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Go with Peace Jamil - Affirmation and Challenge of the Image of the Muslim Man

Abstract

Lately, several studies have looked at how Muslims are represented in film. This article takes a Scandinavian perspective on the topic and presents an analysis of masculinity and Islam in the Danish action drama *Go with Peace Jamil*. First an introduction to Islam in film in the western world in general and in Scandinavia in particular is presented, after which *Go with Peace Jamil* is discussed as a film that affirms some of the problematic images of Muslim men in film, but also challenges these images. As in so many other western films, Muslim men in *Go with Peace Jamil* come across as violent and aggressive, but in this film, in contrast to many Hollywood productions, we are introduced to many kinds of Muslims and varying ideas of Muslim masculinity.

Keywords

Islam, masculinity, Scandinavian film

Author Notes

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Introduction: Islam on the agenda

Violent, aggressive, terrorist, fanatic, gun-crazy, strange, dangerous – these are descriptions that come to mind when viewing Islam and Muslims through the eyes of Hollywood. As is the case with other media in the western world,¹ film, too, has been shown to turn Muslims into the “other”, the dangerous and the treacherous. As recently as at the turn of the millennium, very few in the western world seemed to react to these problematic representations. However, since the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the public and scholarly interest in religion in media in general and Islam in particular have grown exponentially. This event has often been identified as a turning point in discussions of media and religion.² Consequently, over the last decade Islam and film has also been the topic of a number of studies. Focus has been on the controversial representation of Muslims in films from the western world (particularly in what is usually referred to as Hollywood productions), on alternative images of Islam and Muslims in films from around the world, and on the interests driving directors identifying as Muslims.³

Studies have identified similarities in how Muslims are represented in western films, but also cultural differences. In several European countries, directors with a close connection to Islam have offered noteworthy alternative images to the ones Hollywood presents. In Sweden, at the turn of the millennium,

a new generation of film directors took the stage, several of them with a background in Muslim countries and cultures. In their early films, these so called “immigrant directors” often dealt with the challenges of combining a different religious or ethnic background with the norms and ideas of a secularized Swedish society. In the process, they also presented interesting portraits of Islam and gender.⁴ During the last ten years, in the other Scandinavian countries as well, many directors with a foreign or partly foreign background have been noticed for their work and representations of Islam, including their portrayals of gender and faith. This article is a case study of one of these films, the controversial debut feature film by the Danish/Palestinian director Omar Shargawi, *Go with Peace Jamil*, focusing particularly on how Islam and masculinity is constructed in the film.⁵

To provide a background from which to discuss Shargawi’s film, I begin with an introduction to current studies of Islam, gender, and masculinities in film and in Islamic culture. After this I present a close reading of characterisation, masculinity, and faith in the rather gruesome, but moving story of *Go with Peace Jamil*. Finally, some future directions for representations of Muslims in film are discussed.

The perspective on gender in this study is a social constructivist one.⁶ In other words, I argue that gender, in this case discussed as masculinity and femininity, is something that we construct in social interactions. Our

understanding of what is “correct” gender behaviour is thus cultural and dependent on time and space. The important role popular culture such as film plays in our understanding of gender is also worth pointing out: popular culture offers us ideas about gender and can both confirm and challenge our notions of ideal masculinity or femininity. Religion also plays a central part in how we understand gender, and in the films studied here it is centrally linked to how gender is represented and comprehended. In the case of media such as film, gender and religion are furthermore constructed in line with the logics of media, for example in accordance with the demands of a certain genre and in a way that suits a specific narrative. These processes of mediatization, or how media uses, transforms, and structures concepts – in this case religion – according to its needs and interests,⁷ are also central to our understanding of masculinity and Islam in film.

Islam and masculinity on the silver screen

Islam in film is a complex topic that, as noted, appears differently in different cultural contexts. I will here limit myself to discussing studies of American and European productions and how Islam is represented in films from these specific cultural contexts.

An overview of representations of Islam in contemporary western films offers varying images. Certainly, there is no single way of representing Islam and Muslims, but nevertheless, one cannot deny the fact that in western productions, Islam and Muslims have often been depicted in a deprecating way. In his noteworthy work *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2009), Jack G. Shaheen presents an overview of the way Arabs have been represented in Hollywood films for more than a century. Since in Hollywood films, most Arabs are represented as Muslims (and vice versa, most Muslims are represented as Arabs), Shaheen's study is also a study of how Muslims are represented in Hollywood productions. The image that appears is disheartening. Not much seems to have happened over nearly a century. In the silent film *The Sheik*, made in 1921, and in *The Siege* from 1998, the images of Arab Muslims and their faith are equally degrading and dehumanizing. In Shaheen's words: "Seen through Hollywood's distorted lenses, Arabs look different and threatening. Projected along racial and religious lines, the stereotypes are deeply ingrained in American Cinema. [...] Hollywood's caricature of the Arab [...] is there to this day – repulsive and unrepresentative as ever."⁸

