



THE BLUEPRINT

FOR MUSLIM INCLUSION

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FILM INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS

PRODUCED AND PUBLISHED BY

Pillars Fund

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Riz Ahmed / Left Handed Films

Left Handed is the production company started by Riz Ahmed, focused on stretching culture through telling fresh stories in bold ways.

USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative

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A special thank you to the industry experts, community leaders, and scholars who contributed their thoughts and shared their experiences.



There are 1.8 billion Muslims in the world with varied, rich, and compelling life experiences.

This Blueprint for Muslim Inclusion serves as a companion piece to the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative study *Missing & Maligned: The Reality of Muslims in Popular Global Movies* and draws from the real opportunity to engage Muslim communities further, unearth incredible stories, and ensure Muslims feel seen and empowered to tell their tales. Through extensive work with Muslim creatives and communities, Pillars Fund noticed a tremendous gap in the depiction of Muslims in the media and the daily experiences of Muslims. Pillars Fund partnered with the USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, The Ford Foundation, and actor and activist Riz Ahmed and his production company Left Handed Films to release a study on the portrayal of Muslims in the 200 top-grossing movies released between 2017 and 2019 across the U.S., U.K., Australia, and New Zealand.

Out of 8,956 characters in these films, 1.6% were Muslim, highlighting a dire need to include Muslims in media. With this data in hand, a broad coalition of filmmakers, academics, community organizers, culture change strategists, actors, and producers came together to build a blueprint for inclusion that can fundamentally change the way Muslims are portrayed on screen, thereby influencing the way Muslims are perceived in their real lives. Our coalition believes this blueprint can pave the way for a more inclusive and safer society for all, where diverse and rich life experiences are honored on and off the screen.

“As a minority, no sooner do you learn to polish and cherish one chip on your shoulder than it’s taken off you and swapped for another. The jewellery of your struggles is forever on loan, like the Koh-i-Noor diamond in the crown jewels. You are intermittently handed a necklace of labels to hang around your neck, neither of your choosing nor making, both constricting and decorative.

Part of the reason I became an actor was the promise that I might be able to help stretch these necklaces, and that the teenage version of myself might breathe a little easier as a result. If the films I re-enacted as a kid could humanise mutants and aliens, maybe there was hope for us. But portrayals of ethnic minorities worked in stages, I realised, so I’d have to strap in for a long ride.

Stage one is the two-dimensional stereotype—the minicab driver/terrorist/corner shop owner. It tightens the necklace. Stage two is the subversive portrayal, taking place on “ethnic” terrain but aiming to challenge existing stereotypes. It loosens the necklace. And stage three is the Promised Land, where you play a character whose story is not intrinsically linked to his race. There, I am not a terror suspect, nor a victim of forced marriage. There, my name might even be Dave. In this place, there is no necklace.”

Riz Ahmed, [“Typecast as a Terrorist”](#)



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The Muslim Visibility Challenge

The USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative found that out of the 200 top-grossing films they studied, only 19 had even one Muslim character.

In other words, 181 of the 200 films presented no Muslim characters who spoke one or more words. In order to address the erasure of Muslims in film in a way that creates immediate and impactful change, we invite production companies, studios, agencies, festivals, and other key influencers in the film industry to support and commit to **The Muslim Visibility Challenge**. The Challenge acknowledges that the lack of Muslim representation is not for lack of talent, but for lack of imagination. Participating companies agree to lean into imagination and abundance by:

Sunsetting terror tropes over the next 18 months.

- Slightly more than one third (39%) of Muslim primary and secondary characters identified in the Inclusion Initiative's study were shown as perpetrators of violence. The study found that it was primarily secondary characters (41.7% of all 36 secondary characters) responsible for acts of aggression.
- Plot lines that center violent terrorist characters not only inaccurately depict Muslims by creating a false persona but also flatten and silence the aspirational integrity of artists, their creative visions, and the abundance of talent present in Muslim communities.
- Scripts that are based on the "Good Muslim/Bad Muslim" paradigm pit "patriotic," secular, and "modern" Muslims participating in copaganda ("cop propaganda") and the military industrial complex against other Muslims. This feeds the problematic "clash of civilizations" narrative, which suggests Islam and Western ideals like democracy are inherently incompatible.¹
- Sunsetting terror tropes will give space for the abundance and diversity of existing and new Muslim stories across genre, intersectional identity, and message that are possible to be told.

