Bauer remain calm under extreme duress. Hassan lacks the white hero's hardness and firmness of the body – traits that are defining of whiteness. But in spite of giving an image of physical weakness, he displays firm will power, refusing to give in to the terrorists' demands, an attribute that also characterizes white people (Dyer 1997:37). Yet, the

manifest shortcomings in the character's striving to 'pass as white' suggest that many viewers of *24* will find it very difficult to identify with him. Thus, in my reading, Hassan is portrayed in line with the notion of the racial counter-stereotype, which in Western popular culture draws extensively on the discourse of whiteness. And like all racial counter-stereotypes, he can never completely incarnate the qualities associated with white people, as the character's simulation of whites' cultural practices falls short of the mark.



Illustration 4: President Hassan in front of the Kamistani flag: a softer version of the iconography of Islamic terrorists' beheading of an 'infidel'.

The last scene featuring the President shows his corpse, his throat slit, the back of his head resting against a Kamistani flag on the wall, and his face turned upwards as if gazing towards the light that shines down on him from the skylight (see illustration 4). All colour has left Hassan's cheeks, his pallor and congealing blood establishing his death. This image suggests that the character no longer constitutes a counter-stereotype, as the impediments that

hindered his access to qualities of whiteness now appear to be removed. The President's death is marked by northern light from above, as if the character has metamorphosed into a white person. Northern light, described as light that comes into a room in daytime through a large north-facing window, is viewed as the superior light. The north is here the epitome of the high, cold, places that promoted the vigour, cleanliness, piety and enterprise of whiteness (Salt 1983:329). His death becomes conjoined with him looking up and into this light. This suggests that he is graced by the whiteness of this light from above, and like white people Hassan now seems to be the recipient of, and enlightened by, the northern light. Hence, the President's death can be taken to signal a moment of grace, of God's blessing. This is in line with Bauer's reaction when he enters the room and bears witness to Hassan's fate. He kneels down in front of Hassan's dead body, reaches out his arms and lifts Hassan up and towards him before closing his eyes – a gesture which signifies a sacral, Christian rite. Furthermore, it suggests that Bauer and Hassan have a special bonding, even though there appears to have been very little opportunity for them to become friends.

Omar Hassan belongs to a small group of heroic and trustworthy characters in *24*, defined by a willingness to sacrifice themselves for what the serial delineates as a set of unquestionable and elevated values and moral standards. I regard these standards and the cultural codes and symbols that sustain them, which have an implicit presence in the show, as guided by the US discourse of whiteness – a discourse that is linked to 'Americanness' and US nationalism. In this case, it is oriented towards labelling favourable ingroup characteristics and virtues of US national identity that elevate and set this group apart. In *24*, the hierarchical relationship between the United States and Kamistan is taken for granted. Through Hassan, *24* can denounce Kamistan, and thereby, indirectly, Islamic Middle Eastern countries – for clearly failing to meet the standards of the United States. This theme is made explicit in the scene where Hassan confers with the US President. President Taylor addresses a disquieting

development in Hassan's country. Hassan has recently ordered a crackdown of the opposition there, and the dialogue illustrates how he evaluates his homeland in comparison with the United States. Defending his decision to take the necessary steps, Hassan asserts that Taylor does not understand. Hers is an open society governed by the rule of law; his is closed, and the only real law is power. I posit that this counter-stereotypical character is used to confer legitimacy on the US discourse of whiteness; a discourse which, in *24*, sets the United States apart from Kamistan and the Middle East, based on what it highlights as superior achievements in science, humanism and entrepreneurship.

A difference that makes no difference

In seasons following the accusation by Muslim interest groups of *24*'s stereotyping of Muslims, the serial appears to be more ambiguous and contradictory in its representations. The two characters that I examine are personifications of success, a President and a leader of a major government agency, respectively. This would seem to signal that the serial has moved away from the more ideologically motivated one-sidedness of its Muslim images, as the delineation appears ideologically conflicted. However, I argue that my close reading of *24* reveals that the new positive Muslim characters resulting from the producers', writers' and actors' manifest aim to achieve a more even-handed portrayal of Muslims, should be regarded as flawed. Yassir and Hassan are constructed as Muslims of Middle Eastern origin who are deprived of empowering cultural references to their background. Instead, these characters are represented in line with a white set of cultural practices and codes that are simulated and imitated. As shown in my analysis, their efforts to 'pass as white' fall short.