As Shaheen shows, Arab Muslims routinely appear as the bad guys, devoid of the humanity and intellect granted western characters, and limited to six common tropes: villains, sheiks, maidens, Egyptians, Palestinians and repulsive characters in cameos. Shaheen's discussion is very political and ties in with the

complex research on the ideological dimension of film,⁹ obviously a much needed perspective in the case of Islam in film. Naturally, alternative images of Muslims can be found in some Hollywood productions, but overall, Hollywood's power to influence and shape the views of audiences worldwide makes the numerous negative stereotypes a pertinent issue.

The problematic representation of Islam by Hollywood has been discussed in several other works as well. Amir Hussain begins his overview of Islam in film with a discussion of the complexity of Islam, a fact, Hussain argues, that is "seldom recognized in media portrayals of Muslims", which instead "tend to homologize all Muslims to an Arab (and usually terrorist) stereotype" despite the fact that most Muslims are not even Arabs.¹⁰ Based on Shaheen's work, Hussain discusses the problematic portrayals of Muslims in everything from movie classics, such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), in which Islam and Muslims are exoticized; to action films such as *Rules of Engagement* (2000), where Muslims are portrayed as absolute villains; and to animated films such as *Aladdin* (1992), in which the Muslim heroes might be good, but every other Arab Muslim is represented as an uncivilized brute. However, Hussain also notes a few exceptions of fairly favourable representations of Muslims, which reflect the political interests of the cold war, US relations with Afghanistan and their common enemy, the Soviet Union. For example, in *Rambo III* (1988), Rambo goes to Afghanistan where he helps to train the mujahideen, a group that became

the Taliban about a decade later, but that in the film are represented as noble heroes.¹¹

In her study of Muslim terrorists in Hollywood films, Rubina Ramji highlights the issue of gender and gender structures in filmic representations of Muslims. The problem is not just that Muslim men are often represented as monsters – the fate of women characters is not much better. As Ramji writes, “[n]ot all women living in Arab countries wear black cloaks and veils, but the images given by Hollywood offer only one homogenous, truncated image, a woman who is alienated from the Western world, silenced and oppressed by the ordinances of her religion.”¹² Muslim women are usually represented as subjugated and invisible in public, a situation from which only the white or the westernized man would seem to be able to save them. More rarely, but just as problematically, Muslim women sometimes come across as violent and dangerous. The example Ramji takes is *Rules of Engagement* (2000), a film that Shaheen also finds very problematic, in which it is suggested that it was the violent threat of a Muslim woman that was the actual cause of the murder of several Muslim men, women and children, not the racist attitudes of the US soldiers doing the killing, as suggested in the beginning of the film. Ramji also discusses some images of “good” Muslims in western films. One example is Azeem (played by Morgan Freeman) in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991), who is saved by Robin Hood and vows to stay with him until he is able to save

Robin. Azeem is represented as noble and educated, but also as very much an exception. The same is true for the other recurrent positive Muslim character in Hollywood films, the westernized Muslim. This character usually helps fight the more common evil Muslim. However, these exceptions do mostly seem to function as a reinforcement of the rule, as it is the bad Muslim character that continuously stands out in a number of quite recent films: *Navy Seals* (1990), *The Sheltering Sky* (1990), *Not Without My Daughter* (1991), *True Lies* (1994), *Air Force One* (1997), *Black Hawk Down* (2001), etc.

What we see in many western films, then, is an obvious “othering” of Muslim characters. As Richard Dyer has argued regarding stereotyping generally,¹³ by being negatively stereotyped, Muslims are turned into the problem in contrast to the “us” of the films (usually white, Christian westerners), who are set up as the norm. In this process religion, gender, and ethnicity intersect. Just as with the representation of other ethnic groups in films,¹⁴ Arab Muslims are often gendered in different ways than white characters. In the case of male Muslim characters, the traditional masculine traits we regularly encounter in films are often brought to the extreme and turned into something off-putting. For white, male heroes being violent is usually standard, and in many genres (such as action, adventure, and thrillers) acceptable; but the Muslim man is generally represented as someone who is not able to control his violence or use it the “right” way. Here, religion also plays a part, as a force that misdirects the violence. The oppression

of women by male Muslims is furthermore highlighted in a way that turns Muslims into monsters compared to the western hero, although white male characters also traditionally have been represented as controlling in relation to female characters, and active women tend to be punished in western productions, too.¹⁵ Again, religion plays a part as Islam is offered up as an explanation for the oppression of women.