¹ Meagen Tajalle, "Recycled Tropes and the Persistence of Islamophobia in American Films," *Inquiries Journal* 12, no. 10 (2020), <http://www.inquiriesjournal.com/a?id=1814>; Mahmood Mamdani, "The Cold War After Indochina," in *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War, and the Roots of Terror*, 63–110 (New York: Pantheon Books, 2004).

Securing a first look deal with at least one Muslim creator in the next 18 months.

- Beyond the few Muslim characters depicted on screen, the study examined how these characters were distributed across the sample of films. Muslim characters appeared in less than 20% of these top movies. By investing in Muslim creators who have deep insight into Muslim communities, companies have the opportunity to encourage and nurture the telling of stories with a Muslim lens, which will undoubtedly increase the prevalence of three-dimensional and fully fleshed-out Muslim characters on screen.

Industry Solutions by Specialty

1. **All industry leaders, regardless of specialty**, have the opportunity to uplift the importance of Muslim narratives at their companies and organizations.
 - a. **Formally recognize Muslims as a marginalized, erased, and under-resourced group in your diversity, equity, and inclusion programs.** Inclusion programs have historically not recognized Muslims as a demographic that needs focused programming. Commit to educating your staff on Muslims and how your company can become more inclusive for this population on and off screen. Bring in Muslim-identifying educators to lead your learning.
2. **Production companies and studios** have the opportunity to make a significant impact on the prevalence of Muslim characters on screen, as well as how Muslim characters are portrayed.
 - a. **Examine and reform casting practices.** The Inclusion Initiative's study identified a total of 8,965 speaking characters in the 200 top-grossing films from the U.S., U.K., Australia, and New Zealand released between 2017 and 2019. Of these, 1.6% were Muslim and 98.4% were not Muslim. With so few Muslim characters on screen, production companies can begin addressing the erasure of Muslims in film by reimagining small roles that have no impact on plot. Character names, dress, environment, and other indicators can signal Muslim affiliation and begin normalizing Muslims as they are: a regular part of society. Equally important is to consider the intersectional identities these characters bring to categories like race, gender, sexual orientation, denomination, and more. One high-impact way to ensure thoughtfulness as these practices are reformed is to hire Muslim casting directors. As a key role with tremendous agency, this will almost certainly increase the number of Muslim actors being auditioned and, ultimately, cast.
 - b. **Source Muslim vendors and suppliers.** Muslim suppliers can build inclusive spaces for Muslim actors on set, as well as contribute to accurate representation of Muslim characters on screen. Whether sourcing halal food, hijab stylists, or set designers, pulling from the pool of Muslim-led vendors will economically support Muslims in the industry while also improving content.
 - c. **Conduct inclusion script reviews that capitalize on the expertise of self-identified Muslims.** Prior to production, seek out expert cultural consultants trusted by Muslim communities to assess the script for the perpetuation of harmful tropes and inaccurate presentation of faith practices. The same cultural consultants should be used to ensure that dress, practices, and other portrayals are accurate during and after production.



4. **Festivals** can incubate Muslim talent in a meaningful and effective way, providing them a road map to gaining agency representation and career opportunities that will embed them in the film industry's ecosystem.
 - a. **Earmark slots in pipeline and lab programming for Muslim creatives each year.** While Muslim talent is often overlooked, there is a significant opportunity for festivals to support this under-celebrated group and offer a platform from which Muslims can launch their careers.
 - b. **Invite Muslim talent to serve on your board.** Muslim talent can offer important perspectives to your governing board that allows the prioritization of this often overlooked group, as well as provide insight into how to recruit, retain, and support Muslim talent.
 - c. **Intentionally invite Muslim critics and journalists to cover your festival.** Critics are an important part of the cultural ecosystem for their ability to critique and evaluate work that has meaning to the community without perpetuating harmful tropes. Having Muslim critics and journalists present to review new content can ensure that the work is fairly reviewed and evaluated.
5. **Film and drama schools** can make waves by nurturing cohorts of Muslims that need support, mentorship, and project financing.
 - a. **Invite Muslim talent to serve on your board.** Muslim talent can offer important perspective to your governing board that allows the prioritization of this often overlooked group, as well as provide insight into how to recruit, retain, and support Muslim students.

