

Representation of the Other Reproduce Inequalities: A Case Study of the Dictator Film in Terms of Orientalism

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ABSTRACT

Representing the other in media is the process of exchanging culture, it gives us information about the unknown, 'the other' creating a certain image about them, this image evolves till it becomes their stereotype. Stereotypes are a form of media representation, which is often inaccurate, negative, partial and limited. Which is what happened with the Orient, as Edward Said in his pioneer work 'Orientalism' explains. This article focuses on the formation of stereotypes and misrepresentations of the Arabs in Hollywood movies taking Larry Charles's film dictator (Charles, 2012) as a case study. The paper argues that increasing the representation of the other can reproduce inequality as it was the case in the film. The paper applies Edward Said's Orientalism and Stuart Hall's work to shed the light on the traditional stereotype of representing Arabs in the film. Textual analysis is used to analysis the representation of the character traits of the protagonists and the representation of the Arab countries in relation to Orientalism. The paper will focus on the representation of the character traits of the protagonist, representation of Arab countries in relation to Orientalism and creation of stereotypes.

1. Introduction

Media in general is an incredibly powerful medium, especially when it comes to visuals, which the public tend to be more drawn to. These visual mediums act as the window that shows us the hidden world, introduce us to the other, tells us what we do not know. But like everything else created by humans, it is not perfect, it does not give you the full version of the story. In contrast it forms stereotypes; creating false image about the other, especially when it comes to representing marginalized minority groups (Erigha, 2015). Since the creation of media the West always had the upper hand, especially when it comes to the media talk and representing the other. One of their biggest flaw is their representation of the Orient especially Arabs. Misrepresentation of the Arabs in Hollywood started from day one, films such as The Sheikh (George,1921), and The son of the Sheik (Fitzmaurice,1926) presenting Arabs as barbaric, savage and uncivilized beings. These kind of films started the filmic tradition on how to represent Arabs, which lasted for decades (Sardar & Davies, 2010). However, their representation was taken from the literary work in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries which was inspired by the depictions in Elizabethan manuscripts that took its cue from the middle ages. These manuscripts were inaccurate as Edward Said (1978) explain later in his book Orientalism. For Said Orientalism explains the old big frame that the West sees the East

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through, classifying the Orient as the ultimate “Other”, other in literature, history, art and popular culture. Sticking certain characteristics to the orient as being less civilized, barbaric and lustful. Orientalism sheds the lights on the underlying power and its structure, hegemony, knowledge, culture and imperialism which was historically embedded since the nineteenth century as Said called it “colonial discourse”, creating the misrepresentation and presenting the Orient as the other.

Edward Said in his pioneer work *Orientalism* (1978), introduced a new definition of Orientalism, based on ontological and epistemological thoughts that create a distinction between the Orient and the Occident. For him Orientalism has several meanings that are all interdependent; Orientalism is not just the readily accepted definition by the academics, who teach, write and research about the Orient, or a justification to exercise power and domination. It is more the attitude toward the Orient “Middle Eastern, North African and Asian” societies. It is the images that were produced since the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that depict the Non-Western societies as second-class societies who are controlled by their primitives, the thing that set the basis of the European dominance and imperialism in these societies (Lockman, 2004).

Hall (1992) discusses this problematic idea, questioning the process of labelling the West and the East, pointing out that this process allows us to classify societies into categories, Western and non-Western. This process is a tool to set certain structure of thoughts and normalize it. It became a system of representation that works as a language where different societies, people, culture and places were divided into two big groups western and non-western. This system doesn't stand alone it is based on other ideas, being considered as a western country means developed and urban, depending on industrial economies. On the other hand, non-western nonindustrial countries depend on agricultural economy and undeveloped rural societies. This system does not end by labelling, differentiating and defining societies, it also compares setting a standard model of comparison to follow.

Said (1978) explains the relevancy of Orientalism when it comes to inequality of representing Islam, and the middle east creating stereotypes to the extent that the media can be accused of being biased against them. In most cases the western perspective in representing Arabs is misleading, by creating a certain image of Arabs being barbaric, lustful or bombers. Tayyara (2015) argues the natural form of the Arabs is not represented in Hollywood movies. Which is the point that Said (1978) highlighted on, movies like *Harum Scarum* (Nelson, 1965), *Three kings* (Russell, 1999) portray Arabs in the usual stereotype done according to the post-colonial views on the Orient.