This critique of Hollywood representations is not to suggest that there exists one “true” Muslim identity which is not represented in film. Neither is it to deny that there are Islamic teachings and ideas that in certain contexts have been interpreted and realized in ways that are oppressive of women.¹⁶ The point is that there are many forms of Muslim masculinity and femininity and many different ideas about the relations between women and men in Islam. Recent studies have focused on the many faces of femininity in Islam,¹⁷ but there are also noteworthy studies dealing with masculinity and Islam,¹⁸ highlighting the complexity of this subject. However, from the above discussion it is obvious that western, or rather Hollywood, films do not offer up many alternative images.

As has often been pointed out, genre is essential to how gender is constructed in film.¹⁹ Action films with Muslims as villains might be standard in Hollywood, reflecting the problematic relationship between the USA and parts of the Muslim world, but in Europe, where many countries have close ties to some Muslim countries due to immigration and the history of colonialism, we most

often meet Muslim characters in other genres, particularly in dramas with a focus on the family. Rubina Ramji has discussed how the immigrant Muslim arrived in British cinema in films such as *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985), *My Son the Fanatic* (1997), and *East is East* (1999), films that all in one way or the other focus on the family and adjusting to life in the UK.²⁰ At the turn of the millennium several thematically similar films were produced in Scandinavia as well. The story of these films often follows a young second-generation immigrant who is trying to find his or her place in Scandinavian society, a project fraught with difficulties as the characters are positioned between the tradition of their parents and the often contrasting norms of the surrounding society.²¹ In the end, tradition usually gives in to the “Nordic way of life,” with religion as a private matter that does not have too much of an influence on life in general.²² One example of a film of this kind is Reza Bagher’s *Wings of Glass* (2000), about a young woman, Nazli, who is caught between the expectations of her family and her own wish for independence. Nazli just wants to be like everyone else and refuses to be controlled by religious norms or tradition. However, she also has to deal with the fact that even her name already sets her up as different, causing walls to be constructed and turning her dream of independence into a real challenge.

Though we find many different images of Muslims in Scandinavian films, here, too, some negative stereotypes prevail. Young Muslim men in particular are often represented as violent and oppressive of women. In the case of

Wings of Glass, Nazli's cousin Hamid is the person most eager to turn Nazli into what he considers a decent woman, sometimes using violence to get what he wants. It is worth pointing out, though, that most Scandinavian films focusing on Islam are directed and/or written by filmmakers or scriptwriters who identify as Muslim and are themselves negotiating their place in the society that is portrayed in their films. It is also worth noting that gradually, and particularly during the last couple of years, in several Scandinavian films, Muslim characters have come to be represented as a more ordinary part of society and as having to struggle with the same problems as ethnic Scandinavian characters, such as unemployment and loneliness, as for example in Gabriela Pichler's critically acclaimed *Eat Sleep Die* (2012). Comparing the representations of Islam and gender in Scandinavian films to representations in other European films, both similarities and differences are noticeable. There is a recurring problematization of violent Muslim men in many European films. In the case of, e.g., Damien O'Donnell's *East is East* (1999) and Christopher Morris' *Four Lions* (2010), the choice of a comedy format gives an interesting edge to the depictions. However, many films also highlight the complexity of notions of gender in general in the multicultural Europe of today. This is the case, for example, in several films by German-Turkish director Fatih Akin, such as *Head-On* (2004) and *The Edge of Heaven* (2007). In the case of Omar Shargawi's *Go with Peace Jamil* the focus is on men and masculinity, but

here too we are dealing with representations that would seem to become more complex when one digs into them.

Shargawi's complex Muslim men

Omar Shargawi can partly be described as a member of the new generation of “immigrant directors”, as they have been called in Sweden. His Palestinian heritage via his father has inspired his filmmaking, in which he has dealt with issues such as religion, politics, and immigration. However, Shargawi's take on Islam is somewhat different from the typical stories described above. In interviews, Shargawi has talked about his struggles with making *Go with Peace Jamil*.²³ The film was meant to be a short film, but with time grew into a full feature film. However, both Shargawi and many of the other people involved were hesitant about making the film and doubtful about the way it might be received, and perhaps with good reason. The story told is far from uncomplicated, focusing as it does on violence, religion, and revenge. Like many other Scandinavian films with a focus on Islam, this, too, is a family drama, but at the same time, it is a violent drama film, bringing to mind American productions such as Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) or Danish crime-thrillers such as Nicolas Winding Refn's *Pusher* (1996).

The story is set in the suburbs of Copenhagen, but it could just as well be understood to take place in any larger European city, as there is very little in the images that reminds the viewer of Copenhagen. One does not, for example, see the classical Copenhagen buildings or the sea. All characters in the film have a foreign or partly foreign background, and are often easily identified as Muslim by dress and the foreign languages spoken. The film thus evokes a different national setting, not only through its protagonists, but also because of the yellowish colour of the images, chosen to give the film an eastern feel.

