

The Negative Portrayal of Arabs in American Films

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Abstract:

The original inspiration of my project stems from a very simple observation: that Arab characters are often represented in a conventional and pessimistic manner in most American films that have perpetuated an ethnically discriminated image of Arabs. In other words ,the paper broadly discusses the cruel representation of Arabs in American films that contributed in generating a number of cultural misconceptions about them.

In this paper, I intend to examine the reasons why film -makers keep presenting Arabs as psychopathic terrorists, absurd, prehistoric and substandard. I intend to assert that Arabs today-as they were more than 70 years ago-are described in American films as being robbers, ,cruel, vicious, uncultured, and religious fanatics. I go up against those who maintain that the image of the Arab is roughly distorted and stained only after September the eleventh attack on the United States in 2001.

الملخص:

يركز هذا البحث على الشخصيات العربية التي تصور بطريقة سلبية في اغلب الافلام الامريكية. كما يناقش الوصف اللاانساني للعرب في الافلام الامريكية التي ساهمت بزيادة الحقد العرقي ضد العرب. اسعى في هذا البحث الى بيان اسباب هذا الحقد وبيان اسباب وصف العرب بانهم ارهابيين وبدائيين ومتوحشين. كما اؤكد على ان هذه الصورة كانت موجودة قبل مايقارب السبعين سنة وليس كما يزعم البعض بان العرب ظهوروا كأرهابيين فقط بعد احداث ١١ سبتمبر.

vicious depiction of Muslims and Arabs are widely spread in the American society creating a demeaning image of Islam which has long preoccupied the American mainstream thinking. Doubt and hatred have become American prevalent feelings towards the faint image of Arabs¹.

Jack Shaheen explains that Arabs are hardly ever been described as simple people with usual activities and interests in Hollywood films. He also

totally suggests that the idea of presenting Arabs as different and lower on screen is necessary for building the superior self of Americans.²

Gregory Burris says, "they [theArabs] are not perceived to act according to the logic or the moral code that is applied in the civilized world"³. Western producers and film- makers are reluctant to change their depiction of Arabs and the Middle East. Through movies America projects vicious e characters and intentions on Arab people and personified those images in the mind of viewer .Mohammed Namir asserts that America avoids depicting Arabs in typical environment as other human beings but they are always the villains opposite the American "good guys".⁴ Many of the portrayals of Arabs, at first glance, give the impression of cultural and ethnic qualities that are innately hostile to Western civilization. The Arab images are often distorted and their actions, as seen by Laurence Michalak ,are considered as " violent and unpredictable and they spread fear and cause trouble, both for their surroundings and for themselves"⁵. Laurence argues that their actions seem to come from innately vicious and uncivilized impulses .Jack Shaheen in his article Reel Bad Arabs argues that Arabs in American films are portrayed either as" violent terrorists, oil billionaires and tribesmen who kidnap blond Western women".⁶

To get a better understanding of the real reasons behind the creation and use of wicked Arabs in foreign films , we must realize some of the potential roots of discrimination against them . Michelle Aguayo notes that one reason behind the portrayal of Arabs as terrible and brutal is the prejudiced persons' fears and anxieties' He states: "When the prejudiced persons can no longer control their fear, chronic anxiety will result. It puts them on alert and predisposes them to see all sorts of stimuli as menacing"⁷.

Such fears and uncertainties have become familiar and intriguing amusing themes in cinematic presentation of evil Arabs from the 1920s on into the present ,and this increases the dread and the grudge towards the Arabs.

The origin of this fear comes after World War II when the Americans hoped of a better life ,but in the 1970s many of these postwar hopes and dreams had crushed down ,and an atmosphere of distrust, cynicism, depression, and negativity flourished⁸. Gregory Burris states: "After the World War II the United States sank into a miasma of self-doubt from which

it has never fully emerged."⁹As Kim Deep saw it then, Americans expected more than the world could offer to them. He says : "We are ruled by extravagant expectation of our power to shape the world...We tyrannize and frustrate ourselves by expecting more than the world can give us or than we can make of the world." ¹⁰

Moreover, the rising power of the Middle East and the seeming threat of the Arabs became another notorious theme of the 1970s. The Middle East as Christina Klein puts it "loomed as an evolving global imaginary that became a region often contextualized in an adversarial relationship with America, and, in turn, the Arabs were reduced to an ethnic imaginary that earned our prejudicial anger."¹¹

