

CONFRONTING ORIENTALISM IN AMERICAN MEDIA**ENFRENTANDO EL ORIENTALISMO EN LOS MEDIOS ESTADOUNIDENSES**

Sara Saleh Aljuaid¹
Morgan State University

Recibido marzo 30 de 2023 – Aceptado octubre 23 de 2023

Abstract: Following the aftermath of the attacks on September 11, 2001, Arab, Middle Eastern, and Muslim Americans became high-profile and trending subjects of primetime American T.V. American media and Hollywood have subjected the Middle Eastern community to scrutiny by broadcasting stereotypes that demean and dehumanize Middle Easterners and their Homeland. Middle Eastern American literature post-9/11 centers around questions of conflicting identities and new discourse on mainly the representation of Muslim women. Since 9/11, the Orientalists' stereotypical representations of Muslim women as docile, passive, and exotic, dating back to the colonial projects in the 18th century, have been weaponized to create a sense of sympathy and to provoke hostile sentiments against Muslim men. This was done in the interest of the so-called 'War on Terror.' This paper examines the narrative pertaining to the Middle East's cultural, social, and political representations in American literature. It includes an analysis of the residual colonial ideologies deeply rooted in the newly emerging stereotypical portrayals of the Middle East. The recurring patterns of these texts are critical to understanding how the fictional representation of the Middle East, the Orient, is depicted and the psychological after-effects.

Keywords: Orientalism, Muslim women representation, Media stereotypes, Colonial ideologies

Resumen: Tras las secuelas de los ataques del 11 de septiembre de 2001, los estadounidenses árabes, del Medio Oriente y musulmanes se convirtieron en sujetos destacados y de moda en la televisión estadounidense en horario estelar. Los medios de comunicación estadounidenses y Hollywood han sometido a la comunidad del Medio Oriente a escrutinio al transmitir estereotipos que menosprecian y deshumanizan a los habitantes del Medio Oriente y su patria. La literatura estadounidense sobre el Medio Oriente posterior al 11 de septiembre se centra en cuestiones de identidades en conflicto y en un nuevo discurso centrado principalmente en la representación de las mujeres musulmanas. Desde el 11 de septiembre, las representaciones estereotipadas orientalistas de las mujeres musulmanas como dóciles, pasivas y exóticas, que datan de los proyectos coloniales del siglo XVIII, se han utilizado como arma para crear un sentido de simpatía y provocar sentimientos hostiles contra los hombres musulmanes. Esto se hizo en interés de la llamada 'Guerra contra el Terrorismo'. Este artículo examina la narrativa relacionada con las representaciones culturales, sociales y políticas del Medio Oriente en la literatura estadounidense. Incluye un análisis de las ideologías coloniales residuales arraigadas en las representaciones estereotipadas recién emergentes del Medio Oriente. Los patrones recurrentes de estos textos son fundamentales para entender cómo se representa y cuáles son los efectos psicológicos de la representación ficticia del Medio Oriente, el Oriente.

Palabras clave: Orientalismo, Representación de mujeres musulmanas, Estereotipos mediáticos, Ideologías coloniales

¹Doctoral Candidate Department of English Language Arts Morgan State University

Confronting Orientalism in American Media

Following the aftermath of the attacks on September 11, 2001, Arab, Middle Eastern, and Muslim Americans became high-profile and trending subjects for primetime American T.V. and national newspapers. American media and Hollywood have subjected the Middle Eastern community to scrutiny by broadcasting stereotypes that demean and dehumanize Middle Easterners and their Homeland. Middle Eastern American literature post-9/11 centers around questions of conflicting identities and the emergence of a new discourse pertaining to mainly Muslim women's representation. Since 9/11, the Orientalists' stereotypical representations of Muslim women as docile, passive, and exotic, dating back to the colonial projects in the 18th century, have been weaponized to create a sense of sympathy and to provoke hostile sentiments against Muslim men. Thus, Orientalism has attracted research, particularly the discussion about the Middle East's cultural, social, and political representations in America among Middle Eastern writers and scholars.