This article will focus on the inequalities of representation of Arabs in Hollywood in reference to Orientalism, taking Larry Charles' Film, *The Dictator* (Charles, 2012) as a case study to analyse the inequalities of representation and stereotypes. The film will be analysed through textual analysis method in light of Edward Said and Stuart Hall's work to shed the light on the filmic tradition in representing Arabs. That started since the 20s and evolved in the late 60s as Arabs and Muslim portrayals changed; no longer romantic or erotic representation such as the case of *Khartoum* (Dearden, 1966). Arabs representation started to be linked to current political situation, being accused of terrorism and violence is the new stereotype represented in Hollywood beside being oppressed along with the classical stereotypes. This paper will focus on the representation of the character traits of the protagonist, representation of Arab countries in relation to Orientalism and creation of stereotypes.

2. Materials and Methodology

Orientalism could be found in any film genre even comedy, where jokes were added to the movie with Orientalist stereotypes like being a billionaire, bomber, belly dancer or lustful for females. One of these movies is Larry Charles' film *The Dictator* (Charles, 2012). It is an interesting film to study in the lens of Orientalism starting from the cast as the protagonist Sacha Cohen who always faces criticism, as he participates in controversy films. The film implies the comedy factor using the contrast and the difference in culture between the West and Arabs. Comedy was used as a weapon to react on the differences and unknowns to the westerns, anyone who is not us could be laughed on, in these circumstances comedy could turn to be racist, sexist, or offensive in general to the other. (Lacey and Stafford, 2002).

The story is set first in Wadiya a fictional country ruled by the dictator Aladeen who refuse to apply democracy in his country and considered as a threat to the West as he is working on his nuclear weapon. Aladeen was invited to the UN to discuss the nuclear weapon issue where he finds out his Uncle Tamer has organized a coup on him replacing him with a body double to sign on democratic elections in Wadiya. Aladeen starts to fight back to take his throne, then he meets Zoe the American refugee activist who helped him thinking that he is a Wadian refugee who refuses Aladeen's dictatorship. The movie was chosen because it is one of the famous and recent American movies which has an Arab as a protagonist but still contains almost all the classical stereotypes on Arabs being a billionaire, dictators, oil countries, bombers, racists, sexists, lustful and uncivilized. The film is considered to be an Orientalist, according to Said (1978) the West has this white privilege, but the East is always a threat; a middle eastern can easily be labelled as a terrorist more than any citizen from the West. The film represents Arabs as the Other in the same way Hall (1992) explained his idea of The West and the rest as they were represented as underdeveloped country that need the help from the developed countries which is America in this case. This caused the film to be accused of inequality of representation and creating stereotypes rather than solving the problem of marginalization in the representation of the others.

This paper is considered as qualitative research, which according to Stokes (2003) is concerned with the interpretation and the meaning of the data during the analysis. Usually a qualitative research method is used to focus on the process of explicating data and uses its results to create a convincing argument. For this research the main data source is Larry Charles's movie *The Dictator* (Charles, 2012). In order to analyses this movie through a qualitative method, Textual analysis method will be used to dig deep into the text to look closely at the film to understand then analyses the messages they convey. It is an effective way to analyses films.

According to McKee (2003) Textual analysis is a method that understands symbols, pictures and language in form of a text to collect information in relation to how people understand and communicate. Either visual, written or spoken messages they all provide cues to the way in which communication can be understood. The message or the text are often understood as a reflection to the social structure or influenced by it. The text or the message in a certain film reflects the political, cultural and ethnical context. There is no a fully correct interpretation of any text but rather infinite possibilities for the right interpretation, as some of them might be more likely than other in certain circumstance. In textual analysis text can both open itself to plural meaning and attempts to fix certain meanings. Text is not necessary to be a book or a magazine it could be any media product such as a film, program or an advertising campaign all of them are considered as a text that can be interpreted in different ways according to the viewers. In films camera angles, themes, settings, plot and the cast, all of them can be considered as a text that gives an interpretation or a meaning.

In this paper textual analysis will be used to analyse the representation of the character traits of Aladeen, being represented as sexual, lustful and uncivilized through quotes, and the setting of the scenes. In addition to the set decor such as the made-up setting of Aladeen's castle that was built on the Ottoman architecture style. Same analysis applies on Zoey who was represented as the civilized, refugee rescuer, feminist American girl. This representation will be linked to the main concepts of this paper, Edward Said's Orientalism (Said, 1978) and Hall's representation, the West and the rest (Hall, 1992).

The Dictator was chosen as the text for the analysis due to few reasons. First of all, films in general are a very popular medium that research has proven its powerful effect. Especially when it comes to race portrayals and how the public's beliefs, attitudes and behaviour regarding this race could change. In this case it is a controversial film that was banned from more than four countries due to its misrepresentation of Arabs and Islam in general (Morawitz & Mastro, 2008). As mentioned before the limitation of this method is that it depends on the analytical skills of the viewer, as there is no fixed meaning. Which means that a focus group or qualitative interviews could add to the analysis by adding different angles and point of views (McKee, 2003).