Throughout this decade, America felt frustrated and confused about the Middle East. The Americans fear the rising power of the Arabs and they feel powerless towards this power .In other words, they have experienced a feeling of fear in their real lives concerning the Arabs and the Middle East that did not and do not always react to the western desires as they anticipate them to in their political designs and schemes.¹²

The Middle East, after the WarII, came to defy the American ideologies and political policies through the discourses of oil, wealth, and hostility. While the Middle East has been by no means excused from ill-spirited American representations in the past, in the 1970s the reputation of the Arabs was given a new level of popular American disdain in light of these policies. The rising wealth of the Arab oil nations was becoming more and more disturbing in the American view. Nimer asserts Arab wealth became an" object of American jealousy, rivalry, and fear"¹³. Expectations were that America would increasingly depend on the Middle East in the future .There was a panic that the Arabs were likely to be careless and unreliable with this new financial wealth, maybe even using blackmail against America, and, thus, it was feared that" America was funding its own demise"¹⁴. The Arabs, in contrast, were shown as smiling, gloating, integrating, intriguing, and powerful enough to drive America backwards in the modern industrial age that it worked so hard to attain. The Western 's reputation and dignity are endangered and placed in jeopardy, and in the end they never fully get their earlier perceived self – confidence.

The new, improved, and coordinated terrorist attacks of al-Qaeda on American targets at home and overseas during the Clinton period, and its

sublime attacks of September 11, 2001, generated a new period of dread of the evil Arabs that broadened this fear and dread of Muslims everywhere. After the attacks on the United States in 2001, the image of Arabs and Muslims has become even worse. The period of post-9/11 has witnessed a shocking increase in the number of abhorrence and crimes against Arabs and Muslims.¹⁵

The negative portrayal of Arabs began during the silent movie era of the 1920s. Rudolph Valentino's roles in *The Sheik* (1921) and *Son of the Sheik* (1926) set the stage for the exploration and the misused images of Arabs in European films. Both *The Sheik* and *Son of the Sheik* represented Arab characters as thieves, charlatans, killers and brutes¹⁶. The films of Orientalist fear offer no obvious crush of the Arabs, or at least no obvious victory for the Americans, and keep the evil Arabs as regular characters and continual objects of the detrimental act. In his essay "Arabs in Hollywood: An Undeserved Image", Scott J. Simon is an American who lived with the Arabs argues that of all the ethnic groups portrayed in American films, "Arab culture has been the most misunderstood and supplied with the worst stereotypes"¹⁷. Shaheen has shown us a collection of movies that produce anti-Arab stereotypes, which emphasize America's s bigoted attitudes toward the Arabs. *The Song of Love* (1923) tells the story of a power-hungry Algerian chief who plans to defeat French majestic rule and make himself the king of all of North Africa; *A Cafe in Cairo* (1924) is about an Arab desert outlaw who murders a British man and his wife but saves their daughter so that they may get married; and *The Desert Bride* (1928) portrays an Arab named Kassim Ben Ali as the leader of a group of Arab nationalists who arrest and torment a French officer and his beloved. All of these films describe the Arabs as scoundrels and are sure to close with the victory of the good Western symbol: the Algerian chief in *The Song of Love* is killed by French troops; the girl who is to marry the desert thief in *A Cafe in Cairo* is saved by an Englishman, and *The Desert Bride* ends with the escape of Ben Ali's two captives and the death of Ben Ali.¹⁸

These films, however, are reflections of real-life fears of the Arabs in the Western everyday cultural and political lives., and, therefore, the confidence of the "American national self was in peril"¹⁹. Another movie from the silent picture era that shows Arabs as uncivilized is *A Son of the Sahara* (1924). It centers on boy named Raoul who is brought up by an Arabian desert tribe. He falls in love with an officer's daughter, Barbara, who rejects his love because he is an Arab. However, when it is revealed in the film that Raoul is not

actually an Arab, Barbara is overwhelmed with love for Raoul. This story seems to be the strongest hidden attack on the Arab culture of all the Arab movies of the 1920s. Because the European woman rejects Raoul because she thinks he is Arab but then accepts him when she learns that he is in fact a European²⁰

Rober Stain says:

Arab at his worst is a mere barbarian who has not forgotten the savage. He is a model mixture of childishness and astuteness, of simplicity and cunning, concealing levity of mind under solemnity of aspect . His acts of revolting savagery are the natural results of a malignant fanaticism and a furious hatred of every creed beyond the pale of Al-Islam.²¹

