



From belly dancer to bomber: Stereotyped Hollywood Muslim and American audience

*¹ Bilal Ahmad Kuthoo, ² Dr. Abha Dahibhate

¹ Research Scholar, Jiwaji University Gwalior, Madhya Pradesh, India

² Professor, Department of English, PG College, Guna, Madhya Pradesh, India

Abstract

Hollywood has always engraved Muslims in a particular and distinct guise i.e. Aladdin from a far off land and an exotic belly dancer. The image has always created a huge gulf between the real Muslim and his representation. At certain instances, the image created in Hollywood movies is far from an actual flesh and blood individual; it rather caricatures and reduces whole community and their culture to entertainment purpose. These Hollywood caricatures have not been limited to fun, humor and entertainment but Muslims have lately been portrayed as violent mobs or terrorist. This paper will demonstrate how Hollywood initially portrayed Muslims as exotic (belly dancer, camel rider) and later as violent (hijacker, bomber), but essentially, the characteristics of Otherness remained unchanged from the first movies *Fatima Dances* (1896) to the movies made after 9/11.

Keywords: hollywood, muslims, belly dancer, caricature, violent, otherness

Introduction

He is robed and turbaned, sinister and dangerous, engaged mainly in hijacking airlines and blowing up public buildings. It seems that the human race cannot discriminate between a tiny minority of persons who may be objectionable, and the ethnic strain from which they spring.

--Columnist Sydney Harris, "The World Shrinks and Stereotypes Fall," *Detroit Free Press*, April 11, 1986.

A Muslim barbaric, an uncivilized, a savage, a violent, a villain, a slave torturer, a women auctioneer, a jinn chanter, a carpet-flyer, a mysterious sailor, a talismanic desert trader all these images have been associated with Muslims through Arab civilization. These stereotypes floated in American popular imagination for a long time, but in recent times media images from films, television serials, newspaper photographs and top headlines, magazine cover photos and captions have solidified these stereotypes. In the present time the media images have almost substituted truth. Sharify-Funk argues about the media images and representations that now image is truth and truth is image, the power of the media is pervasive. Doing much more than merely holding up a mirror to society in their capacity as means of representation and as sources of information, the media also contribute to the construction of social reality by selectively "re-presenting" identities and issues and by serving as gatekeepers to public space and moderators of social dialogue (2009, p. 74). This distorted image/reality of Muslim civilization was for the first time presented to American audience in a short movie called *Fatima Dances* (1896) by Edison Company. It certainly became a hindrance in the way of genuine understanding and cultural dialogue between the Muslims and Europeans in general and Muslims and Americans in particular.

During 1920s, Hollywood was really instrumental in

producing the entertainment image of Muslims and which was readily accepted by American audience as objective representation of the people living in a most complex and culturally diverse region. Hollywood morality and hero aesthetic when it involves characters of Middle Eastern origin or from any other Muslim country often perceived as distasteful and on whom projections of evil and fear can easily be imposed distorted image of Arabs and Muslims; false stereotype of Muslims and Islam is very much common in the Western media by every possible way. Often Arabs and Muslims are confused as same entity and are considered as antidemocratic, irrational, hot-tempered, barbaric, uncultured, lustful, and so on (Abdullah, 2015, p. 52). The image of a fearful Muslim, a suspicious bearded individual has become a commonly known character in media and in real society. A bearded man or a hijabi woman has become a readymade symbol of Islamic fundamentalism.

Muslims for a long time have occupied the central argument of round table discussions and primetime television shows with semi expert journalists talking endlessly how the Islamic fundamentalism exist around the world, without making any distinction between millions of ordinary Muslims who live across the globe with different cultures and languages, rituals and traditions, clothing and food habits, geography and landscape, instead these primetime shows converted them all in a homogenous group without any visible difference. "Islam and Muslims are historically looked down upon by the West and stereotypes about Islam are not new to Western culture" (Abdullah, 2015, p. 53). These stereotypes started in Europe with the first colonial encounter with the Muslim Orient when some experts started to document the Orient in general. These more than three centuries old stereotypes have been consolidated over the time, even when the knowledge about the whole world has become more objective, the image of Muslims has not improved, even when people come to know

the Muslim society more closely the stereotypes never fall apart.

This paper will analyze how these stereotypes in America which had got rooted there through the travel books of early Americans and through the early Hollywood movies have consolidated. The stereotypical images are getting more and more concrete as Muslims are coming in glare of media. If one takes a look on the stereotypes of Muslims in America, one finds the little has changed from the time when American first imagined Muslims at the time of Barbary pirates to the unfortunate event of 9/11. There are people, like Brain Kilmead in his book *Thomas Jefferson and the Tripoli Pirates* (2015), who believe that America is fighting the unending war on terrorism which Thomas Jefferson started. This paper will analyze that the stereotypical image of Muslims has not changed but just the characters has changed.