Literary scholars and historians use Orientalism to discuss and examine the so-called East's cultural, historical, and religious facets. Edward Said, an Arab American literary theorist and comparative literature scholar at Columbia University, introduced Orientalism to the American academic field in 1978. According to Said, Orientalism is a product of Western colonization in the Near East. He defines the term as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident' (Said, 1978, p. 2). In other words, the Orient is an intellectual reflection of the imperial colony, and the Western colonizers need to acknowledge their presence by imagining 'the other' who is non-Western. Thus, Orientalism is a form of intellectual colonization. This perception of otherness must be constructed by degrading the other (the Orient) to emphasize the colonizers' superiority. This binary construction of the Orient is based on the mentality of the colonizers as superior and civilized. Therefore, there is an intended cultural gap between the Orientals and the European colonizers. The colonizers position themselves as the basis of human civilization and must keep the subaltern Orientals inferior.

Said adds that Orientalists depict Muslim women as unable to speak for themselves or express their feelings. Their passivity results from the Orientalists' claim of Oriental women's lack of history or representation. In their portrayals of what they call "typical Oriental" women, Orientalists always take the role of speaking for Oriental women and standing up against the culture that they smear as misogynistic (p. 6). The social and cultural mobility post 9/11 regarding Muslims sparked a new discourse investigating the Orientalist stereotypes of Muslim women and their relevance to the discussion of Arab American identity. The gist of the Orientalist discourse about Muslim women projects the biased perception of Oriental women as inferior, oppressed, and static. Post 9/11, discussion of the oppression of Muslim women by honor killings, domestic violence, genital mutilation, and the lack of women's rights dominated the media. Muslim women are presented to American viewers as sexually subjugated victims in desperate need of Westerners' saving, and Muslim men are unquestionably the perpetrators of subjugation.

Also, Orientalism can be established through otherness as an imaginary geographical distinction. The Orientalists create two images of the Orient vs. the Occident, where the Orient is negatively marked as distinct from the Occident. The binary construction of the Orient indicates the Western degradation of the Orient and its inhabitants. The Orientalists position themselves and the Occident as the mark of civilization and the other Orient as uncivilized and backward. In rethinking Orientalism, examining key concepts that Said highlights in his book is imperative. One of which is his critique of the Orientalist's authority.

Furthermore, the Oriental discourse is based upon constructing binary images of the Orient as silent, static, and passive, whereas the Occident is portrayed as dynamic, outspoken, and present. The Oriental is depicted as inexact, talkative, and ignorant, whereas the Occidental is logical, accurate, and concise. When the Orientalist speaks about the Orient, he associates its civilization with barbarity, myths, and spirituality, yet the Western civilization is always attributed to civility, progress, logic, and critical thinking. The Orientalist's role in the colony is to report, observe, and analyze the Orient's social, political, cultural, and religious aspects. According to Said, the

Orientalists' portrayals and statements about the Orient and the Orientals have never been questioned or examined. He calls this notion the 'Orientalist vision' (p. 69). Their observations are viewed as truth. They describe the Orient because they know it. Knowing the Orient is enough to validate their judgment.

For decades, Hollywood films portrayed Muslims negatively as potential enemies whose goal is to attack the West and its values, implementing the traditional Oriental rhetoric about the Middle East. In the seventies, Arab men in Hollywood movies were portrayed as camel riders who lived in a faraway, extremely dangerous land. Muslim women were also exoticized and depicted as belly dancers and maids to serve the Pasha. These representations are remnants fixated on the Western imagination. In the 19th century, many European Orientalists such as Louis Massignon, H. A. R. Gibbs, Alphonse de Lamartine, Dante Alighieri, François-René de Chateaubriand, and others romanticized the Orient as their European fantasyland. Muslim women were also Orientalized and sexualized, and many Orientalists wrote extensively about the Oriental Harem and the Pasha. Hollywood continued the narrative of *othering* Muslims as a foreigner threat in the eighties. Popular movies such as *Back to the Future* (1985) depicted Muslim men as terrorists who steal plutonium to build a nuclear bomb (Shaheen, 2015, p. 83).

