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“American Perceptions of Arab Countries in Film: Midwestern Students in Morocco”

“Oh, I come from a land, from a faraway place/Where the caravan camels roam/Where it's flat and immense/And the heat is intense/It's barbaric, but hey, it's home!” This lyric opens the popular Disney film, *Aladdin* (Ron Clements and Jon Musker, 1992). *Aladdin* (1992) is a prime example for the various issues that plague the representation of Arab countries and characters in American cinema. Some of the issues seen in this film are made all the more frustrating by the fact that Aladdin is meant to be a children’s movie, and these harmful stereotypes have been imposed on American kids for almost 30 years. Though the film is set in the fictional nation of Agrabah, it conveys a popular American sentiment about Arab countries such as Morocco: they are dangerous wastelands filled with barbarism and hostile cultural norms. When Arab countries and their people are not portrayed as barbaric, they are portrayed as an exotic decoration that highlights the struggles and seeming perfection and purity of the white main characters. In *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), a film set in Morocco, Moroccans and their struggles with colonialism, race, and European occupation/conflict during WWII are completely backgrounded. The setting and Moroccan background characters serve as ornate decorations that feed American exoticism. Arab men are portrayed as both overly oppressive and overly sexual towards women. In films like *Arabian Nights* (John Rawlins, 1942), “Arabic princess” belly dancers with veiled faces dance for dirty-looking men. I theorize that notions of American Exceptionalism and Imperialism--along with post-9/11 sentiments--fuel this hostility toward Arab Americans. Though the United States has a history of Islamophobia, post legislation that was implemented in the aftermath of September 11th, such as travel bans against primarily Muslim countries, proposed registries for Arab Americans, and the NYCPD’s program tactics of targeting primarily Muslim neighborhoods shows how much American Islamophobia has infiltrated our policies, our society, and our movies. I seek to dismantle the idea of “evil otherness” forced on Arab cultures by widespread American prejudices through the lens of film.

Hyper sexualization of Arab women in the form of the belly dancer stereotype is a major issue in many films, and *Aladdin* (1992) is no exception. At one point, Jafar has Jasmine an extremely revealing outfit, in chains, serving him fruit on a plate, saying “It pains me to see you reduced to this, Jasmine. A beautiful desert bloom such as yourself should be on the arm of the most powerful man in the world.” as he forces her to feed him an apple. He calls her a “pussycat” and demands that Genie forces her to fall “desperately in love with him.” In order to deceive him, Jasmine strokes her hand down her body seductively. This is fairly risqué for a children’s movie, and an interaction similar to this appears in only one other Disney film: *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Gary Trousdale and Kirk Wise, 1996). Ironically, it involves Frollo attempting to seduce another brown woman, Esmeralda. If a white princess was given this sort of treatment, there would be outrage. When *Frozen* (Jennifer Lee and Chris Buck, 2013) premiered, there was outrage from parents that Elsa’s moment of empowerment included her changing into a more revealing outfit. One writer for Redbook, a popular parenting magazine, said “Her regal coronation outfit (long gown with long black sleeves—stunning and stately) morphs into a snowflake of a dress: a Tiffany blue, tight-fitting gown with a long slit in the skirt, dramatically highlighting what appears to be her 18-inch waist sandwiched between perfect perky breasts and womanly hips… Elsa has transitioned seamlessly from a girl literally hiding her power under gloves, to a bare-shouldered vixen proudly broadcasting all of her nubile assets” (Wallace). Because Elsa is white, and therefore “pure”, any display of sexuality is disgraceful in the eyes of the American public because it counteracts what we believe about whiteness. We accept Jasmine’s sexual display and Jafar’s sexual desires as natural because we believe that Arab people are inherently less virtuous than white people, so their behavior coincides with our idea of who Arab people are and what they value.

