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Trends and Patterns of Muslims' Depictions in Western Films.

An Analysis of Literature Review

Patrones y tendencias en cómo se representan los musulmanes en las películas occidentales. Análisis a partir de una revisión de literatura

Padrões e Tendências em como os muçulmanos são representados nos filmes ocidentais. Análise a partir de uma revisão de literatura

Abida Eijaz

Abstract

Films have the potential to play an active role in determining when and how to evoke certain realities depending on which issues are selected, what discourses are highlighted, how observations are framed, what associations (positive and negative) are established, which symbols are selected for representation, and in what ways the content is treated. Many studies conclude that Muslims and Islam have been receiving a negative treatment in films. This study evaluates major propositions and findings of recent research on trends and patterns of Muslims' depictions in fiction films. The literature is evaluated for six themes, namely clash of civilization or arbitration, stereotyping as deficient or efficient information processing, framing as the "other," marginalization and/or prominence, representative and referential, and market driven and/or popular taste.

Key Words

Framing, stereotyping, Othering, clash of civilization, Muslims in films.

Abida Eijaz

abidaejaz@gmail.com

PhD, Assistant Professor & Researcher
University of the Punjab, Pakistan





Resumen

Las películas tienen el potencial para determinar cuándo y cómo se evocan ciertas realidades. En ellas se seleccionan temas, se resaltan discursos, se enmarcan observaciones, se establecen asociaciones (positivas y negativas), y se seleccionan símbolos para representar dar forma al contenido. Muchos estudios concluyen que los musulmanes y el Islam han recibido un tratamiento negativo en las películas. Este estudio evalúa las principales proposiciones y hallazgos de investigaciones recientes sobre tendencias y patrones de las representaciones de musulmanes en películas de ficción. La literatura se evalúa alrededor de seis tópicos: el choque o la mediación entre civilizaciones, si los estereotipos son mecanismos deficientes o eficientes para procesar información, el “otro” como lo que está siendo metido en un marco, la marginación y/o el protagonismo, lo representativo y lo referencial, y si está orientado al mercado y/o al gusto popular.

Palabras clave

Enmarcado, estereotipos, otredad, choque de civilización, musulmanes en películas.

Resumo

Os cinemas têm o potencial para determinar quando e como são evocadas certas realidades. Neles são selecionados temas, discursos se ressaltam, se emolduram as observações, se estabelecem associações (positivas e negativas), e símbolos que são selecionados para representar e dar forma ao conteúdo. Este estudo avalia as principais proposições e descobertas de investigações recentes sobre tendências e padrões das representações de muçulmanos nos filmes de ficção. A literatura é avaliada desde seis tópicos: o choque ou a mediação entre civilizações, se os estereótipos são mecanismos defeituosos ou eficientes para processar informação, o “outro” como o que está sendo posto num âmbito, a marginalização e/ou o protagonismo, o representativo e o referencial, e se é guiado ao mercado e/ou o prazer popular.

Palavras-chave

Enquadrado, estereótipos, otredade, choque de civilização, muçulmanos em filmes.

Introduction

In mass communication research, studies regarding influences on media content are less explored (Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; Scheufele, 2000). The concept of *news media as gatekeepers* triggered interest in this tradition. Hypotheses



of selection, distortion, replication, additivity, and complementarity explain the influences on production processes (Galtung & Ruge, 1965; Sande, 1971; Peterson, 1979, 1981; Bell, 1991; Harcup & O'Neill, 2001). The concept of *media as shaping and reshaping realities* suggests exploring the various influences on the production of media content (Gans, 1980; Gitlin, 1980; Altschul, 1984; Shoemaker & Reese, 1991; O'Reagan, 1996; Herman & Chomsky, 2002; Curran & Seaton, 2003; Allan, 2004; Gauntlett, 2005). Islam and Muslims have been receiving negative associations in the media, particularly in films. Many studies have already been carried out to investigate the patterns of Muslims' depictions in films, suggesting the prevalence of stereotyping and othering. However, there is a need to do a systematic review of the previous research to evaluate the overall trends and patterns of Muslims' depictions in films.

