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Hala

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Hala

Abstract

This is a film review of *Hala* (2019), directed by Minhal Baig.

Keywords

Islam, Assimilation, America, Immigrants

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Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Film and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture. He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



Hala (2019), dir. Minhal Baig

Muslim teenager Hala is the child of immigrants from Pakistan. Her parents keep a close eye on her as they worry about the influences of American culture: her mother is perturbed when she skips her morning prayers (fajr), and they worry about her being alone with boys. For her part, Hala just wants to be a normal American teenager, and although she dutifully makes up her prayers after school and wears her hijab, she also has a crush on a non-Muslim boy, Jesse, who shares her interest in skateboarding as well as poetry. As their covert relationship develops, she lies to her parents about her whereabouts and eats non halal food. And yet she does not want to totally discard her family or her religious and cultural identity; instead, she would just like to be able to be herself.

Events come to a head when she realizes her parents' arranged marriage is not a happy one, which makes her even more averse to their attempts to coerce her into one. In her high school English class, they read Henrik Ibsen's play *A Doll's House*, and Hala identifies with Nora's decision to leave her husband at the end of that play, as well as her quest for self-determination,

authenticity, and honesty. Her mother understands her better than her father, realizing that Hala must make her own decisions. They are not in Pakistan anymore, and that has created challenges for all of them, but immigrants sometimes must compromise with a new culture in order to adapt. Part of this may involve more opportunities for female self-determination, which is hard for conservative patriarchal men to accept; of course, we should remember that there is plenty of patriarchy in home grown American culture which does not need to be imported anew, so there is no reason to suggest only immigrant men have that problem.

Director Baig said in the Q and A that this is a highly personal project for her, essentially telling her own story of her struggle to find her own identity in America. Many Muslim (and other) immigrants search for ways to adapt to American culture without losing their own religion and cultures, and non-immigrants are often unsympathetic to this desire. At the end of the film, Hala is shown in her college dorm room saying her prayers by herself; then, she rolls up her rug, takes off her hijab, and goes outside onto the campus dressed like any college student might. One might interpret this to mean that she is saying goodbye to her Muslim identity and moving on; but I prefer to see it as her own form of balance, keeping her religious identity as part of her life without letting it determine all parts of it. American Muslims (and other religious groups) face similar questions about how to live their religious identities, and there is no single answer about how best to do so. This film is a sensitive portrait of one girl's attempt, and it feels like she has found a viable way to value her past while pursuing her future.