The *Arabian Nights* has remained one of the most acclaimed books, and its fantasy looms large in the Western imagination of the Orient. The fascination with Oriental folktales reached Hollywood in 1942 when the famous director John Rawlins introduced Hollywood's first adaptation of the book. The movie *The Arabian Nights* (1942) stars Jon Hall as the 'Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid (786 –809), The first Indian American actor Sabu Dastagir as Ali Ben Ali, and the widely renowned historic storyteller Scheherazade starred by the Latina actress Maria Montez was a box office hit that brought stardom and fame to both the exotic figures of the movie Montez and Sabu. The movie's setting was ancient Baghdad, a location that is in alliance with the stereotypical narrative of the Oriental tale, an exotic faraway land where thrilling adventures occur.

Although the book inspired the movie and is not necessarily a historical-based drama, the plot contains a plethora of misinformation and dramatized portrayals of the 'Orientals' that deviate from the book and the history of the Abbasid dynasty. As Michel Moon (2016) states in his analysis of the cinematic adaptation of the folktale *Arabian Nights: A Queer Film Classic*, Montez, who plays the character of the belly dancer Scheherazade and Sabu, who is an acrobatic performer, were presented to the audience as characters not only as leading figures who help to save the protagonists but also as exotic figures who generated a carnal and fleshy appeal (p. 103). That being said, the protagonist follows the Western tradition, a heroic figure who saves his love interest. The overall atmosphere of the movie is erotically inducing and presented in a way that not only fetishizes Middle Eastern female and male bodies but also evokes sentiments of frivolity towards the Orient. The exaggerated and cartoonish portrayal of the Middle Easterners parallels the other depiction of other ethnic groups that are utilized to either ridicule them or to entertain and fearmonger American viewers.

Furthermore, *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) is among the most well-known Hollywood movies that received esteemed Cinema rewards for its exquisite cinematography, including an Oscar, Golden Globe, and Bafta. The British film tells the story of the highly acclaimed British spy and intelligence agent T. E. Lawrence, known as Lawrence of Arabia, who helped to liaise the relationship between the British army and the Arab revolting tribes led by King of Hejaz Hussein bin Ali during the Great Arab Revolt in 1916-1918. Lawrence, or, as Arabs used to call him, *Aurens*, representing the British government, promised Arab independence and sovereignty from the Ottoman Empire, as stated in his autobiography *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, published in (1926) (p. 8). Nevertheless, his mission in Arabia led to reinforcing the British and French political presence in the Arab territories, as stated in the Sykes-Picot agreement.

As a member of the Arab Bureau, an intelligence unit within the Cairo Intelligence Department, he successfully infiltrated the Arabs to dissolve the Ottoman Empire and hand over the power to the Western allies of Britain and France. Similar to the *Arabian Nights* (1942) movie, there is this typical vagueness when it comes to the location of the setting where the movie was filmed in Jordan and Morocco. Although the geographic mapping of Lawrence's mission is pivotal, the movie failed to paint a clear picture of the geography of Arabia. This lack of accuracy helps

to paint a blurry and confusing perception of the Middle East that still to this day prevails. The desert is not only a place of mysticism and enchantment but also horror, disarray, barbarity, and bewilderment. On the contrary to the *Arabian Nights* (1942) film, there is no space for the erotic Oriental Tale fantasy since the film is a political restatement of the Arab revolution that glorifies the British intelligence's intervention and minimizes the role of the Arab warriors who bravely rebelled against the Ottomans. Instead, it features Arab men in a highly offensive manner that shows them as barbarous, uncivil, disorganized followers, not leaders.