The film starts with a murder (that is not shown but suggested at first, and later made explicit): Jamil, the main character (played by Dar Salim), has killed the man who killed his mother when Jamil was but a child. Jamil now prepares to leave the city and go to his mother's family in Lebanon, trying to convince his estranged wife and his son to come with him, and his father to understand him. However, his actions trigger a chain of bloody events from which there does not seem to be any escape.

The evil other

At first glance, the picture we get of both Islam and Muslim men in *Go with Peace Jamil* is very homogenous and can be summarized in one word: violent. As Ebbe Iversen puts it in his review of the film in the Danish newspaper *Berlingske*:

“No ethnic Danes can be found in the separate universe of the film, and the Arab men are all, with the exception of Jamil, loud, chauvinistic Muslims full of aggression.”²⁴ Jamil has set off the violence by killing his mother’s murderer, but the fact that his mother was murdered suggests a history of violence. Jamil is pursued by the friends and relatives of the murdered man – led by Mahmoud, the murdered man’s brother – and they are all out for blood, constantly cursing the men they hunt. When Jamil’s best friend, Omar, played by Shargawi himself, is killed trying to help Jamil, his friends and relatives, too, call for revenge and Jamil is told that it is his duty to avenge his friend. Simplifying matters a bit, one might say that almost everyone seems to want someone killed, and everyone involved is a Muslim.

But why would Muslims want to kill Muslims, and why was Jamil’s mother killed in the first place? The background of this individual conflict is the conflict between Shiite and Sunni Muslims. This conflict in turn has its roots in the different opinions about who should have been the successor of Muhammad and the fate of the fourth caliph and his sons. When Muhammad died, one faction was of the opinion that Muhammad had not designated a successor, but others believed that Muhammad had chosen Ali, his cousin and son-in-law, as successor and first caliph. Those loyal to Ali became known as Shiite. Ali finally became the fourth caliph, but was deposed and assassinated in 661. The later deaths of Ali’s sons, the grandsons of Muhammad, came to strengthen Shiite opposition to Sunni

Islam and the development of their own dogma and ideas of leadership. Shiite Islam has later split into several groups, but the opposition between Sunni and Shiite remains.²⁵ However, this conflict is never explained in much detail in the film; the question of who should have been the first caliph is mentioned briefly, but apart from this the audience only learns that some Shiites think they will be blessed by killing a Sunni, and vice versa. Apart from this, the viewer is expected to know about the feud between the two largest Muslim groups, or at least to comprehend that Sunnis and Shiites are not the same. At first glance, the centrality of this conflict to the story does not do a lot for the image of Islam or Muslim men, who still come off as very violent, but it directly challenges the image that western films otherwise often offer, namely, that there is just one form of Islam, and that all Muslims can be lumped together into one group. It also indirectly highlights the fate of Muslims generally in western films by underscoring the “othering” of those who are not like oneself.

As illustrated above, in films from the western world Islam and Muslims are often constructed as the “other.” This is particularly the case in Hollywood productions, but also many European films where Muslims play the role of immigrants. Initially, *Go with Peace Jamil* seems to present a similar image of Muslims. With their criminal backgrounds and the violence they perpetrate the characters are plainly placed outside regular society. They are not official leaders, but representatives of brutal sub-groups existing on the outskirts

of a society that does not seem to have a place for them. Thus for many in the audience the characters no doubt come across as “other.” However, the film also highlights the general problem of “othering” by underlining the danger of seeing people who are not exactly like oneself as “other.” Throughout the film, characters identify other characters as different and speak condescendingly of those who are not like themselves. Though the main feud seems to be between Shiites and Sunnis, other differences between the characters are also highlighted. Here are some descriptive lines from the film:

“Goddamned Sunni!”

“You know those Pakis, you have to keep an eye on them.”

“Fucking Shiites!”

“Fucking Bedouin!”

“I don’t trust the Egyptian.”

“How the fuck could you leave me with those Turks?”

All of these comments are very offensive, but at the same time they underline the many different Muslim identities at play in the film: Sunni, Shiite, Pakistani, Egyptian, Bedouin, Turkish. In this way, it is made clear that there is no such thing as a generic Muslim. However, by representing this “othering” as the problem – as the character Salah puts it: “We hate each other to death” – the film

also challenges the audience to think about the dangers of “othering,” emphasizing that this is not just an issue for Muslims. As Jamil’s father says: “Shiite, Sunnis, Jews, Christians. We are all possessed by hatred. Even though we all worship the same God.”