A side from the textual analysis Edward Said's Orientalism (1978) will be also considered as an approach to analyse and interpret the representation of Arabs, and the creation of stereotypes. As mentioned before Said defines Orientalism as the negative attitude done by the West as they present the East as sexual, sex-crazed and uncivilized. The goal of this research is to use these methods and tools to examine, understand and analyse how Hollywood movies represent Arabs in terms to Edward Said's Orientalism.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1. Representation of Arab countries

In his controversial directorial style Larry Charles invokes various modes of classical representations of Arabs in his film *The Dictator* (Charles, 2012). This is done through traditional oral performance and filmic modes to create the fictional character of General Aladeen the leader of Wadiya. The film is a satirical that mocks Arabs through a political and social representation. The story is set in Wadiya, a constructed setting portraying Middle eastern region country ruled by the dictator Aladeen. As it is a western made-up setting Wadiya's depicting of Arabs or middle Eastern territory was according to Larry's imagination (Villarejo, 2013). The constructed setting of Wadiya added to the comedy elements in the film such as the visualization jokes or a sigh gag (Lacey and Stafford, 2002) which was clearly shown, in the presentation of Aladeen's backyard carved like his own face and his iconic beard as a pond. This depiction represents and refers to the glamorous picture of rich Aladeen and his iconic beard that refers to Muslim men was one of the classical stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims in general.

According to Schmidt (2014) after the so-called War on terror started after 9/11, one of the most prominent stereotypes of Arabs that combined all the negative characteristics was the beard or 'Bearded Terrorists' and it became a universal embodiment of an evil Arab. The representation of terrorism and bad Arabs is what Edward Said noted by explaining how western media focus its attention on Palestinian suicide bombing with a huge propaganda likeness to terrorist attacks while deliberately ignoring the Official Israeli attacks which is much worse in a clear gross distortion of reality (Morton, 2007).

In addition to propagandist depiction of Arab Muslims, Larry's film depicts what Foucault called a heterotopic space. According to Johnson (2006) heterotopic spaces are those places that exist in imagination, they are not a part of our physical world; they are however, crucially

ideas that might influence our behaviour. Larry used the fictional Wadiya to implement on the idea of rich Arabs which already exists (Kozlovic, 2007), by using the huge cartoonish castle with the golden domes with the Ottoman style of architecture that looks similar to mosques. Mosques being the places of worship where Muslim's do their religious activities (Kozlovic, 2007). By this the film wants to point out on the strong connection of the Middle East and its relation to Islam, making it seem like the two terms Arabs and Muslims are interchangeable, however, they are actually different, proving the orientalist lens of Larry and his portrayal of Arabs.

During most of the film, Wadiya as well as its dictator Aladeen were depicted as a threat to the world, as he develops nuclear weapons. This point was represented and stated clearly more than once in the film, like in the opening scene that sets the theme of the film by answering the question of who general Aladeen is in a news reportage. The narrator or the anchor man said, "Tensions are rising as the Stand-off between the world community and the rogue North African nation of Wadiya intensified today as U.N. weapons inspectors were once again refused access to the country by Wadiyan leader, Admiral General Aladeen" (Charles, 2012).

This quote was the narration on lifelike footages of the U.N. weapons inspectors in Iraq before the American invasion of Iraq, created a link between General Aladeen and the Former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein. Who was accused of supporting international terrorism as there were U.S government officials allegation, that claimed that there were highly secretive relationship between the Iraqi President Hussein and Al-Qaeda a radical Islamist military organization, known for its terrorist attacks in western countries (Pincus & Milbank, 2004).

This representation of Arabs being a threat to the West is one of the classical stereotypes of Arabs in Hollywood especially after 9/11 attacks. According to Corbin (2017), there are two common false thoughts about terrorists in American media either in movies or on the news; first they are always Muslim, and second white people can never be terrorists. Crobin (2017) in his articles examines the role of unconscious cognitive biases in producing stereotypes represented in example of Muslims being terrorists all the time. On the other hand, the others "the Westerns" use the white privilege avoiding being labelled as terrorists. Which is the same point that Said emphasized on in Orientalism (Said 1978) that beside being represented as a second-class citizen in the media there are also certain labels or qualities that Arabs had since the late eighteenth and nineteenth century such as being barbaric and killers, the image that became a stereotype and has been upgraded recently to include being labelled as terrorists.

