

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

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Abstract:

Media is the creator of stereotypes, it creates it, publishes it, then normalizes it till it becomes the truth about the other. This article focuses on the representation of the Arabs in Hollywood movies taking Larry Charles's film dictator (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.

Keywords: Arabs; Orientalism; Stereotype; Textual analysis

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Introduction:

Representation in media is the process of exchanging culture, it connects the message with the culture creating a certain image for a group of people. This image evolves till it becomes their stereotype in media. 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. For him 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. In reality there is no line on the map to differentiate between “the Oxidant and the Orient” it is all imaginary, that has a long stand position in the culture based of the West.

This paper discusses the representation of the other ‘Arabs’ in Larry Charles’ Film, The Dictator, (2012), arguing that increasing the representation of the other can reproduce inequality. The film will be analysed through the textual analysis method in light of Edward Said and Stuart Hall’s work to shed the light on the traditional representing of Arabs that started since the 20s and evolved in the late 60s as Arabs and Muslim portrayals changed; no longer romantic or erotic representation. 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.

Methodology:

This paper is considered as qualitative research, which is concerned with the interpretation and the meaning of the data during the analysis¹. Usually a qualitative research method is used to focus on the process of explicating data and uses its results to create a convincing argument. In this paper the main source of data is Larry Charles's movie *The Dictator* (2012). In order to analyse 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 analyse the messages they convey. It is an effective way to analyse Films.

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 how communication can be understood². 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 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 opens 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 a film the camera angles, themes, settings, plot and the cast all of them can be considered as a text that gives an interpretation or a meaning.

¹ stokes 2003

² (McKee, 2003)

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In this paper textual analysis will be used to analyse the representation of the character traits of Aladeen, being represented as sexual, lustful and uncivilised through quotes, and the setting of the scenes. In addition to the set decor such as the made-up setting of Aladdin's castle that was built on the Ottoman architectures style. Same analysis applies on Zoey who was represented as the civilised, refugee rescuer, and feminist. This representation will be linked to the main concepts of this paper Edward Said's Orientalism³ and Halls' ⁴representation.

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 when it comes to race portrayals and how the public's beliefs, attitudes and behaviour regarding this race could change, especially when it come to a controversial film that was banned from more than four countries due to its misrepresentation of Arabs and Islam in general⁵.

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.⁶

A side with textual analysis Edward Said's Orientalism will be also considered as an approach to analyse and interpret the representation of Arabs, and the creation of stereotypes. Said defines Orientalism as the negative attitude done by the West as they present the East as sexual, sex-crazed and uncivilised. The goal of this research is to use these methods and tools

³ (Said, 1978)

⁴ (Hall, 1992)

⁵ (Morawitz and Mastro, 2008)

⁶ (McKee, 2003)

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to examine, understand and analyse how Hollywood movies represent Arabs in relation to Edward Said's Orientalism⁷.

Fining and Discussion:

Representation of Arab countries

In his controversial directorial style Larry Charles invokes various modes of classical representations of Arabs in his film *The Dictator* (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 film 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 imagination⁸. The constructed setting of Wadiya added to the comedy elements in the film such as the visualisation jokes or a sigh gag which clearly, for example, the presentation of Aladeen's backyard carved in his own face and his iconic beard as a pond⁹.



Figure 1

⁷ (Said, 1978)

⁸ (Villarejo, 2013)

⁹ Scene number three (00:02:30-00:03:30) figure 1

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This depiction represents and refers to the glamorous picture of rich Aladeen and his iconic beard that refers to Muslim men which one of the classical stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims in general being rich and having big beards. 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 emblem of an evil Arab.¹⁰ The representation of terrorism and bad Arabs is what Edward Said noted by explaining how western media focus its attention to Palestinian suicide bombing with a huge propaganda likeness to terrorist attacks while deliberately visiting the Official Israeli attack which is much worse in a clear gross distortion in reality¹¹. In addition to propagandist depiction of Arab Muslims, Larry’s film depicts what Foucault called a heterotopic space. Heterotopic spaces are those 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 as a representation of Arabs¹². Using the huge cartoonish castle with the golden domes with the Ottoman style of architecture that looks similar to mosques. Mosques are the places of worship where Muslim’s do their religious activities¹³. 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 when they are actually different. Which proves the orientalist lens Larry and his film portrayed Arabs in since the first scene.

During most of the film, Wadiya as well as its dictator Aladeen was depicted as a threat to the world, as it develops nuclear weapon. 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,

¹⁰ (Schmidt, 2014)

¹¹ (Morton 2007)

¹² (Johnson, 2006)

¹³ (Kozlovic,2007)

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“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.” This quote in the narration with real footages¹⁴ of the U.N. weapons inspectors in Iraq before the American invasion of Iraq -“ War On Terrorism” as it was labelled- , creates a link between General Aladeen and the Formal 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 organisation, known for its terrorist attacks in western countries¹⁵.