A lot of the violence in the film seems to take place in the name of religion, but the film also includes other voices on this issue. Omar, for example, stops his friend Jamil from referring to Shiites in a derogatory manner, pointing out his own connection to this form of Islam. The character called “the Egyptian,” who is a Sunni, but a friend of the murdered man, who was a Shiite, simply states that the Koran was given to all Muslims, when asked who he thinks should have been the first caliph. Most importantly, though, Jamil’s father criticizes the logic of revenge that seems to drive everyone, not least Jamil. Jamil accuses his father of not avenging his wife, even making Jamil shake the murderer’s hand when they met him in the street and leaving it to Jamil to kill him. Jamil’s father, however, points out the hypocrisy of his son, who will not eat pork, because it is a sin, but has no problem with killing somebody, which is also a sin. The explanation Jamil’s father gives as to why he himself did not avenge Jamil’s mother is simple, but straight to the point: “Had I avenged your mother then who would have taken care of you?” In the film, Islam thus becomes a religion of violence only for those who ignore the central aspects of this religion, or as the closing quotation from the

Quran puts it: “Who so ever kill a human being it shall be as if he killed all mankind.”

Multiple masculinities

Go with Peace Jamil thus offers a fairly multifaceted image of Muslims and Islam. At closer examination the film also provides several different ideals of masculinity. Although Muslim masculinity is constructed as violent through the film’s protagonists, who over and over again take part in violent acts, the fact that it shows Muslims of several kinds highlights that Muslim men are not all the same, and that consequently, Muslim masculinity, too, is not a straightforward matter. It becomes obvious early on in the film that religion means different things for different characters. For some, both Sunnis and Shiites, it is important to follow religious dietary prescriptions and respect the holy space of the mosque, while for others faith is only important as something that differentiates them from others. The Egyptian, for example, throws away his ice cream when his friend mentions that ice cream sometimes contains pork fat, but his friend continues to eat. Salah, a Shiite, will not enter the Sunni mosque where Jamil is hiding. When the Egyptian enters the mosque, he takes off his rings and jewellery in accordance with tradition, after he receives disapproving looks due to his attire (a sweaty tank top and lots of gold jewellery). Though the Egyptian mentions that he

sympathizes with Jamil, he is still as willing as the other characters to perform acts of violence – among other things beating Jamil bloody when they finally catch up with him.

Overall, the film constructs young Muslim men in particular as problematic, but even among these characters there are variations. Some have families and children, some only think about themselves; some would give their lives for their friends, others would have them sacrifice themselves; and some are ready to kill a child, others to die for him. These variations make the characters come alive. Sophie Engberg Sonne captures well the complexity of the characters in *Go with Peace Jamil* and their truly human qualities in her review of the film for the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten*: “It [some unevenness in the story] does not change the fact that the human drama and the dominating conflict between Sunni and Shiite Muslims is both educational and important. There are no clear bad guys in *Go with Peace Jamil*, they all have warring and atoning sides, which makes the tragedy so much greater.”²⁶

As in many other films about Muslims, most of the Muslim men in *Go with Peace Jamil* come off as very traditionally masculine, perhaps even hyper-masculine. Via their attire and the spaces where they are situated they are linked with very conventional masculine symbols that highlight toughness, violence, and machismo. Several of the characters dress in black or partly in black; Jamil, for example, wears a black leather jacket in many scenes. Despite

the fact that tattoos are generally prohibited in Islam, several of the characters have visible tattoos and a tattooed hand is seen on one of the images used in publicity for the film. Also, several of the characters carry weapons and thus drive home the fact that here, masculinity is constructed as violent. In contrast to the women, the men furthermore spend a lot of their time in the streets or in other public spaces, or cruising the streets in their cars. Both the cars and their activity in the streets further associate the Muslim men with traditionally masculine models.

But despite of all these very obviously conventional masculine traits, there are also many other less apparent, but equally important traits which in the film are connected with Muslim masculinity. Compared to the traditional image of the good or bad guys in western films, who very often come across as being in control, independent, and physically strong,²⁷ the male characters in *Go with Peace Jamil* combine a macho attitude that highlights strength and seems to glorify violence with emotionality, intimate physical contact, community and family. One of the first scenes in the film to exemplify this is when the murdered man is found by his friends and they are shown caressing him and openly expressing their sorrow. A less tragic aspect of such physical expressions of emotions can be found in scenes with Omar and Jamil, who are often shown hugging and touching each other. When Jamil's cousin makes fun of this, he too is lovingly caressed and lavished with hugs and kisses to make him feel a part of the

group. This cousin later uses the same emotional intimacy to convince Jamil that it is his duty to avenge Omar. When Jamil tries to walk away and ignore his cousin's demands, he is pulled close by his cousin and reminded of what is expected of him. Shargawi's film here captures a cultural difference in appropriate masculine behaviour, namely the lack of anxiety over physical contact between men that is found in Arab cultures. From an outside perspective, and taking into account the conventional ways of representing men in western films (as being not physically close), these images of men hugging and kissing are noticeable and challenging to mainstream ideas of appropriate behaviour among men, although it is no doubt nothing out of the ordinary for someone who is a part of this culture.