The producers may have had 'good intentions' of depicting a wider range of Muslim characters in order to meet the critics' demands. However, balancing or correcting pejorative stereotypes takes more than introducing positive depictions, as there is reason to be cautious

of positive representations of the racial and ethnic Other. Replacing a dominant stereotypical mode of representation does not necessarily escape the binary structure of stereotyping or unlock the complex dialectics of power and subordination through which Muslim and Arab identities have been constructed historically by Western imaginaries. For example, Edward W. Said (1995) is as suspicious of supposedly positive representations of the Orient as he is of more straightforward negative representations. Indeed, within postcolonial theory the character of the 'noble savage', a representation that shares important traits with the racial counter-stereotype, has appeared repeatedly. Stuart Hall describes the 'noble savage' as racial characters in Western texts who appear 'noble' – by assisting Westerners – but who are still ultimately marked by their absolute racial difference (Hall 1996b:310-312). Consequently, what appears as a 'positive representation' in fact sustains a discourse of essential difference.

24's representation of the characters suggests that they comprise a difference that does not make any difference. The delineation of Yassir's ostensible acceptance of the injustices done to her by white male co-workers and her efforts to incarnate white standards of normality, support that assertion. In comparison, Hassan displays to a larger extent heroic qualities, as he carries out heroic deeds: saving the white hero's life and sacrificing his own for a greater good. But, both characters share an inability to keep up their appearance while under pressure, for instance in the torture scenes. Furthermore, Yassir frequently becomes portrayed in line with the gendered cliché of a damsel in distress – marked by the show's general inclination to portray women in a sexist manner (see McCabe 2007). Hassan is a President who seeks to transform and adapt his Islamic homeland to the West's standard of democracy, rule of law and way of life. In the analysis I argue that a discourse of whiteness which has 'Americanness' as a focal point is mediated through this character and therefore gains credibility. Yet, the President's efforts to embody and display the qualities associated with white people seems somehow deficient and unconvincing. Yassir and Hassan constitute

personifications of success, a President and a leader of a major agency, but despite perfectly good intentions the characters fail in comparison to their white peers – in conducting their duties and in foreseeing events as their white US counterparts do.

Paul Gilroy (2000:37) states that the postracial refers to a future in which racialized hierarchies, racial notions and the dominance of whiteness is overthrown. I would additionally suggest that the notion of the postracial produces the category of the acceptable dark-skinned Other, suited for today. In this context, the representational mode for Hollywood's entertainment is recurrently the racial counter-stereotype. This character representation is in adherence with what Hall (1996a:444) describes as the new essentially 'good black subject' – a subject that allows the concept of race to be “crossed and recrossed by the categories of class, gender and ethnicity.” This subject either renders blackness and brownness invisible, or it celebrates exceptional blackness supported by white values – as the privileged viewing position for perceiving race is middle class whiteness (Gray 2004:165).

In my view, the representation of the characters is guided by a hegemonic point of view in line with the fixity that exists in relation to how the Muslim Other is perceived in Western discourse, even as the United States and Hollywood's television shows supposedly now have entered the postracial era. In *24*, Muslim characters from the Middle East are usually reduced to narrow and limiting roles (the Islamic terrorist), and if not, they are rendered in a vacuum, as though their cultural and ethnic background does not exist (the counter-stereotypes). Thus, the serial to a large degree follows along the lines of how Hollywood has traditionally chosen to portray Muslims and Arabs, where pejorative stereotypical portrayals are the stock-in-trade (cf. Michalak 1988). The problem is that *24*, in line with the contemporary Hollywood trend of accommodating representational modes to a postracial discourse, claims to be different.

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