“The Arabian Nights”: Origin of Muslim Stereotyping

The portrayals from *Arabian Nights* stories have been attached to Muslims and these images have become so fixed in public consciousness that it is stereotypical. Aladdin, one of *Arabian Nights* story was pictured by Disney in 1992. This picture most bitterly explains the image of Muslims that is has emerged in the American consciousness. The theme song of this picture was most objectionable for many scholars. The opening song sings that Aladdin hails “from a faraway place, where the caravan camels roam, where they cut off your ear if they don’t like your face. It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home.” In the film, as many were drawn grotesquely, “with huge noses and sinister eyes,” the *Seattle Times* noted. Charles E. Butterworth, then a visiting professor of Middle East politics at Harvard University, told the *Times* that Westerners have stereotyped Arabs as barbaric since the days of the Crusades (cited in Nittle, 2017) ^[12].

Aladdin was not just a peculiar and alien character but he represented a jinn chanter mysterious man for American audience who kept many mysterious creatures beneath his spell. The barbarity, savagery and primitiveness derived from the tales were all imbued in Aladdin, and a real Muslim was eligible for every strange quality this fictional character was having. A blogger Lily Bolourian while sharing her life experiences says “I will be the first to admit that I grew up obsessively watching Disney princess movies for years. I had pencil pouches, backpacks, dolls designed with princess-everything”. She farther adds that she knew that “every single orientalist stereotype that was born of that movie would now come full circle” (Bolourian, 2017) ^[2]. While trying to explain the complications wrought by the fictitious representation of a particular people marginalized because of their religion Bolourian argues that “these fictional representations serve many goals. With magic lamps, flying carpets and talking animals rampant, my humanity can easily seem fictional too. If we do not really exist outside of a colonial lens then it becomes a lot easier to harm us” (Bolourian, 2017) ^[2].

The most prominent fact deciphered from the Arabian Nights portrayals is that it played a greater role to define the Muslim individual and society for American audience who had little access to Muslim world. While setting this creation of Muslim other in broader and historical context Alam & Husband (2013) suggests that:

The definition of that Otherness have been integral elements of the creation and legitimation of British imperialism and colonialism. Discourses that have rendered Islam different, and inferior, have been part of this history; and processes of domination and exploitation of peoples of the Islamic faith have been part of British imperial history (cited in Eid, 2014, p. 101-102)

Said at the first place saw the role of discourse in creating the Islamic World as a deviation from the West rather than accepting Islamic culture as entity in itself, Islam was interpreted through the Western parameters of civilization. With an extensive scholarly attempt at analyzing the different cultural images and literature portrayals, Islam and Muslims emerged as Other (Said 1978). And an inevitable role has been played by fairy tales of Arabian Nights and the way American audience interpreted these stories.

America were exposed to these stereotypes at a time when they had almost no practical knowleghe of Arabian people, their landscape and the culture, so Arabs and everything related to them in the American psyche was created through a story culture. The whole tradition of Arabian Nights was an entertainment source for Arabian people at a primary level. Arabian Nights was not a historical chronicle of a cultural representation of the people. “These fictional renditions of wild foreigners subjugating harem maidens were accepted as valid; they became an indelible part of European popular culture” including Americans (Shaheen, 2001, p. 8). Europe has taken Arabian Nights as a source of cultural representation rather than an entertainment source. For Europeans Arabs are what they found them there in the stories.

Muslims in 1920s Hollywood

1920s was the period when Arabs first found the place in the Hollywood movies, “filmmakers did not create the stereotype but inherited and embellished Europe’s pre-existing Arab caricatures” (Shaheen, 2001, p. 7). They were set in the role of a wicked that harass and torture any good and civilized people. In *The Sheikh* (1921), which incepted the current era of stereotyping in Hollywood movies, portrays an Arab Sheik Ahmad who falls in love with the White heroin Diana. Diana never accepts love of this Arab even he makes an attempt on her honor. But when it is revealed that the Sheik Ahmad Ben Hassan is really not an Arab but born of a White couple, his father was British and his mother Spanish, who died in desert and the child was raised by a tribe, there is no end to Diana’s happiness and she instantly confesses her love, “with this knowledge, the spunky New Woman heroine marries him” (Melani, 2001, p. 24). The movie demonstrates an utmost detest of Arabs who are not worth the love of a European woman.