- b. **Engage your endowments and donors to underwrite fellowships and thesis films for Muslims.** Financially supporting this content creation can build the bridge from the classroom to launching a successful career.
 - c. **Support emerging Muslim filmmakers with the resources to attend the top 10 film festivals globally.** Film festivals are an opportunity for filmmakers to learn by doing, expose their work, network with gate openers, and gain confidence in their craft.
6. **Unions** can provide data about the talent existing within Muslim communities.
- a. **Survey your members to understand how many identify as Muslim.** Currently, no data exists to tell us the number of Muslim writers, directors, or other union members in the film industry. By providing raw numbers and percentages of how many Muslims are members of your union through an opt-in demographic survey, agencies, production companies, and other decision-makers can be aware of the pool that currently exists, and pipeline programs can respond by committing to goals that can increase those numbers.
7. **Philanthropists** can provide unrestricted funding and financial support to emerging Muslim creatives.
- a. **Invest in short films and features by Muslim writers, directors, and producers.** As we have seen in other arenas, specific funds dedicated to ensuring films by directors of a certain background or identity have made it possible for new stories and storytellers to emerge. Whether through grants or other investments, demonstrating the financial viability of content by, for, and about Muslim communities is essential.
 - b. **Provide unrestricted funding to be used for the variety of personal and creative needs of Muslim creatives** that allows them the financial freedom to devote time and effort to storytelling as a vocation. This is particularly important as Muslims in the United States are the faith community most likely to live in poverty, and half of British Muslims live below the poverty line (a rate 10 times higher than the national average).
 - c. **Give grants that are large enough** to provide the resources to tell the story Muslim creatives want to tell.
 - d. **Pair funding with support systems for Muslim creatives** such as mentorship, peer support, or a cohort of support.

APPENDIX A

FIVE PILLARS OF ADAPTIVE CULTURE

As we embarked on the creation of the community-led solutions for the film industry outlined in the above report, we convened more than 40 celebrated community organizations, industry leaders, artists, and academics across the United States and the United Kingdom to join our efforts and offer their expertise. This document was created in collaboration with this group to address the question: “How might we transform the representation of Muslims in the scripted/non-scripted series and film industry for the better?” Through this process we developed five pillars that reflected both the necessary mindset shifts required to transform the industry as well as the various stages in the development of a series or film that can be pivotal in the inclusion of Muslims.

We include this appendix in the hope that it honors the work of our partners who allowed us to recommend industry-wide solutions, grounds readers in our values and beliefs around collaborating with Muslim creatives, and provides an overview of the opportunities where change is possible if we lean into imagination and a growth mindset.

1. Center: Plurality of Narratives

As the most racially and ethnically diverse faith communities in the United States and Britain, Muslim creatives have an abundance of narratives to share on their lived experiences. Artists must be given a platform to accurately portray the varying lived experiences of Muslims across genres.

- Embrace polycultural and multifaceted identities by writing, producing, and directing Muslim characters who explore the various facets of their selfhood (such as race, gender, ability, class, theology) and experiences independently and in relation to Islam.
- Use Maytha Alhassen’s “Haqq and Hollywood” report to investigate whether the depictions of Muslim characters in your narratives fall into harmful stereotypes that lead to state-sanctioned exclusion and interpersonal violence directly harming Muslim communities.²³
- Normalize the use of widely accessible tools such as the Riz Test and TTIE’s Inclusion Factsheet to screen and measure how Muslims are portrayed in writers rooms.⁴⁵

² Jonathan Githens-Mazer and Robert Lambert, *Islamophobia and Anti-Muslim Hate Crime: a London Case Study* (2010) <http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.12389/20715>.

³ Maytha Alhassen, “Haqq and Hollywood” (2018), https://popcollab.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/HaqqAndHollywood_Report.pdf.