However, on the other side the West, for example Israel, despite the fact that they kill civilians they are not represented in the same way. In other words, Islam in American media coverage is a threat to the West which gives the right for the West to defend themselves against this threat, using all sorts of power military, economics and of course media (Ridouani, 2011). Same as what Said argued about that these misrepresentations give the right to the West to help the other, or according to the new representation to defend themselves from them.

Another Orientalist view that Larry pointed out was considering the Middle east, Arabs and North Africans are all the same as long as Islam exists. The movie states that Wade is a North African country, however, geographically and according to the map shown in the film it was not, in contrary it is an East African. This conflict of representation recalls in mind what Said (1978) emphasized on that Orientalist lens sees the East as if they are all one country; same culture, religion, language and therefore same stereotypes.

Representing a non-Arab country that lies on the map in the East African region as a North African country with stereotypes of Arabs because it was stated that it is a Muslim country, is a multidimensional stereotype and misrepresentation issue. First there is a huge difference

between East and North Africa, according to (Abdelali, 2004) there isn't any country in Eastern Africa that speaks Arabic or even a Muslim country. Second of all north African countries are not entirely considered as Arabs, they have other ethnicities such as Berbers, Dinka, Nubians and Arabs (Djebali, 2005). On top of this was the representation itself of an Arab country being a threat to the West, land of terrorism and dictatorship, a rich oil country with huge castles that belong to the ruler while the rest is a desert. This Orientalist point of view of representing Arabs and Arab countries is what Said's (1978) considers a stereotype, it was based on the French scholars who wrote about the Middle East imposing the European culture on the East representing the West being superior, civilized while the East still lives in the middle ages, a big desert where terrorists live in.

3.2. Aladeen the Bad Arab

Being a Western threat was the key theme of the film, as mentioned before Larry set up the theme of the film from the opening scene, he almost stated all his representations and useful background information for the audience to know how is General Aladeen and to pick their side, the protagonist of the film was represented as a villain, not in the film but in real life. Through Admiral Aladeen Arabs were represented in a parody or spoof comic effect as killers, sex-crazed, and terrorists. Parody is an exaggerated imitation where laughter depends on the recognition of the parody which is basically mockery (Lacey and Stafford, 2002).

Aladeen's representation being a murderous and a barbaric killer was introduced from the beginning through a flashback showing him forgetting that he executed the former head of the Wadiyan nuclear program after a disagreement about the shape of the nuclear weapon. Aladeen was the representation of being a killer who executes people easily even if it was a silly matter, which was shown later on when he executed one of the officers for being lucky after getting a gift from his favourite cereal, and the other one who was executed because he was going down the stairs in the opposite direction in front of him. The way Aladeen commanded executions was funny since the parody element of exaggeration was there, the problem was in the sign itself which was moving his hands on his neck as if he was chopping his head. This sign refers to the method which Arabs used to execute people by during the middle ages, using this reference in a mocking way emphasizes on representing Arabs as barbaric killers since this method of execution is considered to be a sadistic way to end a person's life according to the West. By this the film represents Arabs through Aladeen as cold-hearted silly murderers who enjoy killing.

According to Ridouani (2011) western representation for Muslims was not fabricated completely, it had its deep-rooted conceptualization among the West since they knew Arabs or Muslims. This relationship started since the Middle Ages especially during the Crusades as well as the Ottoman "Muslim" expansions in Europe. The problem is that the West promotes almost the same stereotypes that Arabs and Muslims were accused for such as being the other or the enemy and sometimes as the vicious killer.

Another stereotypical representation of being the bad Arabs was representing Aladeen as a lustful man. This representation was shown more than once during the film, but this paper will focus on the representation of Arabs as lustful in the Harem scene, where Aladeen was surrounded by his guards whom were all women, whom are also part of his harem. In the scene the women were depicted as slaves, a commodity for their master's pleasure fulfilling his sexual desires. This was clearly shown when uncle Tamir explains to Aladeen the job of the girls saying: "They are trying to pleasure you, allow the girls to use their many talents" (Charles, 2012). The scene afterwards emphasizes on the idea that for Arabs women are slaves whose job is to entertain or pleasure their master as Uncle Tamir turns to the girls give them a

sign to start kissing each other in front of Aladeen, then the scene ends with him giving orders to the girls to take off their bra as he said “girls show him your bosoms” (Charles, 2012). Harem is an Arabic word means women but in an orientalist lens it usually means women as slaves, this stereotype was created through Orientalist painters such as Dominique Denon and David Roberts, as they set representation of the Orient eroticism in their paintings, in addition to the Orientalist literature at that time that represented women as mistreated, abused or sexual slaves (Dajani, 2000).