Many of the male characters in *Go with Peace Jamil* also turn out to be family men for whom their children especially mean everything. Throughout the film, Jamil is shown taking care of his son, Adam. Omar also spends time with Adam in the first scenes in the film, and later it turns out that he himself has two daughters. Abu Moussa, who has betrayed Jamil's whereabouts to the men who want to kill him and who is pulled into the vendetta when Omar is accidentally killed by the men coming to take Jamil away, sits by his daughter's bed waiting for Jamil to turn up and take his revenge. It is in turn the sight of the daughter that seems to still Jamil's hand when he finally arrives. Mahmoud also has a son that he brags about, and it is through talking about their sons that Jamil's father tries to move Mahmoud to not take his revenge on Jamil.

Age, too, is a decisive factor in the construction of masculinity in this film. While not all of the older men come across as especially lovable, there is one man that stands out and this is, as already noted, Jamil's father, played by the director's father, Munir Shargawi. This character challenges Jamil's actions as nobody else does and illustrates the importance of thinking of your children first, something that cannot be combined with a personal vendetta. In contrast to Jamil, Jamil's father often dresses in light clothes and seems to be comfortable in many different surroundings, both in his home and the world outside. Interestingly, he confronts his son about the violence Jamil has perpetrated when they are in the kitchen, and in the context of food. He argues convincingly against the madness of thinking that violence might be ended through violence. This case of older men questioning younger men and trying to persuade them to change their ways is something that can be noticed in other Scandinavian films about Muslims as well: the older generation of Muslim men are often represented as more open-minded and more ready to challenge prevailing norms than younger male characters. This represents a striking contrast to prevalent representations of Christian characters in Scandinavian films, in particular religious community leaders, where men of the older generation are usually the ones sticking to traditional norms.²⁸ Via the character of Jamil's father, Muslim men are also connected with food preparation, otherwise a typically feminine activity. Omar serves homemade hummus made according to a recipe of Jamil's father, who is later shown cooking for his son and

grandson, and, in one of the most important scenes of the film, serves his son pork to make him face up to his hypocrisy in following some religious rules and ignoring others.

All these different aspects contribute to making the representation of Muslim men in *Go with Peace Jamil* quite complex. In other words, in this film we find the challenge to prevailing simplistic and one-sided representations of masculinity that many scholars have called for in the context of men in films more generally.²⁹ The representation of male characters is one thing, however, while the representation of female characters is another.

Invisible women

Although male Muslims in *Go with Peace Jamil* are constructed as fairly complex and varying characters for whom religion can lead to peace as well as war, and love as well as hate, one could argue that this complexity is partly built on an absence; Muslim women play a very limited role in the film and their absence provides the men with multiple roles. This situation is of course nothing new in film and other narratives about men, and it has been pointed out over and over again in studies of gender and film or gender and narratives about men. Stephen M. Whitehead writes: “[D]espite their absence from the main scene [...] women play a key role in the imagery of ‘man in his world.’ They exist, usually, as the

purpose, the vulnerable, the flight from, the prize, the sought after, the protected. ‘Woman’ is omnipresent, yet necessarily curtailed by the masculine mysteries invoked by the images of man doing ‘his own thing’.”³⁰ This is also very much the case in *Go with Peace Jamil*.

There are only five women characters of any importance to be found in *Go with Peace Jamil*, and they all have pretty much one and the same role; they are mothers and wives, or in the case of Amira, Jamil’s sister, she is sister and babysitter, i.e., they are all defined in relation to the men of their families. The most important female character, Jamil’s mother, never appears since she is already dead when the film opens. However, we learn hardly anything about this woman, although her murder sets off the whole tragic story of the film. The only information we receive is that Jamil is like her in the sense that both he and his mother are difficult for Jamil’s father to comprehend. They are mysteries to him, but while the mystery of Jamil is in some sense solved in the course of the film, the mystery of his mother prevails. She is important for her son since her murder seems to have determined the course of his life, but she is a cause without agency.

