

REVIEW

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How to Meet Muslims: A (Cinematic) Primer

If you don't know about some of these films, consider yourself uncultured.

By HAROON MOGHUL

The most effective way to counter a prejudice is to know someone about whom the prejudice is supposed to apply. Those who personally know Muslims are far less likely to have negative thoughts and feelings about Muslims—but in a country of now almost 310 million Americans and only several million Muslims, this advice remains wishful.

Add to it that Muslims, unhelpfully, are not distributed evenly across the country, but concentrated in places like New York City, where almost one million Muslims live in our nation's most crowded metropolitan area. (There is, astonishingly, no major cluster in Oklahoma, despite the obvious importance of that state to the global campaign to install Shari'ah law in random places.) Short of putting Muslims on buses and driving them around the country to be gawked at, talked to, and interacted with, what more can be done?

The next best thing to a living, breathing Muslim is an approximation of one. That is, the silver screen (had you said robots, I'd counter: Muslims will be the last people on Earth to come up with robots). Why not? Movies explore the lives and experiences of Muslims in a format that can be watched as easily at home as on the train (that's what iPads are for).

Plus, a lineup of cool movies, foreign and domestic, will only make you, your friends, or your community look intimidatingly more sophisticated. Who doesn't like movies? And who likes people who don't like movies?

Fear of a Brown Planet

Probably a third of the world's Muslims live in or come from the Indian subcontinent, such as this writer, descended from the steamy plains of the Punjab but raised in gelid New England. And South Asia's a part of the world we never stop hearing about. Of course, most of this attention is directed to Pakistan, so let's start there.

In *Silent Waters*, we follow a young man from a small village impressed by the Islamist message coming from more urban types. But his falling for the forces of extremism doesn't come without a price, not least for the secrets buried in the village, sad attempts to forget historic violence and move on, as best as possible. We see in this unsettling film the true cost of extremism, and the ways in which it has undermined, cruelly and uniquely, the religious culture of the societies it does not spring from so much as it consumes from within.

If I have a quarrel with the film, it is the suggestion that such extremism can be blamed solely on

the 1980s dictatorship of Gen. Zia ul-Haq, who presided over Pakistan during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. In fact, the country's leaders long played with and manipulated religious rhetoric to achieve secular objectives. One example of this is the 1971 War, a consequence of which was the independence of Bangladesh, previously East Pakistan.

It all started when, after national elections, the party representing the eastern half of the country clearly won, but the dominant western elite refused to accept a result that would find them subordinated. Much of this refusal was rooted in ethnic supremacism and religious chauvinism (Many of West Pakistan's elites often saw Bengali-speaking East Pakistanis as culturally inferior and Islamically compromised.)

Hundreds of thousands of innocents were slaughtered in this war, as the ostensibly secular Pakistani military violently put down East Pakistanis whose votes had been summarily dismissed; this same military also empowered "religious" militias to assist in their efforts. And West Pakistan's leading politician, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, father of Benazir Bhutto, childishly refused to accept the results of Pakistan's national election, which saw his chance for power defeated. He could have done or said something to try to put an end to the violence, and allow the winning party to take power, but instead he preferred to watch it unfold.

For the countless who perished in what became Bangladesh, the kind of religious extremism that came to plague Pakistan from the 1980s onwards was not a new thing; unfortunately, a certain elite bias ensures that this part of Pakistan's history is forgotten. To see what I mean, you won't want to miss *The Clay Bird*.

How Muslims Killed Fascists

One of the most prominent Palestinians of the British colonial era was the Mufti Haj Amin Al-Husseini, who did very little for his people, and still less for the world, by choosing to side with the Nazis even though he knew full well what the Nazis were up to. Many times this fact is trotted out to make the argument that all Palestinians, Arabs, and/or Muslims are fascists. This historical amnesia is not only unfortunate, but it has had devastating human consequences.

While Husseini was only one man, however twisted, hundreds of thousands of Arabs and Muslims fought as Allies, constituting huge percentages of the Allied forces. There were Muslims from all over India, North Africa, and West Africa, fighting in the British and French armies. We could even debate if the war could have been won without their sacrifices.

One of the most beautiful, finely made, and moving tellings of how these heroes fought and died for, and were forgotten by, countries not their own is the French-language *Days of Glory*. You have to have it. Americans all across the country love World War II movies—it's that, and something more. What better way to share something about Muslims than through a historic experience which is dear to Americans, meaningful to our history, and shows a ridiculously positive example of cooperation and shared sacrifice?

As for Suicide Bombing...