This was followed by the *Tent of Allah* (1923) *Arabian Love* (1924), *The Arab* (1924), *Song of Love* (1923, 1928), *Burning Sands* (1922), *The Son of the Sheik* (1926), *Sahara Love* (1926), *The Shriek of Araby* (1922), *Love in the Desert* (1929) and *She’s a Sheik* (1920). Nadine Fortier, in *Arabian Love*, who is travelling through the desert to visit her dying mother is kidnapped by a group of Arab bandits, gambled by Arabs and won by Norman Stone, an American criminal. The movie portray Stone as good American guy who is nice to heroine rather than Arabs who captured her and put her in a game of

gambling. Arabs in negative and funny roles were instantly accepted by the audience because the popular imagination about the Arabs was intrinsically prone to violence or “foolish and comic” characters (Melani, 2001, p.66). Douglas Little argues that Mark Twain’s famous *Innocents Abroad* (1869) was found by many more readers “peopled by pirates, prophets, and paupers more sharply focused than ever” (Little, date, p. 14). And Jack Shaheen points out that “Some image makers still reproduce discriminatory images of Muslims advanced by Mark Twain more than 100 years ago in his book”.

Shaheen (2000) makes a critical observation and argues that mindlessly and casually adapted, such portraits narrow our vision toward Muslims and Islamic Culture and blur reality. The screen Muslim lacks a humane face rather the Muslims traits have been deprived by media from these people belonging to a particular culture that distinct from “us” Americans. Continually demonized they are carefully crafted to frighten viewers. They live in mythical kingdoms of endless desert dotted with oil wells, tents, run-down mosques, palaces, goats, and camels. These rigid portraits belittle Arab and Muslim hospitality, their rich culture, and their history. For more than a century movies have dramatized myth making. Ever since the camera began to crank, the unkempt Arab has appeared as an uncivilized character, the cultural Other, someone who appears and acts differently than the white Western protagonist.

From the Sheikh to the Billionaire

Hsu-Ming Teo (2012) argues, when E. M. Hull’s *The Sheik* was published in 1919 and made into a film starring Rudolph Valentino, “sheik fever” was unleashed in the Western world. Teo goes on to explain that the word “Sheik” which originally referred to a Muslims religious leader or an elder of a community or family, suddenly took on in the West new connotation of irresistible, ruthless, masterful, and over sexualized masculinity before ending up as a brand of condoms in America by 1931. (Teo, 2012, p.1). *The Son of the Sheik* (1926) brought craze for all the things in fashion and film; Arabic fabrics, clothing, jewelry, cigarettes, cosmetics, interior decoration and design. So this Muslim Stereotype entered almost every sphere of American life.

The sheik is one of the few “Arab” characters in a genre that is obsessed with the ancient Middle East. It would be easy to interpret him as just a bumbling negative stereotype. The sheik is in some ways a cartoonish figure, generous but often silly, whose flamboyant behavior and rough manners are matched by his rather outlandish affection for his horses, whom he calls his “children” and his “beauties” (Melani, 2001, p.66). Stereotypical male a well dressed sheik might have worn knickers, argyle socks, a sweater vest, and a peaked cap or perhaps “Oxford bags”—huge baggy pants not unlike those favored by many of today’s teenagers. (Drowne, 2004, p. 32). These images were proliferated by Hollywood and these traits seemed very natural to Arab temperament.

Hollywood’s sheikh of the 1920s became the oily sheikh of the 1970s and 1980s, and now the fanatical “fundamentalist” terrorist who prays before killing innocents (Shaheen, n.d.). After the oil embargo of the 1970s, the European media presented to its audience image of an Arab billionaire in

movies, TV serials, soap operas, cartoons, comics, and any other source, who is in control of the America’s oil resources. This oily sheikh was portrayed as being the hostile to Americans and their interest. The only thing that oily Sheikh thought about was to extract the hard earned money of Americans and kill as many Americans as possible. American audiences were convinced that the Arabs are illegally in the possession of the oil that is required to Americans immensely and these Muslim terrorists also possess a chemical weapon of mass destruction.