According to Said (1978) the French novelist Flaubert often represents Oriental women as slaves for pleasure and sex. This representation was reflected in the portrayal of the Arabs in Hollywood especially in its early days, exotic and sensual were important elements of the plotline of the film. Dajani (2000) stated that the most common plot-line themes when it comes to films representing Arabs are Rape and Rescue Fantasy, The Desert and The Imaginary of the Harem. Islam and Muslims are usually associated with sex as a sort of their Muslim Paradise according to the Orientalist lens, therefore Arab women are represented as slaves that pleasures their master.

Hall (1992) explains the process of labelling the West and the Other, along with Said's ideology (1978) that the West made these non-geographic constructions and differentiations by labelling Arabs as barbaric and non-western so they can be classified as the others, that have different characteristics, such as rural and under development countries, representing them- selves “the West “as the superior with all the knowledge and development. With these concepts the West constructed they gave themselves the justification for their invasion as they “the West” need salvation, or according to the new representation of Arabs the need to help them to be developed, democratic and industrialized countries as they are. In the Dictator the representation of the West being superior having power and knowledge over the Orient exits. Represented in the store scene as Zoey the American girl who was represented in the film as a vegan, feminist working for a non-cooperative, operating with an anti-racist, anti-oppressive framework for people of all or no genders, starts to teach Aladeen who in a very arrogant way, with unaccepting and contemplating facial expression enters the store start to make inappropriate and racial jokes so Zoey defended her colleagues who were from different ethnicity and racial groups. The jokes included her as he replied that she did not have a white boyfriend since high school by “Well the darker races are less choosy” (Charles, 2012), since then Zoey became his teacher, telling him what to say and what not to say which was obvious in her reply “that came off as kind of offensive” (Charles, 2012). This kind of representation is what Said (1978) talked about in representing Arabs as, uneducated that we, the West who have the upper hand should teach them, in other word these are the reasons why we impose imperialism on them. Zoey being the teacher continued till the end of the scene like when he mocked Hannah the girl with the disabled hand by asking “useful as what? a coat hanger?” after she cut a bag of seeds so Zoey once again emphasizes on how this is not acceptable “Allison, this is not funny No, it is not funny”. This relationship of the teacher and student, the developed and underdeveloped was a pure orientalist lens by Larry as it clearly suggests the idea that the Orient needs the Western involvement in their life to be better and more developed.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, this paper is a case study of how representation of Arabs in Hollywood movies is based on and Orientalist lens as it increases the stereotypes and negative representation of Arabs. Media is known as the creator of stereotypes, it creates it, it publishes it, then normalizes it till it becomes the truth about the Other. In the past the orient especially Muslims and Arabs were marginalized with minor representation in media but recently as the calls of diversity

increased the representation of Arabs increased, creating more stereotypes about Arabs. (Erigha, 2016) Western media usually reflects its ideology in representing the other. This ideology is what Edward Said called Orientalism. Which is the feeling of superiority over the East, which has always been represented as uncivilized or land of terrorism, barbarism, sex fanatics and killers.

In order to see how representation of Arabs and Muslims in Hollywood movies increases stereotypes, Larry Charles's film *The Dictator* 2012 is used as a case study to analyse this representation. The analysis is done through textual analysis in relation to Orientalism. The movie turns to represent the bad Arabs as Aladeen was represented being terrorists, barbaric and lustful. However, the protagonist of the film is an Arab and Muslim but yet the inequality of representation still exists as Aladeen was misrepresented.

In conclusion representation of Arabs in Hollywood is still misleading due to Orientalists who leads to increase the misrepresentation of the Other in media recreating stereotypes. Also, the idea of increasing the representation of others in media does not create equalities of representation and inclusion, on the contrary, it increases the inequality of representation as is the case in the dictator film. The main problem is that stereotypes as all the Arabs are Muslim, barbaric and terrorists, were set years ago and as long as the new representations is not done by the Other, these old stereotypes will still be presented in the media. To be realistic, these stereotypes cannot be changed, it cannot be neglected or removed from the believing system of the West who only know the Other through these stereotypes. In order to reduce these stereotypes and decrease the inequality of representation, representing the Other should be done by the Other, they can represent themselves. In addition to this, the process of representing the Other should be done at least after multiple visits or a research done to see in real life the truth of these representations and how this issue is represented in the Other's media, and how do they represent themselves. Moreover, these new representations should not be generalized it should differentiate between the Other, for example the East, is not one big nation, even Muslims and Arabs they are not the same, each country has its own history, language, religion and culture, in other words its own representation. So, the first step should be trying to differentiate between the Other then correct these stereotypes and do not forget that there are again different cultures within the same countries.

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