The other central woman in *Go with Peace Jamil* is Yasmina, Jamil’s wife, of whom we also learn very little. Jamil has left her, it seems, because he has been occupied by his thoughts of revenging his mother. Yasmina works as a belly-dancer, a job that is a sin according to Jamil’s father. She refuses to leave with Jamil since she believes he will never change and leave his violent life. In this

sense she is given some agency, but quite clearly the film is not her story. Omar's wife appears in one scene with her daughters at Omar's memorial where she demands that Jamil shall avenge Omar. Abu Moussa's wife is seen at their home looking very displeased and turning her back on her husband and not providing him with any comfort while he waits for Jamil. Mahmoud's wife, on the other hand, tries to stop Jamil from beating up her husband at the end of the film, while Amira is seen looking after Adam and being bossed around by Jamil. All these women are in some way involved in what is happening, but they are not allowed to actively take part in the action.

While the men constantly talk about religion, the women are silent on this matter throughout the film, as they are silent in general. The world that Shargawi portrays is thus a world of men, where women seem to be of little importance as anything other than a reason to commit murder. Since this world is a world of violence and death, the fact that women do not take active part in the story is perhaps not entirely bad, but since the women clearly are victims of this violence – by being killed, losing their loved ones and being threatened by violence – their silence and absence become a real lack, suggesting their unimportance in this context. Compared to other Scandinavian directors, Shargawi, in other words, does little to challenge the stereotypical image of Muslim women as being controlled and Muslim men as the controllers.

The future of Islam in film

In *Go with Peace Jamil*, Shargawi presents a both disturbing and challenging image of Islam and Muslim men. Shargawi is clearly critical of violence, and especially violence in the name of religion. As we have seen, his characters do seem to reflect a common stereotype, as most of them are young, violent, and religious; but at the same time they challenge simplistic views of Muslim manhood. In a way, the film's critique is also more complex than a simple critique of violence in the name of religion. When related to other Scandinavian and European films dealing with Muslims and immigrants, the film can also be argued to express a critique of a society where immigrants have been marginalized and violence has become something commonplace and necessary to survival. In *Go with Peace Jamil*, the critique of politics and this lack of social integration are not as evident as in some other Scandinavian and European productions, since the reason why the characters are presented as outsiders to society is not discussed; but it is a question the film indirectly raises. In between the scenes of violence, the possibility to live in peace seems to be what many of the characters hope for. For the audience that manages to see past the violence and recognize their own possible prejudices, the film can present a much-needed challenge to see the human person instead of the labels we attach to each other, often in the name of religion.

Regarding the future of Islam in films made in the western world, Shaheen is hopeful that a change will come and is already on the way. In his study he discusses a number of Arab-American or Muslim-American directors that are making a name for themselves today, such as Annemarie Jacir, Jackie Salloum, and Rolla Selbak. These directors offer different and important voices when it comes to representing Islam in film.³¹ In the Scandinavian context, filmmakers such as Shargawi also provide more challenging representations of Islam. One hopes, then, that the future will bring complex stories about both Muslim men and women, with characters that can help to uproot the many debilitating stereotypes. The peaceful and constructive interactions of characters from different religious and cultural backgrounds that some contemporary films imagine³² are also encouraging. However, for these representations to become more common, both filmmakers and audiences need to take a stand and question one-sided representations and demand stories that offer up diverse voices. Via these productions film can become something that does not merely reinforce difference, but rather enables comprehension and co-existence and helps us see the person behind the label.

¹ Islam in the media has been analyzed in a number of noteworthy studies. See Elizabeth Poole and John E. Richardson, eds., *Muslims and the News Media* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

² The centrality of the 9/11 events for thoughts on religion and media is discussed in Stewart Hoover, *Religion in the Media Age* (London: Routledge, 2006).

³ For an introduction to Muslims in films see, e.g., Rubina Ramji, "Muslim in the Movies", in *The Continuum Companion to Religion and Film*, ed. W. L. Blizek (New York: Continuum, 2009), 177-187.

⁴ The new generation of Scandinavian immigrant directors and their works has been discussed in a number of studies. See for example Rochelle Wright, "'Immigrant Film' in Sweden at the Millennium," in *Transnational Cinema in a Global North: Nordic Cinema in Transition*, eds. A. Nestingen and T. G. Elkington (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005), 55-72.

⁵ The article is based on a paper presented in the panel on religion and masculinity in film at the eighth Conference on Media, Religion and Culture in Eskisehir, Turkey, July 8-12, 2012.

⁶ A social constructivist view on gender has been used in a number of studies. For an introduction to the topic see Judith Lorber and Susan A. Farrell, eds., *The Social Construction of Gender* (Calif: Sage, 1991).

⁷ For a detailed study of the mediatization of religion in Nordic society see Stig Hjarvard and Mia Lövheim, eds., *Mediatization and Religion Nordic Perspectives* (Gothenburg: Nordicom, 2012).

⁸ Jack G.. Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2009), 8.

⁹ Ideology and film has been analyzed from a number of perspectives. For an introduction to ideology and religion in film see Joel W. Martin and Conrad E. Ostwalt Jr., eds., *Screening the Sacred: Religion, Myth, and Ideology in Popular American Film* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1995).