⁴ The Riz Test, <https://www.riztest.com/>

⁵ https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5f8a09a4bd8bae2e8075da0b/t/5fac308482b16a4c5a4504a5/1605120133696/TTIE_Factsheet_Muslims_November2020.pdf

2. Center: Muslim Creative Community

The scripted/non-scripted series and film industry must uplift Muslim creators and provide avenues for creative and professional development. It should invest in Muslim writers, consultants, and below-the-line crew who have “intimate knowledge” (IK), knowledge gained by being in relationship and community with a group of people, allowing for familiarity in the telling of stories.⁶

- Formally recognize Muslims as a marginalized, erased, and under-resourced group and include them in diversity and inclusion programs and casting. Inclusion programs have historically not recognized Muslims as a group that needs focused programming. Incorporate Muslims in programs that support pipelines at all levels of seniority in creative careers and executive decision-making.
- Hire Muslim writers to write Muslim characters (a Muslim character, according to the study, is one who presents with at least one explicit or multiple implicit cues that indicate their affiliation and/or devoutness to Islam). Work towards including Muslims from a variety of backgrounds who can write and accurately portray the diverse lives of Muslims.
- Incorporate cultural consultants as collaborators throughout narrative creation. Consultants should have the agency to actively contribute to the story line as it develops. Although consultants are not a substitute for writers, they are a tool for refining story lines. Consultants should be experts in screening harmful stereotypes around terror, race, and religious practice, having IK of the communities whose stories are being told.
- Provide mentorship and long-term support in the recruitment, training, and professional development of Muslim employees and artists. Most workshopping and programming misses the crucial step of giving artists a platform and building industry connections to transform a job into a long-term career. Giving their work exposure and providing access to jobs is a critical facet of developing a creative community.

⁶ It builds on representation, then authenticity, to intimate knowledge. Not only does it highlight portrayals that privilege the perspective and agency of Muslims looking out rather than being looked in upon, but it also means that you have some relationship with the people you are talking about, writing about, or portraying. Learn more from Zaheer Ali: <https://bklyner.com/muslims-in-brooklyn-event/>

3. Center: Comprehensive Funding

As there is currently little or no funding earmarked specifically for Muslims, the scripted/non-scripted series and film industry must use its economic power to support Muslim creatives through comprehensive and inclusive funding models. This will empower artists to actualize their full artistic visions.

- In your giving, provide unrestricted funding to be used for the personal and creative needs of Muslim creatives, which allows them the financial freedom to devote time and effort to storytelling as a vocation. This is particularly important as Muslims are the faith community most likely to live in poverty.
- In your giving, provide funding grants that are large enough to provide the resources to tell the story Muslim creatives want to tell.
- Pair funding with support systems for Muslim creatives such as mentorship, peer support, or a cohort of support.

4. Center: Adaptive Culture

The scripted/non-scripted series and film industry must honor the differences of artists and practitioners in the creative community by being responsive to cultural and religious differences.

- Normalize inclusion riders that allow cast members to honor cultural and religious differences (for example, establishing religious boundaries in story development).
- View religious and cultural differences as opportunities, rather than drawbacks, to telling diverse and authentic stories.
- Set clear inclusion goals that aim to specifically incorporate Muslim artists into the different facets of the industry.
- Create a line item in project budgets for consultants and writers focusing on Muslim-specific narratives.

5. Decenter: Terrorism Narratives

The scripted/non-scripted series and film industry should use its cultural power to portray the diversity of Muslim life and recognize the everyday humanity of Muslim communities. Plot lines that center violent terrorist characters not only inaccurately depict Muslims by creating a false persona but also flatten and silence the aspirational integrity of artists, their creative visions, and the abundance of talent present in Muslim communities.

- Writing and casting a diversity of Muslim characters can change the view that writing and portraying violent “terrorists” is the only entry point and path of least resistance for Muslims into the scripted/non-scripted series and film industry.
- Create scripts that are not based on the “Good Muslim/Bad Muslim” paradigm, which pits “patriotic,” secular, and “modern” Muslims participating in copaganda (“cop propaganda”) and the military industrial complex against other Muslims. This feeds the problematic “clash of civilizations” narrative, which suggests Islam and Western ideals like democracy are inherently incompatible.⁷
- Uplift Muslim writers in multiple genres and support their work and narrative arcs.
- Embrace story lines that diverge from the narrative of monolithic tropes like the “Brown Muslim Other,” which erases the diverse identities and experiences within Muslim communities.