Adopting an Orientalist narrative, the depiction of Lawrence in the film as a magnanimous and dauntless British hero who is fearless, intelligent, strategic, and tactful juxtaposes the portrayal of the Bedouins of the desert who are backward, barbaric, chaotic, and acting on impulses. Lawrence, who promised the Arab guerillas to aid them with sophisticated British weapons to gain independence from the Turks, was portrayed as a White savior who brought wisdom, military tactics, and foreign aid. The playwrights Robert Bolt and Michael Wilson based their screenplay on Lawrence's memoir *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926) and ignored the Arabic version of the course of events. They highly exaggerated Lawrence's role and presented him as a selfless warrior when he was historically involved only in negotiation and consulting the Arab tribes and their leaders, along with the King of Hejaz, Hussein bin Ali. The authors also dismissed the accomplishments of the Arab Bedouins who fought the Turks courageously. They were presented as mere followers of what the White man dictated, stripping away their authority and agency. Another representation issue is that the Turks are introduced to the audience as wicked villains striving to kill the rebellious Arab tribe members. In the opening scene of the film, the viewers are introduced to what appears to be the cause of Lawrence's death, which is a motorcycle accident, followed by a scene of English politicians discussing who Lawrence is in the eyes of the British Empire. From the beginning of the movie, Lawrence is presented as a mysterious figure whom even his fellow Brits cannot figure out. Again, this serves the notion that the Middle East is the undesigned, traceless, faraway land that is too complicated to unravel. In this movie, the land of the exotic belly dancers and harems has become the land of death and horror.

In addition, the rebellious Arabs are presented as looters and thirsty for blood. In his book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Jack Shaheen (2012), a visiting scholar at the Hagop Kevorkian Center for Near Eastern Studies at New York University, wrote extensively on Arabs in popular culture and Hollywood. He states that one of the most horrific scenes that occur in the movie is when Sherif Ali (Omar Sharif) kills Lawrence's (Peter O'Toole) guide due to his attempt to drink from the Sherif's well (p. 289). Such outrageous behavior is far from the traditions of the Bedouins, who are known for their outpouring of generosity, especially when it comes to hosting strangers not alone; the whole incident is not mentioned in Lawrence's memoir, as Shaheen adds. Lawrence's response to the death of his Bedouin guide is a soliloquy that shames all Arabs, saying: "Sharif Ali, so long as the Arabs fight tribe against tribe, so long will they remain a little people, a silly people, greedy, barbarous and cruel, as you are" (p. 289).

Nonetheless, the incident is not only fabricated but also places Lawrence as a beacon of wisdom and civility in contrast to Sharif Ali and his fellow barbaric Arabs, who are untrustworthy, uncivilized, and greedy. Also, the film deliberately dismisses the fact that Arabs succeeded in forcing the Turks to relinquish their control over Damascus. It negates the narrative that Lawrence was the White savior whose wisdom and military experience facilitated Arab independence. Regardless of the heinous tones of racism and degradation, the film has been viewed as one of the best movies of all time and a masterpiece showcasing the brilliance of the British army and intelligence.

Another scene that is just as problematic is the scene in which the Arab tribesmen led by Sherif Ali gathered in the Arab Council in Damascus, Syria. The film does not only ignore the historical fact that the Arab warriors of Arabia, despite their humbled weapons, helped tremendously to take control of Syria and the Levant but also depicts the Arabs as loud, talkative, and backward who cannot sit at the table. The scene opens with a crowd of Arab tribesmen shouting and yelling at each other. Then, Lawrence comes as a White savior banging a metal gavel, bringing peace and quiet as the civilized Westerner he is portrayed. Similar to the stereotypical depiction of the Jewish people with grotesque facial features historically known as 'hooked nose,' the Mexican-American actor who played the role of

Auda Abu Tayeh, the Sheikh of the Arabic Bedouin tribe The Howeitat, Anthony Quinn, wears a prosthetic nose. A gesture that many Semites, Jews, and Arabs find outrageously offensive.

As previously mentioned, the portrayal of Muslim Women centers around their lack of voice, agency, sexual fantasies, and objectification. However, after the September attacks, the narrative about Muslim women changed. In her book, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11*, Evelyn Alsultany (2012) claims that before 9/11, Muslim women were dehumanized and not worthy of sympathy (p. 71). Consequently, Hollywood produced popular movies such as *The Father of the Bride* (1995), during which Muslim women are silenced and oppressed by their men (Shaheen, 2015, p. 193). However, post 9/11, the discourse of Muslim women drastically changed for political and social purposes. The new post-9/11 sympathetic discourse towards Muslim women pervaded primetime television. Before the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, stories of Muslim women's victimhood dominated the media. News channels and T.V. shows discussed stories of women who experienced domestic abuse, genital mutilation, marital rape, and honor killing. Alsultany (2012) states in her analysis of Muslim women in the media that shame or honor killing was among the most recurring stories that were highly broadcasted. The media narrative emphasizes that the perpetrators of these violent acts were Muslim men. She argues that the media showcased Muslim women as victims needing protection from patriarchy. She also adds that Muslim women were weaponized in promoting the War on Terror started by former President George Bush (Alsultany, 2012, p. 71-75). In addition, there has always been an obsession with the veil of Muslim women since Orientalism and to this day. Most false representations of Muslim women as oppressed, docile, and sexually abused stem from the paranoia of veiling. In the cultural and social contexts, the veil has always been associated with patriarchal and sexual oppression. Even though veiling is more complex and nuanced politically and socially, it is still stereotypically viewed as a sign of foreignness and otherness.