Not Without My Daughter (1990) show the Muslim male as a religious hypocrite, a liar abusing Islam and kidnapping his American wife and daughter. *The Ambassador* (1984), *The Delta Force* (1986), *Wanted Dead or Alive* (1987), and *Ministry of Vengeance* (1989), made the Palestinian Muslim Enemy Number One. *True Lies* (1994) and *Executive Decision* (1996), portray Muslims as sadists killing American innocents, including a priest. In *Decision*, Muslims hijack a passenger jet. Since 1974, images on entertainment shows, the rogues have often been Muslims. A selective overview of more than 200 programs, including network newscasts, documentaries, comedies, soap operas, children’s cartoons, dramas, and movies-of-the-week yielded the following results (Shaheen, n.d.), “transforming Muslims into a commodity available for widespread visual consumption” (Rosenblatt, 2009, p.62).

From Belly Dancer to Bomber

The first opportunity for Americans to witness belly dance came up at the 1893 Chicago world Fair. The belly dance at the World’s Fair was received in an atmosphere of great social change in the United States. Americans interpreted the dancing women from the East as nostalgic symbols of an imagined past, evidence of Western cultural superiority (Haynes-Clark, 2010, p.18). At the World Fair in Chicago in the 1893, the hip gyrations of a Middle Eastern dancer were a big hit with the crowds, and the term “belly dance” was coined. Since then trends of orientalizing dancing in America have shifted and fused (Etzel, 2015). The popularity of belly dance was built on the exploitation, stereotypes, and fantasy of an exotic Orient argues Keyes, as it was observed by American audiences at the event.

Muslim woman in films, history reveals that since the beginning of cinema, have been portrayed utmost negatively, in fact for more than a century, Hollywood’s movies have humiliated, demonized, and eroticized the Muslim woman (Shaheen, 2005), initially through the character of a belly dancer in *Fatima* (1897) and later in more extreme seductive sexual roles of *Fatima Dances* (1907). In Arabian Nights fantasy films such as *The Sheik* (1921), *Slave Girl* (1947), and *John Goldfarb, Please Come Home* (1964), Arab women appear leering out from diaphanous veils, or as unsatisfied, disposable “knick-knacks” lounging on ornate cushions, or scantily-clad harem maidens with bare midriffs, all closeted in the women’s quarters of the palace and/or on display in slave markets.

Not until the 1970s, the new image of Muslim women emerged in the media particularly Hollywood movies, Arab women have been portrayed in humiliating ways, perhaps the most violent Arab women image perpetuated in Hollywood is the

image of the Arab woman terrorist, image that are found in the films from *Black Sunday* (1977), *True Lies* (1994) and *Rules of Engagement* (2000) (Fitzgerald, 2014). In *Black Sunday* (1977) Hollywood aggressively shows another Arab terrorist before the annual Super Bowl game, Palestinian, trying to blow up the Super Bowl and everyone in it. In this movie Dahlia arrives in the United States, acquires a bomb, then seduces a former Vietnam prisoner of war and enlists his aid. She proceeds to help gun down American citizens “where it hurts”: in Los Angeles, Washington D.C., and Miami. Final frames show Dahlia and the veteran steering a blimp over Miami’s Super Bowl stadium, intending to detonate a cluster bomb that would massacre 80,000 spectators, including the American President. (Shaheen, 2005).

The overemphasis of this hijabi terrorist stereotype over the previously dominant seductive belly dancer stereotype demonstrates Hollywood filmmakers’ attempt to change the American perspective vis-à-vis the male gaze. The later manifestation in the earlier films when the male was focused on the exotic. The former, which dominates more contemporary films, masks the male gaze and there relegates a group of women once viewed as objects shadowy figures *obscured by objects*. Ironically, the same Hollywood that undressed the Arab and Muslim women in the early to Mid-twentieth century is now at the great pains to dress them back up. (Bernardi & Green, 2017, p. 37)

Conclusion

Aladdin and Ali Baba with his forty thieves remained a popular uncivilized barbaric character; equally popular was the Middle Eastern Oriental belly dancer, an exotic seductive woman. Since 1920s saw a flood of movies from the Hollywood with Muslims as villains, desert dwellers, women auctioneers, slave traders, belly dancers, etc. and post-1970 Hollywood movies succeeded in emerging a new image of Muslims that was a terrorist with a weapon of mass destruction; one thing that remained unchanged throughout the history of Muslim stereotyping is that Muslims are portrayed as inferior and violent. Hollywood always contrasted a Muslim villain with American good guy. Looking at the portrayals of Muslims in Hollywood *The Sheik* to *Rules of Engagement*, being almost 80 years apart there is very little that is different in the two movies. The people, their behavior, semi-civilized life style, their culture, the landscape, desert and camels, sand dunes and scorching sun all have remained same for Hollywood.