As a supporter of creatives, Pillars Fund is invested in telling and elevating stories that explore the full humanity of our communities. We believe that by investing in artists and their artistic visions, we not only produce transformative and compelling art but also catalyze meaningful social change and community empowerment.

⁷ Tajalle, “Recycled Tropes and the Persistence of Islamophobia in American Films”; Mamdani, “The Cold War After Indochina,” in *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim*).

APPENDIX B

LIST OF RESOURCES (NOT A COMPREHENSIVE LIST)

Riz Test

The Riz Test is a five-question test that is used to determine how well Muslim characters are portrayed in film and TV. *Use it to:* screen content for harmful depictions of Muslim characters.

TTIE Factsheet

The Think Tank for Inclusion and Equity's factsheet gives an overview of harmful stereotypes in the depiction of Muslims and how to include alternative story lines. *Use it to:* get a quick rundown on stereotypes and their harmful effects as well as gain suggestions for alternative depictions of Muslims.

Maytha Alhassen, "Haqq and Hollywood"

Alhassen's report for the Pop Culture Collaborative highlights how Muslim people's identities, needs, and experiences have been distorted in television and film over the last century through an analysis of historical and political context. The report also reviews tropes Muslims are portrayed as and how they came to be. *Use it to:* get a historical perspective on the depiction of Muslims in film and the identification of harmful tropes.

Su'ad Abdul Khabeer, "Representation as a Black Muslim Woman Is Good—And It's a Trap"

In this essay in *Vice*, Abdul Khabeer highlights the tensions that arise from representation and the different dynamics at play when marginalized identities are brought into the media. *Use it to:* gain an understanding of the complexity of representation and how to empower others.

Mahmood Mamdani, *Good Muslim, Bad Muslim: America, the Cold War and the Roots of Terror*

Mamdani's book dismantles the bifurcation of good (secular, westernized) and bad (pre-modern, fanatical) Muslims by showing how these judgments stem from political motives and identities, not cultural or religious identities. *Use it to:* understand the history of political Islam and how the Good Muslim/Bad Muslim trope formed.

Lila Abu-Lughod, [**“Do Muslim Women Need Saving?”**](#)

Anthropologist Abu-Lughod argues that “rescuing women from Islam” has often served as a justification for foreign interference and military invasion of countries. This essay, and her book of the same title, offer an account of the lived experiences of Muslim women.

Use it to: see how the depictions of Muslim women have harmful political repercussions and to gain insight into the experiences of ordinary Muslim women.

Jamillah Karim, [**American Muslim Women: Negotiating Race, Class, and Gender within the Ummah**](#)

Karim’s book focuses on the intersection between ethnicity and gender by highlighting how women who experience gender-based discrimination in their ethnic groups interact with other women of different ethnic identities in pursuit of gender justice.

Use it to: get an understanding of Muslim American women’s experiences across racial and ethnic lines.

Sylvia Chan-Malik, [**Being Muslim: A Cultural History of Women of Color in American Islam**](#)

Through interviews and archival materials, Chan-Malik explores the everyday occurrences of resistance among multiracial Muslim women. Through her analysis of the lived experiences of Muslim women, Chan-Malik explores the evolution of American understandings of Islam, white nationalism, and feminism over the past century. *Use it to:* gain understanding on the different experiences of womanhood and feminisms of Muslim American women.

Evelyn Alsultany, [**Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11**](#)

Alsultany explores the duality of how the attempt to offset negative representation through the depiction of “positive” characters can perpetuate and justify exclusion and inequality. By tracing the history of representations through the push for diversity in the 1990s, Alsultany highlights the complex relationship between representation and equality. *Use it to:* gain a deeper understanding of the representation of Muslim Americans in television and film.

[**HEART, Justice for Muslims Collective and Vigilant Love: Partnership to End Gendered Islamophobia Community Report**](#)

This report, released in 2020 by HEART, Justice for Muslims Collective, and Vigilant Love, unpacks how Muslim women and girls are often seen as cultural representatives of Islam and Muslim communities, which undergirds the control and domination of their bodies

and the seizing of their agency. *Use it to:* gain an understanding of how women experience Islamophobia.