If you want to see the plight of the Palestinians in all its uncomfortable rawness, if you want to know what such a long-lasting conflict has done to the region and its peoples, regardless of their religion

and ethnicity, you would certainly be shocked to watch *Paradise Now*. Many may be deeply upset by this film, and for good reason. It is at times hard to watch, but harder to look away from. It is the best of what a movie can present: an image that continues long after the screen has gone dark. And it has an ending that you and your friends will be talking about for hours more.

The Butcher and the Princess

But let's not let ourselves get too depressed.

Award-winning filmmaker Musa Syeed, a recent graduate of New York University's Tisch School, has made two absolutely brilliant documentary films, equal parts touching, hilarious, and surprising. The short film *A Son's Sacrifice* tells the charming process by which the American child of immigrants decides to follow in his father's footsteps and become a halal butcher.

Syeed's more recent film is *Bronx Princess*, centered around a vivacious teen, almost off to college, whose father has been called back to West Africa, where he will serve as the chief of his people. She's left to navigate the confusing tangle of religion, identity, and adolescence in the overwhelming cacophony of New York City. Both films are awesome. Both films are fun. Both films make for an unusual, unexpected, and delightful introduction to Islam in America.

In charge of a film festival? Syeed's currently producing a film about Kashmir; in the meanwhile, both of these titles will win over audiences.

What Color is God?

If you don't already know about Iranian films, consider yourself embarrassed and uncultured.

Some of the most creative films in the world come from Iran, perhaps because of a regime of censorship that forces Iran's undeniably creative filmmakers to find ways to tell stories without the easy use of physical violence or explicit sexuality. Hence Iranian movies tend to feature layers upon layers; they are sometimes very slowly paced for our ADD American expectations, which require something shooting, screaming, or steaming every few minutes—give it a little patience and you'll be won over.

The Lizard was banned in Iran after playing in cinemas for only a month—during which time it became one of the top-grossing domestic films in Iranian film history! *The Lizard* tells the awkward story of an otherwise unimpressive criminal who, through an act of random charity, is transformed into a mullah. Anyone can relate to the deeper tragedy and the obvious comedy at work in a society under religious rule coming to terms with a flawed, human clergy and all the varieties of piety, whether the good-natured, sometimes embarrassingly eager faith of villagers or the regularized orthodoxy of the government.

For an idea of the subtle religiosity that preceded Iran's Islamic revolution, and will outlast its worst instincts, *The Color of Paradise* will leave you drowning in tears. It's the astonishingly moving story of a blind boy whose father is ashamed of his son, and angry with his lot in life. In the end the tragic figure isn't the son cut off from the sight of the world, but rather a father blind to what he has, and desperate for what he cannot have. I loved this so much I bought a copy for myself, and bought more for friends and family. When I shared it with relatives across the world, they loved it, too.

Under The Moonlight tells the story of an aspiring cleric who finds himself on the wrong side of the tracks, sharing the underbelly of a bridge with prostitutes and drug dealers for the first time in his life. *A Moment of Innocence* goes backwards in time, with a filmmaker reimagining and recording the steps by which he became a revolutionary, the deep passions that inspired his desire to overturn Iran's order, and the (im)possibility of a road back (read [this](#) to get a sense of what the film is trying to do, and why).

But maybe that's too much seriousness, or just outside the range of cultural comfort. Young filmmaker Justin Mashouf, an American partly of Iranian heritage, produced a documentary that digs into both his identity and his hobby—breakdancing. Though, judging by how he moves, hobby doesn't go far enough to do his passion justice, and you'll be even more amused to see him go to Iran to uncover the country's underground breakdancing scene. It's called *Warring Factions*.

The Disclaimer Strikes Back

I don't promise that these titles cover everything of the Muslim experience. How could they? Nor are these, properly speaking, films about Islam as a religion—at least, not instructionally so. (I could, if you'd like, write an article about that.) They are instead films about the lived experiences of Muslims, which explore some of the issues that bind Muslims together or drive them apart, striking questions which anyone open to the breadth of human experience can relate to.

These films do their best to show the beautiful and the terrible in the incredibly diverse and often traumatized peoples and societies of the Muslim world; in the case of the three American movies, they show both the differences and similarities of the immigrant experience and the need to find echoes, whether in the past or across the ocean, to root the self. In that sense, since religion is the aspiration to live a certain way, inspect and nurture the better self, and challenge certain assumptions, these films are quite “religious.”

Especially in the dead of winter, it's not asking too much to sit down in front of the television, pull a blanket over yourself, and open your mind. If you don't like them (and I can't imagine why), you'll just fall asleep, and that's usually not so bad, either.