Marhaban: A Visual Case Study of Everyday Life of in Muslim Morocco

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Contemporary media often vilifies Muslims. Islam has been equated with terrorism in the dominant Western narrative, both in the news and in representation of Muslims in film. This thesis aims to combat these dominant narratives with a documentary that brings everyday life back into the discussion of Muslim society. I interviewed and filmed Hanane Ouzzani and her son Muhammed in Meknes, Morocco for four months, taking a participant-observation approach to understanding their culture and the way Islam weaves into their lives.
Acknowledgments

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Process Analysis

I sought to create something to combat the negative perception of Muslims. I imagined holding it up as a shield every time I heard someone say, “All Muslims are terrorists,” or “Islam is inherently violent.” These statements, sweeping and presumptuous as they are, are not uncommon in today’s Western patois. Because so much of our information is gleaned visually in this era — scrolling on social media brings sensational headlines, constant streams of video on demand, and the news we like most delivered directly to our eyeballs — I wanted my project to exist in a similar format with a different purpose. I wanted to visually be able to show people what the everyday life of a Muslim person looks like. I also wanted my subject to tell her own story, in her own words. I created a documentary that consists of audio from interviews with a Muslim and visuals of her everyday. All speech is captioned with assistance from a native Moroccan fluent in English. This documentary will live on beyond the thesis itself, as I hope to get professional assistance with audio and color correction and submit it to film festivals around the country.

During my time at Ball State, I created my own major and developed skills and interests in video production, journalism, social sciences, and humanities. Media in many forms was my primary focus. I studied how to create it and how it affects people. During sophomore year while I was taking Sociology of Media with Dr. Melinda Messineo and Media Analysis and Criticism with Dr. Ashley Donnelly, I read an analysis of 900 feature films displaying Arab characters by Jack Shaheen. In “Reel Bad Arabs,” Shaheen asks the reader to picture the reel [Hollywood] Arab. He supposes that the reader would probably imagine a black-bearded man with dark
sunglasses and fancy cars, or perhaps brandishing an automatic weapon, because those are the traditional tropes of Arab culture.

“When was the last time you saw a movie depicting an Arab or an American of Arab heritage as a regular guy? Perhaps a man who works ten hours a day, comes home to a loving wife and family, plays soccer with his kids, and prays with family members at his respective mosque or church. He's the kind of guy you'd like to have as your next door neighbor, because – well, maybe because he's a bit like you.” (Shaheen 172-173)

This struck a deep chord with me. Research has shown that when people have contact with those who are different from them, stereotypes can chip away. “Extensive contact with outgroup members reduces uncertainty about and stereotyping of the outgroup, increases cultural sensitivity toward it, and ultimately lessens prejudice and negative affect” (Kalkan, Layman, and Uslaner 848-849). If movies are constantly depicting Muslims as one way and this is reinforced by world news reports of terrorism attacks, could media that shows Muslims the opposite way weaken this confirmation bias of a violent Islam? By producing media that counters the dominant narrative, could I spark a doubt in my viewers that would at least cause them to question the next time they heard someone say, “Islam promotes terrorism”?

I have no illusion that my documentary will somehow spark massive change for the way Muslims are perceived in society. My goal is rather to throw another kind of story in the mix, one that presents a Muslim person as peaceful, shows that their primary values are not so

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1 Although Shaheen specifically refers to Arabs in his article, Persian Muslims and others in the Middle East region are similarly misrepresented in current media. Iran, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkey are not Arab states, but have majority Muslim populations that are often represented violently in American media.
different from other religions, and exhibits a culture on the other side of the world as different from that of mainstream America but not as foreign as many of us think.

MOROCCO

From what I studied in media representation classes and personal research, I knew that Muslims comprised a large portion of the world’s population. According to Pew Research Center, they are the second-largest world religion with 23.2% of the population ("The Global Religious Landscape" 9). It simply didn’t make sense to me that nearly a quarter of the world’s population were violent terrorists.