Through extensive literature review, this paper examines and evaluates main propositions and major findings of: Preceding studies regarding patterns of Muslims' depictions in terms of marginalization or prominence in Western films; previous research on stereotyping and "othering" of Muslims in films; and contribution of past studies for the promotion of harmony and peaceful co-existence or furthering the argument of clash of civilizations.

Film is a significant tool of (re)shaping, (re)constructing, and (re)structuring realities that are widely accessible. Films are not the unconscious and non-deliberate actions of the producers and owners, but rather they reflect the ideologies and policies of the persons who produce, control and own them, since films play an active role in determining when and how to evoke certain realities depending on which issues are selected, what discourses are highlighted, how observations are framed, what associations (positive and negative) are established, which symbols are selected for representation, and in what ways the content is treated. For example, the term *Muslim fundamentalist* is stereotyped to convey negativity.

Hollywood films are watched almost throughout the entire world, and the negative associations of Islam as monolithic and Muslims as fundamentalist, violent, terrorist, oppressors, irrational, and uncivilized become mediated realities for the entire world. Edwards (2001) finds redundant images of East throughout the celluloid history of Hollywood as the political, economic and social concerns of the capitalist approach. Shaheen (as cited in Mesic, 2008) has validated this point in his quantitative study, writing, "Most of the Arab characters in 900 American movies were racist characters and their ordinary day life is presented in a distorted way by the western media" (p. 2). He also points out that Muslims have been receiving negative depictions in Hollywood films from the very beginning,



Ever since cameras began cranking, Hollywood has produced almost 1,000 movies which show Arab Muslims primarily as subhuman, in the same way the Nazi cinema portrayed Jews. And what is disturbing about this particular image is that it has become so ingrained in American psyches, not only here but abroad. (Shaheen, as cited in Mesic, 2008, p. 11).

While concluding about Muslims' depictions in Hollywood films, Shaheen (as cited in Mesic, 2008) puts forward that there have been four perpetuated images of Muslims: as a global menace; as producers of biological weapons; as zealots who issue *fatwas*; and as demonstrators burning Uncle Sam in an effigy.

Many studies of the 20th century (Shrivastava, 1992; El-Farra, 1996; Rainey, 1996; Maksoud, 1998; Kutty & Yousuf, 1998; Shaheen, 2001) conclude that Muslims and Islam have been receiving a negative treatment in films. This study is an attempt to evaluate the research produced in the 21st century regarding trends and patterns of Muslims' depictions in fiction films and how it is influencing and is being influenced by other domains as well. The literature is evaluated for six themes, namely clash of civilization or arbitration, stereotyping as deficient or efficient information processing, framing as the 'other', marginalization and/or prominence, representative and referential, and market driven and/or popular taste.

Clash of Civilization or Arbitration

Huntington (1996) proposed the popular thesis of clash of civilization between secular world and Muslim world based upon four elements: religion, customs, social institutions, and history. Said (1979) approaches this difference as an arbitrator and suggests taking steps in order to avoid the clash. However, western films are nurturing the idea of clash of civilization.

Hollywood cinema has stigmatized Muslims as dangerous, pre-modern and uncivilized people who do not fit with civilized western culture. Therefore, western non-Muslims perceive Islam as a religion promoting intolerance and violence. The concept of binary ideologies of "Self" vs "Others" is becoming more pervasive in the western media. Mesic (2008), is of the view that the West has to review the idea of its own "Self" and the "Other" because such discrimination towards Muslims is linked with Islamophobia, which is giving pace to an anti-Muslim sentiment in media as well as in films. Pickering (2001) explains how the stereotyping of Muslims/Islam in the media has distanced and threatened Muslims. Many other studies propose the same findings. These ideas are perpetuated through media contents and especially through fiction films.