Leila Ahmed, [*Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate*](#)
Ahmed explores the historical roots of contemporary understandings of Muslim women and surveys the history of Islamic discourse on women from Arabia during the founding of Islam to modern Egypt. *Use it to:* gain an understanding of the historical roots and experiences of Muslim women.

Hussein Rashid, [*"Muslims in Film and Muslim Filmmaking in the United States"*](#)
Through an analysis of orientalism, participatory culture, and predominant stereotypes, Rashid examines the relationship of films and Muslims. Rashid analyzes how films define Muslims, how Muslims use film to define themselves, and how films set Muslims in the American national narrative. *Use it to:* gain an understanding of how the media establishes a narrative about and for Muslims in the United States.

[ISPU: Muslim American Experience Bibliography](#)

The Institute for Social Policy and Understanding has developed a bibliography of some 300 works published between 1966 and 2018 that addresses the lived experiences of American Muslims. *Use it to:* find resources by discipline on the myriad of topics and issues that relate to Muslim American life.



APPENDIX C

MUSLIM TALENT MAP

Sourcing diverse talent is a crucial part of moving the film industry into a future that better reflects the demographics and experiences of our present. Muslim talent is abundant, and there are several ways to find your next Muslim collaborator.

- *Forthcoming*: Pillars Muslim Talent Database in Collaboration with Disney. In partnership with Disney, Pillars Fund is currently building a Muslim Talent Database that will be **launched in Fall 2021**. To be hosted on pillarsfund.org, the database will consist of Muslim artists (both below and above the line) available for opportunities in the filmmaking and storytelling industries. The database will connect working professionals and emerging creators looking for their next collaborators and network connections in the United States.
- [Muslim American Casting](#)'s mission is to provide diverse Muslim talent and as-needed consulting services to the mainstream TV/film and commercial industries.
- [Muslim Women Writers in Film and TV](#) is a database of Muslim women screenwriters who primarily reside in California.
- TTIE's [Crescent List](#) is a database of Muslim TV writers.
- [Break The Room](#) is a writers room development company that approaches diverse content at its root: from the community and by the community. Through bringing emerging writers of color together with thought leaders and organizers, they create fresh authentic content in an effective, organic, and truthful way.
- [ARRAY CREW](#) is a database with a mission to support production professionals in the film and television industry from underrepresented populations.
- Color of Change's [Writers' Room Database of Experts](#) provides industry professionals with vetted, diverse experts on a wide range of topics for producers and writers in Hollywood.
- [The Muslim List](#), created in partnership with MPAC, Pillars Fund, and The Black List in 2021, highlights the very best unproduced scripts written by at least one Muslim writer.

APPENDIX D

CASE STUDIES

East of La Brea

In 2017, anti-racism organizer Margari Hill of the Muslim Anti-Racism Collaborative (MuslimARC) teamed up with award-winning screenwriter Sameer Gardezi (*Aliens in America*, *Modern Family*) to design and create an experimental writers-room-style incubator called “Break the Room.” The Pop Culture Collaborative supported this week-long incubator, which, through a viral callout and social media search, filled the room with new and emerging Muslim writers. The result: the first season of the digital series *East of La Brea*, which focuses on a young Black Muslim woman and her community in East Los Angeles.

The project embedded commitments to anti-racism and inclusion into its design and execution, from story concept to writer selection to daily agenda, which included trainings provided by Hill and her team. Gardezi identified four up-and-coming writers through social media channels and official callouts. The project received over 100 applications, and the Break the Room team selected writers Halima Lucas, Thandisizwe Chimurenga, Nia Malika Dixon, and Tanha Dil.

“*East of La Brea* highlights the vibrant stories of different communities where folks are broke, rent is high, and it’s less of a melting pot than people just melting,” reads the show’s description. The show is now executive produced by Paul Feig’s digital production company, Powderkeg.