I had always planned to study abroad, and as my interest in Muslim culture grew, I decided to find a program in a predominantly Muslim country. Morocco is relatively moderate, but Islam still drives much of the culture and daily life of its citizens. I found a program that would allow me to stay with a host family and offered culture-focused classes. I planned to pair this experience with my documentary thesis, intending to focus on the woman of the household in a participant-observation approach to understanding the culture. Because Muslim society is often separated along gender lines and the Muslim female perspective is even lesser known than the male’s, I assumed it would be both easier and more dynamic to approach the documentary with a female focus. I did not know who my host family would be before arriving, and I was extremely lucky to live with Hanane Ouzzani and her son Muhammed during my stay in Meknes, Morocco.

Hanane is a middle-aged divorcée who works outside the home. Her 26 year-old son, Muhammed, is unemployed and dependent on her for housing, food, and all expenses. Hanane is

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2 Christianity is the largest, with 31.5% of the world’s population identifying as Christian.
devoutly religious, while Muhammed, like many young people I met in Morocco, prayed occasionally and observed Muslim holidays. Although their family was not the most typical one, they exhibited a lifestyle that was still consistent with dominant Muslim culture in Morocco. Divorce is not supported by all people, but becoming much more common. Unmarried and unemployed children usually live with their parents. Women work outside the home in most cities, but in smaller cities like the one I lived in, they are also responsible for the majority of the work within the home.

Morocco is constantly in transition, existing in a cultural fusion somewhere in between Western culture and traditional Islamic values. Women in traditional hijabs and djellabas walk arm and arm with women in heels and skinny jeans. Mothers carrying babies on their backs walk through the medina chatting on their cell phones. Taxis and cars dart around men wheeling carts of cactus fruit and oranges on the streets. Even the language is a combination of native Amazigh, French, and Arabic.

Morocco’s official religion is Islam. I interviewed Hanane and my professors, and spoke informally with my program directors to understand the role that Islam played in Moroccan life. Much of this discovery, however, was found in the Arabic phrases I learned and in the behavior I saw on the streets. According to professor of Moroccan gender studies at Moulay Ismail University, Oufae Bouzekri, in Morocco and other Muslim countries, “Islam is not only religion, it’s a code of life. Your behavior and conduct is based on Islamic principles” (Bouzekri). I had thought that Islam would be most apparent in the way people prayed five times a day, but that was a miniscule part of how Islam played into society. For Hanane, who is deeply religious, Islam appeared in the way she spoke of her children and her life, claiming that she first wanted her children to be moral and follow the teachings of God, then have financial success.
But even for the less devout, like Muhammed, religion pervades every aspect of life. The call to prayer sounds five times per day and is an ever-present reminder of Islam. People greet one another with the traditional Islamic greeting meaning “peace be upon you.” When a person shares good news, the expected Arabic reply is, “Thanks God!” Beginning a meal, journey, or anything else begins with asking for God’s blessing. God is an essential element of the way people address one another and is inseparable from Moroccan life. Charity is another of the five pillars of Islam, but means more than financial giving to Moroccan Muslims. For them, giving of oneself and one’s resources is a major way to honor God. Hanane’s home was always open, and a slew of family friends, siblings, nieces, and nephews rotated through her doors during my four-month stay. When I invited friends over from my program, she would tell them that they, too, were her daughters and her home belonged to them. “You are welcome anytime,” was her mantra for all.

THE FEMALE PERSPECTIVE

In Western media, the Muslim female perspective is completely buried. In Shaheen’s Arab film analysis, he identifies five common tropes of Arab women: Harem bellydancers, background laborers, homogenously covered silent groups, seductresses, and bombers intent on killing Westerners. Not a very promising set of stereotypes, all based on observation of rather than listening to. “Not only do the reel Arab women never speak, but they are never in the work place, functioning as doctors, computer specialists, school teachers, print and broadcast journalists, or as successful, well-rounded electric or domestic engineers” (Shaheen 184).
My documentary aims not only to depict a normal female Muslim, but also to share her voice and perspective in a way that honors its value. Thus, Hanane speaks exclusively for herself in the film, lightly edited for length and clarity.

