Women, Islam and media: the challenges of teaching sensitive subjects

Eylem Akatav recently launched UEA’s new module on Women, Islam and Media. She discusses the programme’s inspiration.

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It was in 2005 when the cover of Time magazine featured Mona Lisa in veils, it was then when I had an urge to think, write and research more about women, Islam and the media.

The illustration of a European woman veiled crystallised stereotypical understandings and perceptions not only of a religion, but also of a religion's relationship with women. The analysis of this cover image became my first international conference paper and an article for Feminist Theology Journal, which linked this image to the issues around cultural identity, politics, religion and feminism in the context of Turkey.

The same year Eylem Kaftan's thought-provoking documentary Vendetta Song was released. It is a significant film that invites analysis of its exploration of "honour" killings, gender inequalities, the practice of arranged marriages and the semi-feudal social structure in Eastern Turkey. The film made me think about how religious values are significant factors in what determines cultural practices and customs. So I started asking the question of what can be said about the nature of the relationship between religion, tradition and the way women are represented in film?

Skip to May 2011, the School of Film and Television Studies at the University of East Anglia funded me to visit Women Make Movies in New York. During my visit I saw fascinating documentaries by, for and about women, which explored issues around Islam in the east and the west, including They Call Me Muslim, about different perceptions on veiling in Iran and in France; Love, Honour and Disobey, about domestic violence and Muslim women in the UK and Unveiled Views, which questions whether Muslim women need saving, or whether they are in fact already independent.

Looking at the notebook I had taken with me to this trip now, I see how I had already planned the weekly structure of my new module Women, Islam and Media. In fact, for the current position I hold at UEA I had to give a presentation during the interview, on what module I would set up as a final year option for a degree in Film and Television Studies. Women, Islam and Global Media was my answer.

The module has already proven to be a fascinating teaching, learning and thinking experience both for me and the students of the module. Considering a variety of examples from a variety of national media texts and contexts enables a thought-provoking discussion.
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It presents opportunities and challenges simultaneously. In the first session of Women, Islam and Media I asked students to draw me a picture of a Muslim woman by giving me some keywords. The picture that emerged was of oppressed women, in veils, in a black dress. Dark and silent were recurring words and there was nothing with any positive connotations. This is precisely the task of the module: to understand where this image in our minds come from and how this is related to the media and, more importantly, why?

Researching, teaching and discussing the complex relationship between media images, women and religion is a challenging task which requires a subtle approach. To address this challenge and complexity, my aim is to make teaching this topic meaningful, and go beyond the superficial, while being critical and investigative. Some of the topics have a highly emotive nature; for example "honour" crimes and the way they are represented in the media (both in the east and in the west) has the potential to be divisive, and may intensify sensitivities.

As far as my teaching style and philosophy is concerned, it is crucial to create a conducive space for students where they can have meaningful academic conversations in a critical manner about challenging and controversial issues. Because it aims to create a space for thorough analysis, the module does not have any lectures, rather it is based on three-hour seminar discussions (and film screenings), during which we examine a range of examples and discuss different aspects of women and Islam in a variety of media from around the world. The module encourages students to conduct independent research and to analyse media texts from a critical point of view.

The module creates an academic, social and political space where a variety of examples are discussed by a wonderfully enthusiastic group of students who come from all over the world (UK, US, China, Bangladesh, Mexico, France and Turkey) and with different levels of engagement with religion. The module not only gives me the opportunity to share the outcomes of my research on the area, but also I am privileged to hear a range of views from students.

Eylem Akatav is a lecturer in film and television studies at the University of East Anglia. She is the co-editor of online film studies journal Cinemascope and a member of the advisory board of Sine/Cine.