We Are Lady Parts

Executive producer, writer, and director Nida Manzoor’s *We Are Lady Parts*, produced for Channel 4 and NBC International, tells the uproarious and gripping story of an East London-based, four-piece Muslim female punk band with a niqab-and-combat-boot-wearing manager, with Muslim characters living across a spectrum of piety, race/ethnicity, class, and sexual identities. From a halal butcher shop to the microbiology lab at Queen Mary’s University, it is a bona fide window into Muslim East London. Manzoor’s upbringing serves as inspiration for the centering of Muslim characters engrossed in punk rock and folk music, including growing up writing music with her siblings (with whom she co-wrote the original music for the series).

Ramy

Premiering in 2019, Hulu's Golden Globe and Peabody Award winning series *Ramy* has established a new industry standard for designing a Muslim talent ecosystem. *Ramy*, a series driven by the title character's spiritual journey as a first-generation Egyptian Muslim millennial in New Jersey, initiated and cultivated the careers of Muslims behind and in front of the camera. In its three seasons, creator, showrunner, actor, and director Ramy Youssef has built out a writers room that introduced three Muslim writers in season 1 (their first room) to seven writers of varying levels (from staff writer to executive producer) in the show's third season. The writers in the room embody the range of race and gender identities the show projects on screen. This represents an aberration in a media ecology that does not always consider the specificity of a Muslim writer and actor as essential to telling stories of such a racially, ethnically, and nationally diverse population.

Another common issue in Hollywood writers rooms is the lack of mobility for writers from underrepresented and marginalized backgrounds. Diversity pipeline programs tend to exclusively focus on entry-level access, which leaves many of these writers repeating entry-level positions and struggling to ascend the writing/producing hierarchy. On *Ramy*, in contrast, Iranian Muslim writer Sahar Jahani received her break into Hollywood as a writer's assistant on season 1, won the first Macro x Blacklist Episodic Lab prize for her pilot *Uncovered* (2019), and just closed a development deal with HBO Max for a project that Ramy Youssef is attached to as an executive producer. Egyptian Muslim Adel Kamal experienced a similar meteoric rise after entering the *Ramy* writers room as a room assistant, jumping from staff writer in season 2 to assuming an executive producer role in season 3.

While *Ramy* featured veteran Muslim actors like Mahershala Ali, Hiam Abbass, Amr Waked, and Laith Nakli, the series has offered non-terror genre acting opportunities to up-and-coming talents like May Calamawy (who recently nabbed a lead role in the Marvel Disney+ TV series *Moon Knight*).



The Muslim List x The Black List

In 2021, The Black List partnered with Pillars Fund and the Muslim Public Affairs Council to create The Muslim List, which highlights the very best unproduced scripts written by at least one Muslim writer based in the United States. In its inaugural year, The Muslim List showed that Muslim talent is abundant across America: over 220 scripts were submitted to the contest with 10 winners chosen. Script readers and selectors who identified as Muslim from both Pillars Fund and MPAC collaboratively chose the narratives that felt most relatable, fresh, and exciting from a Muslim audience member's perspective. The scripts submitted varied across genre, identity, and message, showing that when writers have the opportunity to tell their own stories, they will rise to the occasion by creating rich new narratives.

After the release of The Muslim List, leaders at The Black List remarked that never before had they seen as rapid a response from production companies and agencies for scripts on the list, indicating the power of both the writing talent represented on the list and the thoughtful discernment of the Muslim readers behind the selection process. Within days, the vast majority of the mostly unrepresented writers on the list secured meetings with large production companies and/or agencies. All winning writers had their scripts read by at least one agency or production company.

The log lines for the scripts on the first-ever Muslim List are a strong example of the types of stories that can be told when divesting from harmful, centuries-old tropes and committing to contemporary, new voices:

4 MONSTERS by *Khurram Mozaffar*. Four Monsters mixes up Hollywood's favorite villains into one ridiculous road trip—zombies, vampires, aliens, and... Muslims?! When a virus outbreak starts turning Los Angeles residents into the undead, all evidence points to a terrorist attack. Hoping to clear their names, four friends venture into a locked down LA and discover that Hollywood has an underbelly too ridiculous to believe and yet too believable to ignore.

BLUE VEIL by *Shireen Alihaji*. After 9/11, Amina and her father, Muhammad, move to a small town to build a home and life of anonymity. This becomes virtually impossible when Muhammad wins the Lotto. Amina struggles with hiding who she is until she discovers and begins sampling her mother's tape collection. The songs reflect her parents' migration stories to America and serve as a road map to Amina's identity.