Hollywood film *The Siege* has created a feeling of unrest among the Islamic community because it portrayed Muslim Arab-Americans as barbarians and terrorists. Maksoud (1998), the President of the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee posted a complaint through an open letter to the producers of the film. She wrote that film *The Siege* is sinister, dangerous and provocative, and radiates a negative impact on Muslims and Arab Americans. It provokes hate that leads to discernment, persecution, intimidation, and discrimination against people of Arab descent. Hollywood should stop demonizing Arabs and Muslims, so that Arab-American children can grow up feeling safe and proud of their rich cultural heritage.

These Orientalist creations are informing and shaping foreign policies as well. The Iraq Inquiry Report (2016) by Sir John Chilcot mentions that Prime Minister Tony Blair wrote to President George W. Bush eight months before the Iraq invasion to offer his backing for war well before UN weapons inspectors had completed their work, saying: "I will be with you, whatever" (The Guardian, 2016). The perpetuated anti-Muslim contents are simultaneously influencing and are being influenced by the ideologies like: Islam is a threat to the West; Islam is conservative and old-fashioned; Muslims are deviant, irrational, violent, despotic, sexually driven; all Muslims are Arabs; may lead to a general public acceptance of dropping bombs, drone killings, covert operations, oppressive legislation, torture killings etc. Currently, the United States is dropping bombs in seven countries, namely Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Syria, Libya, Somalia, and Yemen, without any resistance or reaction from general masses, as public consent is already manufactured through orientalist discourse.

Hollywood has perpetuated and reinforced the assumptions and narrative of "orientalism." Muslim identity and the concerns of Muslims are increasingly being defined in terms of an oppositional dialectic that pits Islam and Muslims against the rest of the world (Noor, 2007). Islamophobia has become the mainstream media discourse where images of Muslims as violent, fanatics and murderous thrive in movies (Elayan, 2005; Noor, 2007; Shaheen, 2008; Aguayo, 2009; Karim, 2009; Fawal, 2013). The National Report on Islamophobia in United Kingdom (Merali, 2015, p. 552) concludes that media representation of Muslims continued to be problematic, with continued conflation of Islam, Muslims and terrorism, misogyny, sexual deviancy and disloyalty.

In the aftermath of September 11, 2001, some television shows in America took up the question of whether it was fair to discriminate against Arab or Muslim Americans in the name of national security. Asultany (2013) views that such representations lead to the conclusion that, "Americans have to choose between protecting the nation and discriminating against Arabs and Arab Americans (who are, according to the subtext, prone to being dangerous)" (p. 103).



Secularism is a relative term dominantly perceived as binary and opposite to religion. Binary opposites sometimes confine concepts within particular boundaries which may lead to bias and prejudice. In the backdrop of secularism, any religious expression or cultural difference is distasteful, and therefore veiled women are treated as a symbol of oppression and a challenge to the popular ideology of secularism. Tarr (2014) analyzes five feature films for representing the identities of Muslims and Islam in contemporary France: Two films belong to mainstream popular cinema including *Bad Faith* (2006) and *The Italian* (2010), while three are low-budget and auteur-led independent documentaries including *Two Ladies* (2008), *Dernier maquis* (2008) and *Disintegration* (2012). The films offer new narratives through “good guys” negotiation of their Muslim identities in a French context.

The films are evaluated in two contexts: the distant context is postcolonial France, French republican ideology and secularism, while the recent context includes 9/11 and terrorism, Islamophobia and Muslims' anxieties. One of the films depicts young veiled women as incompatible with the secularism of the French Republic. She reiterates the need of integration of Islam as a legitimate referent of French identity.