Ultimately, Muslim women are not as docile and silent as Western media often depicts them. Although Hanane put up with her husband for nearly 30 years until her children were grown, she declared to me off-camera one afternoon,

"My happiness start when he left. Now I can relax. Now I can buy the good things for my house. I can laugh with my children. Never I talk with him – I don’t say good morning or good night. When my children want something, I have to buy it. Never he give money for the girls. I must buy the food, the clothes, pay for the study... But now, after divorce, I am so, so, so happy and relaxed. I like my life now."

Because the family unit is so central to the Moroccan lifestyle, it would have been much less acceptable for her to divorce her husband when they were raising their children together. Hanane didn’t seem to be shunned for her choice by any means. All of her children still came to visit her, friends were over constantly and she was always chatting with someone on the phone (things her husband did not allow when they were married). When she visited the neighborhood in which she grew up, everyone would greet her warmly and she would often stop to have a long conversation, inquiring of extended family members for several minutes with old friends. The idea of the covered woman flitting from indoor space to indoor space that I had learned from Western depictions of Muslims dissipated when I walked with Hanane. She spoke to everybody she came across, including two young boys she didn’t know that appear in the documentary. In the scene, she suddenly challenges the boys to a race up the hill, beats them, and spends the rest of the walk lecturing them about staying in school until they arrive home.
Hanane is a woman who claims her space as equal to men in the public sphere and knows her rights. A woman educated in school and by the Qur'an, she believes that all of her rights were given to her by God. In her eyes, Islam is what liberated women in the first place, giving them equality in the eyes of God. Women played a key role in the prophet Muhammed's success, and it was he that declared, through God, that men and women were to enter heaven as equals. Oufae Bouzekri seconded this, adding that it is through misinterpretations of the Qur'an that women have lost rights in society. Bouzekri takes a more active stance against injustices against women, stating that the political systems use the Qur'an to keep women in a position of less power. In contrast, Hanane is less concerned about earthly injustices because God will judge everything in the end.

Young Moroccan women also vary in their responses to inequalities between men and women. Women haven't been in the public sphere for long in Morocco, which has led to a clash of customs. Because women were often in the home, men traditionally used cat calling to pick up women as they passed from place to place. This still persists today, and it's fairly common to get yelled at once per block by pining males. In discussions with young Moroccan women, they seemed to dislike this "tradition" but had few ideas for stopping it. One suggested that we, as women, would all have to raise our children to recognize that it was wrong. Another suggested starting to talk back to men who were rude. But many of them shyly admitted that if a man was cute, they would gladly respond to the cat calling as long as it wasn't disrespectful. Indeed, there was even heated debate over what consisted of harassment in Morocco. When I asked 26 year-old Muhammed about it, he said that he had never cat called a woman, and that it was a

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3 It is not my intention to interpret the Qur'an for readers in this paper; this is simply meant to present Moroccans' interpretations of religion and how that fits into their place in society as women.
technique used primarily for uneducated men. Hanane refined that definition to “good Muslim boys.” She explained that good Muslim boys do not call out to women in the street, and that if we heard such things we could safely assume the callers weren’t “true Muslims.”

This illustrates Hanane’s mindset when encountering roadblocks. Although she was a woman, divorced, still supporting her grown son, she never complained. She never mentioned harassment or trouble with work, never wished aloud that Muhammed would find a woman to marry. The root of Hanane’s tenacity and peace of being is in her religion. For her, even more so than many of the Moroccans I met, God would always take care of her. She rarely expressed fear or regret and rationalized her world into “good Muslims” and “non-Muslims.”

Her tenacity would shine in other places I wanted to highlight in the documentary, such as the pride she spoke of with her children, her determination when talking about her religious decisions, and even in the images themselves. When the outlet in her kitchen wasn’t working and she needed to use the electric kettle, she plugged it in another room and had Muhammed bring it in. When she had to move her stove off the wall, she re-lit the burner as her friend’s son worked so that dinner would still be ready in time.