BROOKLYN BENGALIS by *Zubaira Ahmed*. When the Mafia threatens to deport her imprisoned father, a Bangladeshi woman takes the household reins and works for the crime family while managing her chaotic and culturally strict home life.

CORPORAL GANDA by *Idrissou Mora-Kpai*. In 1951 Indochina, an African colonial soldier deserts the French army to reunite with his Vietnamese wife and son and finds himself hunted in the process.

DRUM AND VERSE by *Saleem Nasir Gondal*. In the Walls of Solomon, where Jinn and their magical drum are controlled by humans who wield the Holy Verse, life-long rebel Amal finds a path to freedom when she meets the enchanting Benazir, a mysterious Jinni with knowledge from the outside.

LADY LIBERTY by *Jenna Mahmoud Bosco*. Jamila, a brash and disillusioned parking enforcement officer, haphazardly decides to run for city council when her beloved immigrant community is threatened by a snazzy real estate developer with political ambitions. This story is inspired by the tenacious congresswomen of The Squad.

NAILA by *Nadra Widatalla*. A Black Muslim video game designer by day and prison abolitionist by night needs to quickly decide what side of capitalism she really sits on.

NOOR by *Nijla Mu'min*. Caught in the throes of grief following her brother's unsolved murder outside of a Brooklyn bodega, a Black woman develops an unexpected physical connection to the Arab man who works there. A surrender to lust and a search for truth lead their worlds to collide.

ULTIMATE SUCCESS by *Nabeel Arshad*. Sameer Sheik, a former valedictorian now a bitter, burnt-out adult, ends up back at his former high school teaching remedial English, but his life changes when his estranged sister and niece enter his life.

UNTITLED CHUBBY MUSLIM PROJECT by *Mike Mosallam*. On the verge of failing 8th grade due to a physical education requirement, Bilal, a 13-year-old Muslim boy, is forced to move into his brother's jock-filled college party pad after their grandmother has a stroke. Bilal soon realizes he isn't the only one who needs help, as he and his brother Mark (opposites in every way) find love and humor and heal unresolved issues relating to their parents' recent death.

Pillars Fund amplifies the leadership, narratives, and talents of Muslims in the United States to advance opportunity and justice for all. Since our founding in 2010, Pillars has distributed more than \$6 million in grants to Muslim organizations and leaders who advance social good. We invest in community-focused initiatives, push back against harmful narratives, uplift Muslim stories, and give collectively to generate resources within Muslim communities for Muslim communities. Learn more at pillarsfund.org.

Left Handed is the production company started by Riz Ahmed, focused on stretching culture through telling fresh stories in bold ways. In January 2021, it was announced that Left Handed had inked a first-look television deal with Amazon Studios and hired former AMC exec Allie Moore to oversee production and development. Left Handed has several projects on the horizon including *Mogul Mowgli*, a genre-busting, culturally hybrid, and award-winning debut feature from an exciting new voice in Bassam Tariq. The film is co-written, starring, and produced by Ahmed and premiered at the Berlin Film Festival where it won the Fipresci International Critics' Prize. It was nominated for a BAFTA Award for "Best British Film" and received six British Independent Film Awards nominations, with the film taking home "Best Debut Screenwriter" for Ahmed and "Best Music." Strand will release the drama in the U.S. this year.

Launched more than 10 years ago by Founder Dr. Stacy L. Smith, the **Annenberg Inclusion Initiative** is globally recognized for its valuable and sought-after research solutions to advance equality in entertainment. As a research group, Dr. Smith and the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative examine gender, race/ethnicity, LGBT status, disability, and age on screen and gender and race/ethnicity behind the camera in cinematic and episodic content as well as barriers and opportunities facing women and people of color in the entertainment industry. The Annenberg Inclusion Initiative also conducts economic analyses related to diversity and the financial performance of films. The Initiative leverages this in-depth data to identify straightforward and meaningful solutions to remedy invisibility and exclusion across the ecosystem of entertainment. Learn more at annenberg.usc.edu/aii.