Consequently, in the years following the aftermath of 9/11, Orientalism has attracted research on the representations of the Middle East in American literature. With Western political and military interventions in the Middle East, issues of representing the Orient and the oppressed rise to the surface. Such concerns and anxieties are manifested in the contemporary works of Middle Eastern American authors. They struggle to reconcile conflicting identities based, on the one hand, religion, and ethnicities, and on the other hand, their national identity as Americans. Although the discipline of Orientalism is well-established in European countries such as the UK, France, Germany, and the Netherlands, the field is still growing in the United States with a focus on the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, which marked a turning point in the American political discourse of the Middle East.

In addition, a trending wave of Islamophobia sentiment and the exponential rise of hate crimes against Muslims and people of color dominate the rhetoric of politics and literature in America. For that reason, there is limited literary scholarship on Middle Eastern American literature that unfolds the political, cultural, and social implications of such rhetoric that dehumanizes Middle Eastern Americans and the Middle East as a conflict and unrest zone. Therefore, Middle Eastern Americans, particularly women, have to resist a narrative that is charged with accusation and doubtfulness in relation to their loyalty to their country.

To combat the miseducation, scholars need to explore the Middle Eastern literature that was produced post-September 11, 2001. That being said, past perceptions, representations, and the narrative about Middle Eastern Americans are relevant and essential to discuss in this scholarship to create a chronological and ontological mapping of how the discourse of Middle Eastern Americans has been nuanced and influenced by Orientalism as an imperial project.

Most Arab American literary works center around the dilemma of having conflicting identities. However, post 9/11, there is a new emerging discourse about Muslim Women and their identity in the U.S. In the mainstream media, Muslim women are portrayed as docile, passive, and exotic. In Hollywood, Muslim women have been portrayed as victims of Muslim men and in need of saving. Those stereotypical representations of Muslim women can be traced back to Orientalism as a colonial project in the 18th century.

When it comes to tracking and analyzing film and media representations of Arabs, the MENA studies and Orientalism disciplines are indebted to Jack Shaheen, who wrote considerably lengthy analyses of Arabs in the media, particularly in Hollywood. Considering the broad nature of his scholarship, this essay will utilize his book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2012) as a reference in the discussion of Middle Eastern, particularly Arab representations in the media. The book starts with a brief historical overview of how Arabs, Jews, and Japanese were depicted in Hollywood in the media to evoke sentiments of xenophobia and fear of the 'stranger.' Similar to the Jews during Nazi Germany, Arabs have been historically stereotyped in Hollywood. Shaheen (2015) claims that since 1896 until the present, Arabs, men, women, and children have been portrayed as 'alike.' Screenwriters, producers, and directors have been presenting Arabs to the public not only as *the other* but also as "brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women" (p. 2). Those horrific Arab caricatures have a permanent imprint in the collective memory of Americans, and the possibility of associating Arabs with terrorist attacks is inevitable.

Similar to Said (1978), Shaheen (2015) argues that the misrepresentation of Arabs as a deliberate degrading cultural and intellectual practice was inherited from European colonialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the Middle East (p. 7). Those caricatures of mocking, ridiculing, and dehumanizing Arabs are the remnants of European intellectual colonialism known as Orientalism. The Orientalists produced images of the Middle East as a geographical space that is limitless, vague, and indefinite that contains bleak deserts, enormous palaces with harems of concubines of the Pasha or the Caliph, barbaric cultural practices, barbarian camel riders, ugly bearded Arab men acting frantically and resorting to violence in their daily lives. In such a context, women are stuck in the realm of eroticism either by being portrayed as maidens, concubines, exotic belly dancers, or Odalisques. All of those inferior and raunchy images have been inspired by *Arabian Nights* and have been sensationalized by both past and contemporary Orientalists.