¹⁰ Amir Hussain, "Islam," in *The Routledge Companion to Religion and film*, ed. J. Lyden (Routledge: New York, 2009), 132.

¹¹ Hussain, "Islam," 136.

¹² Rubina Ramji, "From Navy Seals to The Siege: Getting to Know the Muslim Terrorist, Hollywood Style," *Journal of Religion and Film* 9/2 (2005), accessed May 15, 2013, <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/Vol9No2/RamjiIslam.htm>.

¹³ Richard Dyer, *The Matter of Images: Essays on Representations* (London: Routledge, 1993), 11-18.

¹⁴ Several studies of ethnicity have also focused on gender. See for example Jude Davies and Carol R. Smith, *Gender, Ethnicity and Sexuality in Contemporary American Film* (Edinburgh: Keele University Press, 1997).

¹⁵ The wave of strong female characters on film and TV during the last two decades has inspired a number of studies. For a discussion of how female power often becomes a problem in film see Sherrie A. Inness, *Tough Girls Women Warriors and Wonder Women in Popular Culture*

(Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999). For a discussion of problematic female religious leadership see Sofia Sjö, "Are Female Messiahs Changing the Myth? Women, Religion and Power in Popular Culture and Society," in *Reconfigurations Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Religion in a Post-Secular Society*, eds. Stefanie Knauss and Alexander Ornella (Graz: Lit, 2007), 59-72.

¹⁶ Gender and Islam is discussed in a number of recent works. For a good introduction to gender and Islam and current research see Nelly Van Doorn-Haden, "Gender and Religion: Gender and Islam", in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Lindsay Jones (Detroit: Macmillan, 2005), 3364-3371.

¹⁷ For a multifaceted perspective on women and Islam see for example Suad Joseph, ed., *Encyclopedia of Women & Islamic Cultures* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

¹⁸ For an introduction to the topic of masculinity and Islam see Lahoucine Ouzgane, "Islamic Masculinities: Introduction," *Men and Masculinities* 5/3 (2003), 231-235.

¹⁹ For more on genre and gender see Mary Gerhart, *Genre Choices, Gender Questions* (London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992) and Christine Gledhill, ed., *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

²⁰ Ramji, "Muslim in the Movies," 181-183.

²¹ For a detailed discussion of Swedish examples of Muslims and immigrants in film see Carina Tigervall, *Tigerns avklippta morrhår: Vi och de andra i den nya svenska filmen anno 2000* (Umeå: Umeå Universitet, 2003) and Carina Tigervall, *Folkhemskfilm: med "invandraren" i rollen som den sympatiske Andre* (Umeå: Umeå Universitet, 2005).

²² The scholarly interest in religion in Nordic and Scandinavian films has increased a great deal lately. For a discussion of the individualization of religion in Scandinavian films and the image of religion more generally in Nordic productions see Sofia Sjö, "Bad religion/good spirituality? Explorations of religion in contemporary Scandinavian films," *Journal of Scandinavian Cinema* 2:1 (2012), 33-46.

²³ For a detailed Danish interview with Shargawi see Christian Erin-Madsen, "Blodhævn – fulgt af nagende tvivl," *Berlingske* May 26, 2008, accessed May 20, 2013, <http://www.b.dk/kultur/blodhaevn-fulgt-af-nagende-tvivil>.

²⁴ Ebbe Iversen, "Haevnen," *Berlingske* June 2, 2008, accessed April 25, 2013, <http://www.aok.dk/film/haevnen-0>.

²⁵ For an introduction to different Muslim groups see for example S. A. Nigosian, *Islam: Its History Teaching and Practices* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004).

²⁶ Sophie Engberg Sonne, "Gå med fred, Jamil," *Jyllands-Posten* May 29, 2008, accessed April 24, 2013, <http://jyllands-posten.dk/kultur/film/article1355720.ece>.

²⁷ For more on gender and power in film see Yvonne Tasker, *Spectacular Bodies Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

²⁸ Sofia Sjö and Arní Svanur Daníelsson, “Detraditionalization, Diversity, and Mediatization: Explorations of Religion in Nordic Films,” *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 26/1 (2013): 45-62.

²⁹ For a more detailed discussion of representations of men and masculinities and challenges for the future see, e.g., Davies and Smith, *Gender, Ethnicity, and Sexuality*.

³⁰ Stephen M. Whitehead, *Men and Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002): 119.

³¹ Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs*, 6.

³² In the case of Islam in Scandinavian productions see for example the previously mentioned *Eat Sleep Die* (2012) by Gabriela Pichler. For a popular European production, see François Dupeyron’s *Monsieur Ibrahim* (2003).

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