Arab women in American films are portrayed as equal with livestock, bought and sold for consumption. Alternatively, a woman is portrayed as being oppressed by her husband, forced to wear a hijab or niqab, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of their many, many children. Perhaps this is not so much a reflection of Arab countries but a reflection of deep-seated American sentiments about women. In the song “One Jump Ahead” from *Aladdin* (1992), Aladdin is seen entering what is implied to be a brothel. Why is it that something as explicit as a brothel is shown in the movie set in an Arab country? In addition, Jasmine has one of the most revealing outfits of many of the Disney princesses. Interestingly, while Jasmine is portrayed as the heroine of the story, the women in the background who join in berating the street rat Aladdin wear clothing that one might see while walking through the market in an Arab country: a hijab or niqab with a floor-length tunic-like garment (in Morocco it was referred to as a jalabiya, but this varies by region). These background characters are the “bad” women of this barbaric country, subliminally equating barbarianism with the hijab, the women who wear it, and Islam itself. Jasmine’s appearance is as far from a stereotypical “oppressed Muslim woman” as you can get, exemplifying both the sexism and Islamophobia of *Aladdin* (1992). According to Joanna Mansbridge in *The Journal of Popular Culture*, “Within [American media], belly dancing offers a fantasy of wholeness and universality. Eroticizing and resolving political tensions with the image of a postfeminist, post racial, universal femininity, belly dancing can uphold an idea of global democracy disguised as an exposed, heterosexual female body. In contrast, the Muslim woman’s covered body is used by the Western media as a potent symbol of the oppressive patriarchal Islamic regimes, which Western democracy must continue to expose and fight against.” Americans view exposed female bodies as liberated, but this idea of liberation and sexual freedom functions also as an expectation of women to perform for the male gaze, entrapping women in the “slut” or “prude” dichotomy. Thus, a Muslim woman finding freedom in remaining covered angers those who have equated “freedom” with that which satisfies the patriarchy, making the covered woman not an autonomous person who has chosen her own individual freedom, but an oppressed “other” that must be saved from those who are oppressing her. Unfortunately, in actuality, it is both women who experience oppression, but in opposite ways.

Brown men are often cast as large and bearded, with dirty appearances and loud, imposing mannerisms. In *Reel Bad Arabs* by Jack G. Shaheen, a “Reel Arab” man is described as “black beard, headdress, dark sunglasses. In the background--a limousine, harem maidens, oil wells, camels. Or perhaps he is brandishing an automatic weapon, crazy hate in his eyes and Allah on his lips.” (Shaheen 172) The guards and apple seller in *Aladdin*, both the 1992 and 2019 versions, exemplify this. Jasmine’s kindness in giving a small girl an apple in the 1992 version is threatened with punishment by mutilation from a large, ugly, dark-skinned man. The image of the barbaric terrorist-type is not a new one. We see it in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981) with cultural stereotypes of snake charmers and violent citizens fighting the white hero, ready to be martyred for their cause. Though snake charming originated in India and Southeast Asia (“Snake Charming”), it has become a stereotype of many Middle Eastern and North African countries, like Cairo, Egypt in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981). Snake charmers in Marrakech, Morocco, perform for tourists for a fee. Many of them have found a way to take advantage of the stereotypes that white tourists have of them and their country. For the upcoming *James Bond* movie, actor Rami Malek was approached to play the role of the villain. He accepted on the basis that his character would not fulfill the terrorist stereotype (White). Mena Massoud, who played Aladdin in the 2019 live-action remake, has publicly stated that he hasn’t had an audition since *Aladdin* (2019) despite the film grossing over $1 billion worldwide (Fallon). About his lack of opportunities, he said, “It’s like, I'm sitting here being like, OK, Aladdin just hit $1 billion. Can I at least get an audition? Like I’m not expecting you to be like, here’s Batman. But can I just get in the room? Like, can you just give me a chance?” These stereotypes of Arab men are not only harmful to audiences but harmful to Arab actors looking for dignified work.

*Prince of Persia* (2010) exemplifies another issue in American films regarding Arab countries, but it’s an issue that permeates both the American and Arab cultures: colorism. Colorism is the phenomenon of attributing beauty and value to lighter shades of dark skin tones. First of all, though Persia is set in modern-day Iran, all of the main characters are played by white actors. Secondly, the villains in *Prince of Persia* (2010) are dark-skinned Africans, except for their leader, who is white. This implies that though dark-skinned Africans make up the majority of the villain army, they are not competent enough to be led without the help and direction of a white man. Colorism is a prominent issue throughout Africa and the Middle East as well as the United States, with many dark-skinned individuals turning to skin lightening cream or filters in order to appear more conventionally attractive. In 2010, Elle Magazine was accused of lightening the skin of *Precious* (Lee Daniels, 2009) star Gabourey Sidibe via Photoshop when she appeared on their cover (Leach). Whether consciously or subconsciously, Americans tend to view light as good and beautiful, and dark as bad and ugly. These harmful value associations are reinforced by the media we create and consume.