A bearded turbaned armed terrorist has replaced the Aladdin and Ali Baba character but the signification implied through these caricatures is both consistent as well as complicated. Hollywood supplied Americans with the most dramatized information about Islamic culture through movies and maintained a particular standard, almost near life-like, in representation of Muslims. Hence, whatever Hollywood demonstrated about this community American audience accepted it as a true reproduction, leading way to the conception that Muslims are fanatics, violent, bloodthirsty terrorists. It has been uncommon to find an ordinary Muslim in the movies since the early period of Hollywood film making; an ordinary Muslim watching soccer, going dinner with his family, enjoying movies with his friends, travelling in

a rush bus, burdened with office work, shopping things for kids, all these roles have been contradictory to Muslim disposition in Hollywood. Muslims have been fastened in an unguenuine frame of a terrorist when violence is done by few and Hollywood has played an irresponsible role in it.

References

1. Bernardi Daniel, Michael Green. *Race in American Film: Voices and Visions that Shaped a Nation USA*: Greenwood Publishers, 2017; 3.
2. Bolourian Lily. *We Do Not Need an Aladdin Live-Action Film. Wear Your Voice*. Retrieved from <https://wearyourvoicemag.com/more/entertainment/not-need-aladdin-live-action-film>, 2017.
3. Drowne Kathleen, Patrick Huber. *The 1920s: American Popular Culture through History*. USA: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2004.
4. Eid Mahmoud. *Perceptions about Muslims in Western Societies. Re-Imagining the Other: Culture, Media, and Western-Muslim Intersections*. Mahmoud Eid & Karim H. Karim Ed. United States: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.
5. Etzel Dominique. *Belly dance: appreciation or appropriation? The Seattle Globalist*. Retrieved from: <http://www.seattleglobalist.com/2015/02/03/belly-dance-appropriation-seattle-deep-roots-tribal-style/32669>, 2015.
6. Fitzgerald Kathleen J. *Recognizing Race and Ethnicity: Power, Privilege, and Inequality*. New York: Avalon Publishing Group, 2014.
7. Harris Sydney. *The World Shrinks and Stereo-types Fall*. Detroit Free Press, 1986.
8. Haynes-Clark, Jennifer Lynn. *American Belly Dance and the Invention of the New Exotic: Orientalism, Feminism, and Popular Culture*. Dissertations and Theses, 2010, 20.
9. Little Douglas. *American Orientalism: The United States and the Middle East Since 1945*. Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.
10. Keyes Abigail n.d. *Why I’m Glad Belly Dance in the US Is Declining. Dance Performance and Education in the San Francisco Bay Area*. Retrieved from: <http://www.akeyesdance.com/belly-dance-in-the-us-is-declining/>
11. McAlister Melani. *Epic Encounters: culture, media, and U.S. interests in the Middle East, 1945–2000*. United States: University of California Press, 2001.
12. Nittle Nadra Kareem. *Common Muslim and Arab Stereotypes in TV and Film. The Thought Co*. Retrieved from <https://www.thoughtco.com/tv-film-stereotypes-arabs-middle-easterners-2834648>, 2017.
13. Rohter Larry. *Hollywood Ignores East-West Exchange*. New York Times. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/20/movies/in-a-better-world-and-other-films-on-islam.html?> 2011.
14. Rossenblatt Naomi. *Orientalism in American Popular Culture*. *Penn History Review*. 2009; 16(2):51- 63.
15. Shaheen Jack. *Arab and Muslim Stereotyping in American Popular Culture*. USA: Georgetown University Center for Muslim. CIAO: <http://facpub.stjohns.edu/~layachia/MENA/Documents/Arab%20and%20Muslim%20Stereotyping%20in%20American%20Popular%20Culture.htm>, 1997.

16. Shaheen Jack. Hollywood's Muslim Arabs. *The Muslim World*, 2000; 90:22-42.
17. Shaheen Jack. *Reel Bad Arab: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. United States: Olive Branch Press, 2001.
18. Shaheen Jack. Stereotypes: United States: Arab Muslim Women as Portrayed in Film Family, Law and Politics. *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN AND ISLAMIC CULTURES*, Retrieved from: <http://sjoseph.ucdavis.edu/ewicSaid>, Edward 1978. *Orientalism*. United States: Pantheon Books, 2005, 2.
19. Sharify-Funk Meena. Representing Canadian Muslims: Media, Muslim Advocacy Organizations, and Gender in the Ontario Shari'ah Debate. © 2009, *Global Media Journal -- Canadian Edition*. 2009; 2(2):73-89.
20. Teo Hsu-Ming. *Desert Passions: Orientalism and Romance Novels*. United States: University of Texas Press, 2012.