DOCUMENTARY

It is clear that because of Morocco’s cultural fusion – its proximity to the West and traditional Islamic values in an era of fast-growing digital globalization – it is a country in transition. I should be clear, however, that Morocco and other countries finding their own balances are not “behind” the West. There is no single path a country should follow to modernization, if it chooses to modernize. Each country possesses its own unique value system,
traditions, geography, languages, religions, and more that affect the way it changes over time. It is often common for Westerners to use the phrase “backward” or “behind” to describe other countries, and that terminology was something I had to unlearn during my time in Morocco and something I hope to share indirectly in my documentary. Different ways of living do not fall into categories of “right” and “wrong;” there are countless ways a person can live her life. Many of the ways Hanane lives her life, both in actions and intentions, will look much like an American viewer’s. Many of them will not. One of my favorite scenes is when Hanane makes harcha bread for breakfast: she puts the pan on the floor in order to flip the massive piece of dough in a way that, at the time, felt shockingly foreign to me. But minutes later, she was texting her daughter on her cell phone at the kitchen table and watching videos on Facebook. I hope viewers can examine these differences as evidence that there isn’t an “us” and a “them.” We share many customs and values, but still retain traditions that make our cultures unique.

There are plenty of aspects of Moroccan culture I would have loved to capture and didn’t. For this documentary, I would have liked to make a treatment ahead of time to organize everything I wanted it to be and know exactly what footage I needed to capture. I didn’t know anything about Hanane, however, and my interviews with her and running behind her with my camera were just as much me learning about her as it was recording it to share with others. These moments didn’t have the usual pre-planned elements like professional films often do. The learning was on the go, and I chipped away at these raw moments for months after returning to figure out what the true story was in the editing process.

I had known all along that I wanted to make a documentary that showcased the life of a Muslim woman, sharing the knowledge that Islam was not violence and showing what Morocco looked like. But in all these grand plans ahead of time, I didn’t know the value of religion to
these people, especially those who were like Hanane. I didn’t know how much it seeped into the language of the everyday. I didn’t understand how women could exist in a place between liberated and oppressed that looks completely different from that place in American society. I didn’t know the hospitality and openness I would be greeted with from so many people in Morocco. I found these things out as I chipped away at hours of footage and interviews, discovering these important themes and noticing the almost-strangeness of the everyday.

Because I took a participant-observation approach in the creation of this documentary, I was not simply trying to understand Hanane’s life. I was living in this world and trying to discover my place in it as well. My attempts to blend in clashed with my technical video training when I would walk down the street holding a camera. I wanted to make beautiful, stable images that documented Morocco, but the outcome of my work is far different. There are plenty of awkward outtakes where a distinctly Midwestern “Ope!” is heard in the audio as the camera shakes and the angle shifts dramatically; me stepping out of the way in Hanane’s cramped kitchen, a position I often found myself in, or tripping over something in the street trying to keep up with her. My hushed laughter is in the background of the video of Hanane racing the young boys. There were moments I didn’t capture as well, many of which I knew would be gone as soon as I reached for my camera. The way Hanane described her divorce with her husband off-screen was telling in this way. She would confess that she hated the way he restricted her time outside the home, didn’t like her friends coming over, and how she felt so free after she divorced him. In on-camera interviews, however, she would shrug and say, “He left us,” when I probed about their split.

In his essay, “Approaches to What?,” Georges Perec notes, “The daily papers talk of everything except the daily” (Highmore 177). Perec’s point is that media calls our attention to
disasters, scandals, and horrors, yet bury ordinary life. This documentary is an effort to bring a focus of everyday life to the forefront of discussion of Muslims. If the only time people hear about Islam is when terrorist attacks happen, stereotypes of the violent Muslim will perpetuate. But by creating new messages and pushing them into the mainstream, there is hope for change.
Works Cited

Bouzekri, Oufae. Personal interview. 9 Nov. 2016.


Producer: Janie Fulling

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