There’s a lot of discussion in academic circles of critical race theory and film. However, Arab representations in Western movies and television are often overlooked and under-discussed. First of all, Agrabah, the fictional city in which Aladdin takes place, was originally based on Baghdad, Iraq. However, when the Gulf War broke out during the production of the film, Disney officials asked to remove any indication that the film was set in a real place. Thus, the harmful amalgamation that is Agrabah was born. Agrabah is nondescript, pulling from Southeast Asian and Middle Eastern influences. This is harmful because it gives the impression that all Arab countries are the same vast wastelands of desert, same cultural dress, same food, same music, same everything. This, obviously, is not the case. Every country has its own distinct culture and history that is influenced by different factors. According to Evelyn Alsultany in her article “Arabs and Muslims in the Media After 9/11: Representational Strategies in a ‘Postrace’ Era”, she says “It has become increasingly common for the country of the terrorist characters in television dramas to go unnamed. This strategy rests on the assumption that leaving the nationality of the villain blank eliminated potential offensiveness; if no particular country or ethnicity is named, then there is less reason for any particular group to be offended… Fictionalizing the country of the terrorist can give the show more latitude in creating salacious storylines that might be criticized if identified with an actual country.” Agrabah being fictional also gives it a degree of separation from Islam and countries associated with it. Film reflects who we are as a society, and in American society, the films we consume the most reflect our racism and Islamophobia toward Arab people and Muslims. I believe that because of our history of consuming these negative representations in the media, Americans are more likely to have Islamophobic and xenophobic opinions and are more likely to feel unease and discomfort when visiting an Arab country.

None of these films portray the accomplishments, history, and culture of Arab countries. For example, the very first university in the world was established in Morocco. The University of Al-Qarawiyyin was established in 859 CE by Fatima al-Fihri, an Arab Muslim woman. It is the oldest continually-operating university in the world. Morocco is also home to the Koutoubia Mosque, which has an extensive collection of books, manuscripts, libraries, and book shops, making it the first “book bazaar” in the world. With only about 4.5% of the geographic size of the United States, Morocco boasts over 4 dozen universities (“NationFacts”). It is an epicenter of Andalusian, Issawa, and Gnawa music and home to authors like Mohammed Ben Brahim, who played an important role in the liberation of Moroccans from Spanish and French colonialization.

I was fortunate enough to visit Morocco for 3 weeks on a study abroad trip with Bowling Green State University. Most of the students on the trip were from the Midwest, Ohio specifically. Many of us expressed apprehension beyond that of usual nervousness on visiting Morocco. Over dinner one night, about halfway through the trip, we expressed certain expectations that we had: that more women would be wearing hijab or niqab, that there would be more strict rules and laws, and that there would be more violence. Even those of us who were aware of harmful stereotypes and cultural insensitivities towards Arabs coming into the trip expressed having these preemptive impressions. I believe this is largely due to the way American media has reinforced these false stereotypes. With all the violence and “otherness” that we see from Muslims and Arabs on TV and in movies, who wouldn’t be nervous? Towards the end of the trip, we discussed again how our experience had changed us. One student, who identifies as a white woman from Ohio, speculated that it would now be easier for her to pick out subtly racist stereotypes now. She also said that experiencing a culture that is demonized by Americans for herself has made her more aware of American hostility towards Muslims and Arab people, and “how the many are judged by the few.” Another student who identifies as a white man from Michigan speculated that if all races were judged by those who do bad things, then all white people should be suspected to be members of the KKK the same way Arab people are suspected to be terrorists. Another student who identified as a Chinese woman from Ohio said that her white grandparents were shocked and confused when she said she was visiting an Arab country. Her parents were less bothered but did tell her they would rather she study abroad in Europe, despite Morocco being rated at a Level 2 travel advisory by the US Department of State. Other countries at a Level 2 advisory include Denmark, Italy, France, and Germany. Upon returning to the United States, I asked some of my fellow students if they thought the trip had changed their way of thinking at all. One student, a white woman from Ohio, stated that she could identify racism much more easily, and felt more equipped to educate her friends and family on stereotypes. She said her mom was shocked that not every woman wore a hijab, nor did they have to. Small prejudices such as this, as well as larger, institutionalized racism, are ingrained in our culture. We believe them, recreate them in our media, and digest them once more when we consume that media, creating a cycle of media violence.