Tim Semmerling in his book, *Evil Arabs in American Popular Film* bases his dispute on close readings of six films (*The Exorcist*, *Rollover*, *Black Sunday*, *Three Kings*, *Rules of Engagement*, and *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*), as well as CNN's 9/11 documentary *America Remembers*. He analyzes how these films describe Arabs as intimidating to threaten American "truths" and mythic tales—and how this uncertainty causes Americans to project evil character and intentions on Arab peoples, landscapes, and cultures. Semmerling also shows how the evil Arab narrative has even crept into the documentary coverage of 9/11. Overall, Semmerling's interested analysis of America's Orientalist fears explains how the evil Arab of American popular film is essentially an illusion that reveals more about Americans than Arabs²².

Most of these films put an unjustifiable sticker on the Arab community as being a group of terrorists and they mean that Arabs are not even worthy of portraying themselves in cinema.

Gladiator (dir.Ridley Scott, 2000), which is an epic war film that glorifies the dignified qualities of the warriors, perpetuates the same humiliating image of Arabs. The brutality of the Arab characters is underscored in scenes where they detain and enchain the wounded hero. Once more, the Western hero is given the qualities of dignity, courage and sincerity while the Arabs are represented as barbarians desert- dwellers and uncivilized. Though Arabs here feature for a very short time, the stereotypical characterization is clearly obvious. Additionally, in these films, Arabs are not presented as developed characters that can contribute to the progress of the story. On the contrary, they are

depicted as superficial , unimportant and secondary characters whose personal human attributes are completely ignored.²³

True Lies,(2006) tells the story of Harry Tasker who is a spy. This fact is unknown to his beautiful but deserted wife Helen Curtis, whose monotonous life leads her to be unfaithful. Discovering this, Tasker puts her under observation even though he should be focusing his efforts on smashing the spy-ring of Salim Abu Aziz , a terrorist group -leader who presides a group called Crimson Jihad which is responsible for many car bombings. A dappled businessman named Jamal Khaled ,who financially supports and arms Abu Aziz, is scheming to blow up nuclear bombs in the United States unless Washington withdraws all its forces from the Persian Gulf.²⁴Tasker's true job becoming known to his wife, ends up having the adventure she always craved alongside Harry, who succeeds in deceiving the militants and killing a large number of terrorists in the course of action. The film pictures screaming, homicidal terrorists who happen to be Arabs. These depictions mirror the real existence of Muslim terrorists acting in the name of Islam who moralize and practice the indiscriminate killing of Westerners²⁵. In fact, this film really predates much of the iconography linked to Muslim terrorists post-9/11. The leader, Salim Abu Aziz, gives this message:

You have murdered our women, and our children, and bombed our cities from afar, like cowards, and you dare to call us terrorists? Unless you America pull all military forces out of the Persian Gulf area, immediately and forever, Crimson Jihad will rain fire on one major American city each week, until our demands are met. First, we will detonate one nuclear weapon on this uninhabited island as a demonstration of our power.²⁶

The way Abu Aziz is described as a man who has weapons of mass destruction increases the grudge against the Arabs and leads the Americans toward the conclusion that the United States represents all that is good in the world and could never do anything to harm people around the rest of the world. Those who hate the U.S., then, must just be jealous. The film ends with Salim Abu Aziz chasing American man's daughter up an industrial crane, threatening to throw her to her death if she doesn't give him a detonation key to a nuclear bomb. In defiance, the daughter retorts, "No way, you wacko!"²⁷

Nihad Awad stated:" the barrage of negative or stereotypical portrayals of Muslims in this film will overpower any positive message".²⁸

Shaheen goes even further, describing the film as "one of the most blatantly racist movies of all time [and one which] encourages viewers to hate Muslim Arabs."²⁹ The film does nothing less than offer a "profound attempt" at exploring "the political, cultural and psychological roots of Middle Eastern terrorism,"³⁰

The faces of Muslim terrorists , as they are referred to in American movies ,are seldom clearly shown on the screen. Instead, they are typically depicted as a depersonalized mass. Edward Said, university professor at Columbia, finds that Muslims and Arabs "are essentially covered, discussed, apprehended, either as oil suppliers or as potential terrorists."³¹ He adds "rather than provide the human density of their lives, a limited series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world [are] presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression."³² Faisal Abbas, media editor of the London-based international Arabic journal, wrote on the newspaper's English website that "despite some aspects which might be perceived by some as negative, many might be pleasantly surprised after watching this film, bearing in mind that Arabs have for a long time been among Hollywood's favorite villains."³³