Although Shaheen's book is regarded as an encyclopedia of more than 900 alphabetically arranged films, it is worth noting that Shaheen spoke shyly about Islam in the *Reel Bad Arabs*. The Christian Arab American author dedicates themes of stereotypes but has not investigated discriminatory tropes, racialization, or the distorting of the image of Islam in detail, even though the misrepresentation of Islam in Hollywood has been prevalent. He only points out that Islam has always been brought up in conversations about patriarchal dictatorship, religious wars, and terrorist attacks (Shaheen, 2015, p. 9). Shaheen overlooks the fact that the stereotypical narrative of Arabs from the glamorous oasis of Arabia inspired by the European obsession with the famous Oriental folk tales *Arabian Nights*, has shifted to a new narrative post 9/11 attacks to be angry bearded Arab Muslim men from the vast land of the violent, brutal, bloodthirsty geographical location named the Middle East.

By the same token, Muslim women are absent in Shaheen's research. He overlooks the religious implications and connotations of stereotypes in regard to providing an overly dramatized picture of Arab women in the media. It is essential to acknowledge that a significant part of stereotyping Arab women is due to their significant component of identity signifier, which is their religious veil. Indeed, the common denominator of Muslim women's portrayals is wearing a Hijab. In his investigations of Arab women under the theme "Maidens," Shaheen again gives Islam a wide berth and avoids discussing Arab women in the context of Islam. The overlooking of Arab women's religious identity is not in alliance with the reason why Arab women have constantly been sexualized. There has always been an Orientalists' preoccupation with the Harem when historically it is quarters designated for the women of the Turkish Muslim household. This magical place in European memory created Arab women caricatures of obscene and repugnant belly dancers, enslaved women, and concubines.

In addition, the author continues his observation of how the narrative has changed from the exotic inhabitants of the Harem to the passive, docile, and oppressed women. Shaheen talks about Arab women's garments, such as black cloaks and veils, yet he does not mention the veil using Islamic terminology,

leaving the religion out of the research scope. Furthermore, he then shifts the conversation to Arab women's apparel. Shaheen adds that Arab women have always been depicted covered wearing black cloaks and veils, and this type of attire indicates male oppression, supremacy, and passivity. Then, he oddly adds that Arab women wear variations of garments, ranging from wearing black cloaks to swimsuits (p. 23). Orient What is problematic is that the settled suggestion that wearing black cloaks or what Muslim women call *Abaya* is an accusation that needs to be explained or justified.

Indeed, Muslim women have been the subject of vigilance and scrutiny, particularly those who are Westerners or live in the West. In examining the narrative about the representation of Middle Eastern and Muslim women in American literature, it is imperative to investigate and interpret the previously mentioned literary works as applications to postcolonial theories, particularly when it comes to the constant efforts to adapt and assimilate in a culture that adopts critical discourse in its view towards Muslim women, Arabs, and their homeland. The recurring patterns of these texts are critical to understanding how the fictional representation of the Middle East, the Orient, is depicted and the psychological after-effects of the trauma post attacks. They also deal with issues of representation concerning globalization and multiculturalism. Also, they perpetuate how gender and religion are intermingled and how they determine the power dynamics of the relationship between the oppressors and the oppressed. In addition, one of the critical factors that determine the study of Orientalism and postcolonialism is the concept of cultural representation, which lays the foundations of groundbreaking theories that closely examine the relationships of the West with the *other*.

References

- Alsultany, E. (2012). *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11*. New York University Press.
- Lawrence, T. E. (1997). *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. Wordsworth.
- Moon, M. (2017). *Arabian Nights: A Queer Film Classic*. Arsenal Pulp Press.
- Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism*. Pantheon Books.
- Shaheen, J. G. (2015). *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. Olive Branch Press.