Fortunately, there are positive representations of Arab characters out there. *The Big Sick* (Michael Showalter, 2017), written and starring Kumail Nanjiani is about a Pakistani comedian living in the United States who comes to terms with his faith, family, and love as a Muslim man. Though it touches on Nanjiani’s struggles with his faith, it doesn’t depict Islam itself in a negative light. *Ali: Fear Eats the Soul* (Rainer Werner Fassbinder, 1974) is a West German film about a Moroccan immigrant who falls in love with an older German woman. They both face ridicule from their respective communities but, ultimately, choose each other. Another film, *Robin Hood* (Kevin Reynolds, 1991) portrays a black Arab man as an intelligent man of science, one who possesses a telescope and successfully performs a c-section on a white woman, much to the discomfort of the white characters. Recently, rapper Riz Ahmed coined the “Riz Test”, which is loosely based on the Bechdel Test. It’s used to test whether a film or TV show has positive representations of Muslims and Arab people or not. According to RizTest.com, “If the film has at least one character who is identifiably Muslim (by ethnicity, language, or clothing) is the character… 1. Talking about, the victim of, or the perpetrator of terrorism? 2. Presented as irrationally angry? 3. Presented as superstitious, culturally backwards or anti-modern? 4. Presented as a threat to a Western way of life? 5. If the character is male, is he presented as misogynistic? or if female, is she presented as oppressed by her male counterparts? If the answer for **any** of the above is **Yes**, then the Film/ TV Show **fails** the test.” Obviously, like the Bechdel test, this is not a perfect form of critique or measurement. However, it can be a helpful tool. For example, *When They See Us* (Ava DuVernay, 2019) passes the test because Yusuf Salaam, a boy falsely convicted of rape, deals with the injustice by turning to his faith and the Qur’an. *John Wick Chapter 3: Parabellum* (Chad Stahelski, 2019) passes because the Arab assassins are just as lethal as any other assassin and the usual negative Muslim stereotypes are avoided. *Iron Man* (Jon Favreau, 2008) does not pass because of Tony Stark’s abduction by terrorists. In addition, the film contains a line spoken by the white villain to an Arab character that reads “Technology, it has always been your Achilles heel in this part of the world” the part of the world referred to being Afghanistan/the Middle East.

What we see in media reflects how we view the world, so it’s no wonder many Americans view Arab countries as barbaric desert wastelands; it’s all they’re ever depicted as. Film is a reflection of ourselves, but it also aids us in the creation of ourselves. Unfortunately, these negative stereotypes likely contribute to discriminatory policies, such as travel bans against primarily Muslim countries to the United States, or France banning hijabs in schools. However, there are people who are working towards creating positive representations of Muslim and Arab characters, such as Ava DuVernay, Kumail Nanjiani, and Rami Malek. Education is our greatest tool in becoming more culturally aware and fighting against internalized stereotypes. I hope that in the future, we as Americans will be able to advocate for the humanity of Arab people and characters and fight for the dignity of the actors who play them. As Dr. Christopher Stonebanks so eloquently said of how stereotypes in media affect American psyche, “Popular media (film, television, print, music, etc.) have had, and continue to have, a profound affect on the manner in which Islam and the Muslim community are viewed… Post 9/11, little has changed as the repeated message of Iraq’s imminent danger given their, still yet to be discovered, weapons of mass destruction paved the way to acceptance of a second Gulf war and countless more Iraqi deaths. So, when I hear cautions of placing too much importance on the media that surrounds us and too little respect for individuals’ ability to be critical thinkers and construct their own knowledge, I wonder what the dead of Iraq or Afghanistan would think of this assessment” (Stonebanks 33).

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