Shaheen argues that American movies have portrayed Arabs , knowingly or unknowingly, as "uncivilized religious fanatics and money-mad cultural 'others'.³⁴ He persuasively makes the case that filmmakers must not be pardoned for staining Arab reputation and sacrificing the truth under the false pretext of artistic license.³⁵

Conclusion

The treatment of Arabs and Muslims in American films is a case in point, and from the beginning of the American film industry, the Arab has served as both an exotic character and a villain. The use of the Arab as a villain seems to have increased in recent years in a way that shows that Americans have an antipathy to Muslims. The characterization of Arabs in the U.S. movies is closely aligned with U.S. foreign and military policy.³⁶

The evil Arab has become a stock character in American popular films, playing the villain opposite American "good guys" who fight for the American well-being. These films depicted Arabs in an unfavorable light and as a terrorist group and as violent religious radicals who can unfairly affect policymaking, encourage hate crimes, and promote divisiveness by exaggerating ethnic differences. The Arabs have no a rightful place in American society at a time of heightened tension between the United States and the Middle East.³⁷

Primary stereotypes of Muslims in Western culture can be divided into four core images: "violence, lust, greed and barbarism."³⁸ Variations of these stereotypes in Western popular culture are that Muslims have immense, but ignoble and undeserved wealth, they are barbaric and regressive, indulge in sexual excess, and are prone to violence. Such traits have long formed the core of dominant European perceptions of Muslims and Arabs, deriving from cultural traditions dating back to the Middle Ages. Michelle Aguayo believes that", the world is better off with their extermination"⁴⁰.

Some Westerners who live among Arab people discover another reality. They are impressed by Arab generosity, hospitality and compassion⁴¹.

Note

¹Laurence Michalak, Cruel and Unusual: Negative Images of Arabs in Popular Culture.(Washington, DC: 1988),p.33

². Jack G Shaheen, Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11. (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch, 2008),p.85

³. Gregory Burris, "Sultans of the Silver Screen: The Turk in Reactionary Cinema." Journal of Popular Film and Television v. 35 no. 4 (Winter 2008) p. 164-72

⁴. Mohammed Namir, America and Islam(Ny :Benguin Press,1997),p.45

⁵. Laurence Michalak,p.12

⁶ibid.p.23

⁷ Michelle Aguayo, "Representations of Muslim Bodies in The Kingdom: Deconstructing Discourses in Hollywood." Global Media Journal:(Canadian Edition, 2009),p.23

8. **ibid.p.34**
9. **Gregory Burris,p.98**
10. **Kim Deep, "Deconstructing Hollywood: negative stereotyping in film." In Women in Action(Ny: Penguin Press,1998),p.38**
11. **Christina Klien, Image of Arabs in European Cinema (TX: U of Texas P, 1982.),p.67**
12. **Hamid Enayat, Modern Islamic Political Thought (TX: U of Texas P, 1982.),p.19**
13. **Mohammed Nimer,p.29**
14. **Hamid Enayat,p.77**
15. **ibid.p.76**
16. **ibid.p.79**
17. **Scott J. Simon . Arabs in Hollywood: An Undeserved Image (Ny:Northeastern University,1989),p.90**
18. **Jack G Shaheen,p.87**
19. **ibid.p.85**
20. **Hamid Enayat,p.75**
21. **ibid.p.71**
22. **Tim Semmerling, "Evil" Arabs in American Popular Film: Orientalist Fear.(Austin: University of Texas, 2006), P.12**
23. **Hamid Enayat,p.83**
24. **Tim Semmerling,p.89**
25. **ibid.p.82**
26. **ibid.p.87**
27. **ibid.p.92**
28. **Nihad Awhad,p.11**
29. **Jack G. Shaheen, Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People (New York: Olive Branch, 2001).p.65**
30. **Ibid.p.64**
31. **Edward said,p.69**
32. **Ibid.p.75**
33. **Faisal Abbas,p.34**
34. **Jack G Shaheen,p.63**
35. **ibid.p.68**

- ³⁶ Nihad Awhad, p.21
³⁷ ibid. p.32
³⁸ Edward said, p.65
³⁹ Edward said, p.67
⁴⁰ Michelle Aguayo, p.39
⁴¹ ibid. p.38

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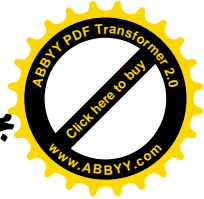
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