Figure 2

This representation of Arabs being linked to terrorism or being a threat to the West is one of the classical stereotypes of Arabs in Hollywood especially after 9/11 attacks. 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 in his articles examines the role of unconscious cognitive biases in producing stereotypes represented in example of Muslims being terrorists all the time while on the other hand the others “the Westerns” uses the white privilege avoiding being labelled as terrorists¹⁶. Which is the same

¹⁴ scene number one (00:00:50-00:01:00) figure 2

¹⁵ (Pincus & Milbank,2004).

¹⁶ (Pincus & Milbank,2004).

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point that Said emphasised on in Orientalism 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 media¹⁷. 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 Wadiya is a North African country, however, geographically and according to the map shown in the film it was not, it is an East African country. This conflict of representation recalls in mind what Said emphasised on that Orientalist lens sees the East as if they are all one country; same culture, religion, language and therefore same stereotypes. A good example on that as mentioned above the example of the French poet Neruda as Said explains how the description of the Orient at that time was not accurate as they considered the East as the Other they are all the same they are not the West¹⁸.

Representing a non-Arab country that lies on the map in 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. There isn't any country in Eastern Africa that speaks Arabic

¹⁷ (Ridouani, 2011)

¹⁸ (Said, 1978)

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or even a Muslim country¹⁹. Second of all north African countries are not entirely considered as Arabs, they have other ethnicities such as Berbers, Dinka, Nubians and Arabs²⁰. 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 desert. This Orientalist point of view of representing Arabs and Arab countries is what Said considers a stereotype that was based on the French scholars who wrote about the Middle East creating the European culture towards the East representing the West being superior, civilised while the East still lives in the middle ages, a big desert where terrorists live in²¹.

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 mockery²². 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

¹⁹ (Abdelali, 2004)

²⁰ (Djebali, 2005)

²¹ (Said, 1978)

²² (Lacey and Stafford, 2002)

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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 head²³.



Figure 3

This sign refers to the method which Arabs used to execute people by during the middle ages, using this reference in a mocking way emphasises 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. Western representation for Muslims was not fabricated completely, it had its deep-rooted conceptualisation among the West since they had contact with Arabs or Muslims. These relationships started since the Middle Ages especially during the Crusades as well as the Ottoman" Muslim" expansions in Europe²⁴. The problem is that the West promotes almost the same stereotypes Arabs and Muslims were accused for such as being the other or the enemy who is a vicious killer until this day. Said noted similar concept that this West's choice of representation is due to a deep-rooted hatred for Islam. As an example of this, Said took the Irani revolution events and how the western media covered Islam through it, he emphasised that the coverage was misleading, containing huge amounts of energetic coverage that was based on objective material²⁵.

²³scene 5 (0:05:00-00:06:40) figure 3

²⁴ (Ridouani, 2011)

²⁵ (Said, 1978)

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Another stereotypical representation of bad Arabs was representing Aladeen as a lustful man. This representation was shown more than once during the film, but this essay will focus on the representation of Arabs as lustful in the Harem scene, where Aladeen was surrounded by his guards which were all women, who 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 saying²⁶: “They are trying to pleasure you, allow the girls to use their many talents.” The scene afterwards emphasis 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”. Harem according to the Orientalist cultural production that was created through Orientalist painters such as Dominique Denon and David Roberts the site where the eroticism of the Orient is represented. In this painting and even the Orientalist literature at that time women were represented as mistreated, abused or sexual representation²⁷. An example on this that Said used often was Flaubert representation as he described Oriental women that they are no more than a machine that cannot distinct between men, dumb and irreducible sexuality, which is basically women are slaves for pleasure and sex²⁸. 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. 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 master²⁹.

²⁶ Scene 16 (00:25:00-00:26:30)

²⁷ (Dajani, 2000)

²⁸ (Said,1978)

²⁹ (Dajani ,2000)

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Hall explains the process of labelling the West and the Other, along with Said's ideology that the West made this non-geographic constructions and differentiations by labelling Arabs barbaric, non-western so they can be classified as the others, that have a different characteristics, such as rural and under development countries, representing themselves "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" are in need of salvation, or according to the new representation of Arabs the need to help them to be developed, democratic and industrialised countries as they are. In the Dictator the representation of the West being superior having power and knowledge over the Orient exists. Represented in the store scene³⁰ as Zoey the American 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" 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". This kind of representation is what Said 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 emphasises 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

³⁰ scene 15 (00:22:00-00:24:50)

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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.

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 normalises it till it becomes the truth about the Other. In the past the orient especially Muslims and Arabs were marginalised with minor representation in media but recently as the calls of diversity increases the representation of Arabs increases and creating more stereotypes about Arabs³¹. 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 uncivilised 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 represented as the bad guy in the film. Which is the thing that proves the idea that representation of media of the Others increases the inequality and creates stereotypes.

In conclusion representation of Arabs in Hollywood is still done by Orientalists which leads to increasing the misrepresentation of the Other in media approving and creating other stereotypes. Also, the idea of increasing the representation of others in media it does not create

³¹ (Erigha,2016)

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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 knows 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 without stereotypes. 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 media, how do they represent themselves. Moreover, these new representations should not be generalised and to differentiate between the Other, as the East, is not one big nation, even Muslims and Arabs they are not the same, each country has its own history, language and culture, 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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