The concept of binary opposites is becoming more pervasive in the era of ideologically driven media, which is more influential than the formal curriculum in schools (Watt, 2012). The very idea of religion as a binary opposite to secularism is not compatible with western culture and civilization. However, the perception of religion as an independent phenomenon can help to view it as a different reality. Differences can be approached in two ways: by highlighting them as a clash and conflict or by respecting them and celebrating them as diversity. Unfortunately, the depictions of Islam and Muslims in films are contributing to clash and conflict. There is a need to celebrate diversities and to mediate differences.

Stereotyping as Deficient or Efficient Information Processing

Stereotyping is observed quite differently in the scholarship of media studies as compared to psychology. While explaining Lippmann's definition of a stereotype, (the projection upon the world of our own sense, of our own value, our own position and our own rights), Halse (2014) draws two different meanings “on one hand, stereotypes are both deficient, biased, and in the interests of those who apply them. On the other hand, stereotypes are a means to ensure efficient information processing” (pp. 113–114). The tradition of media studies has applied the first meanings and analyzed media messages as creating and sustaining structures of difference and power, while studies in



psychology have applied the second meaning for individuals' need to economize their cognitive processes.

It is observed that when film writers want to portray a terrorist, or someone who is threatening, they link up Middle Eastern culture with the character by putting it in particular attire associated with the Middle East, giving an accent, and making them look like Arab (Rainey, 2004). That's a stereotype used often because it's very quick and easy, since the Middle East is thickly populated with Muslims and so it is but natural for the audience of such films to perceive Islam through a negative frame. The formation and perpetuation of such images is not only detrimental for the region but for the religion as well.

Eisele (2002) traces the early history of Hollywood cinema and finds the depictions of East as a place of abduction and enslavement, oppression and coercion, lust and greed, terror and redemption for sins. From the beginning of American cinema in 1896, the image of the Arab (who is Muslim) has always been stereotypical, the cultural "other," which is often projected along racial and religious themes (Ramji, 2005). In her analysis of Hollywood films from 1990 to 1998, Ramji refers different Hollywood films such as *Thief of Damascus*, *Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Ishtar*. She concludes that Arab Muslim is recurrently depicted as a backward and immature individual, who is in need of Western knowledge and domination.

Ridouani (2011) suggests that western media has compressed, over generalized and oversimplified the Arabs and Muslims. Western media is unable to "discriminate among the different ethnic groups, different races, different dialects, and even worse different religious beliefs" (Ridouani, 2011, p. 12). Western media maintains and reinforces common stereotypes for the Muslims whether they are printed, broadcasted, televised or filmed. Though in the Muslim world there are fifty-seven countries with different cultural shades, socio-economic circumstances, political conditions, and legal systems, western media tends to portray them with a holistic view and treats them as a homogenous world. As pointed out by Ridouani, "...far from being a multicultural, multiracial, and multiethnic groups, Muslims are stereotypically embodied in one persona which is endowed by all sorts of devilish deeds" (Ridouani, 2011, p. 13).

Ethnographic studies suggest that immigrant Muslims in the United States also receive a different treatment in the media. Two of the largest ethnic Muslim groups of America; African American and South Asian immigrants are also receiving a different treatment in the media. Karim (2003) narrates her experience of a photo journal and a photo shoot. She questions the absence of African, American and South Asian Muslim women in a Muslim women's magazine *Azizah* that was depicting pictures of Arab Muslim women only. Later



on, when she was asked to pose for the same magazine, the lady journalist asked her not to smile and gave no real explanation as to why.

Why would she not be interested in at least a couple of pictures of smiling Muslim women?... another attempt to present Muslim women as solemn and unhappy... I felt frustration of watching someone present us in ways that ignored our diversity (in the case of first photo journal) or that had already determined how we should appear and express ourselves to the public (in the case of the photo shoot). (Karim, 2009, p. 229).

Negative depictions are adding to the incidents of anti-Muslim violence, discrimination, stereotyping, bias and harassment as endorsed by the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR). CAIR reported an increase of 18 percent in such incidents as compared to the year 1996. Kutty and Yousuf (1998) critically evaluate the impact of such stereotyping of Muslims on children and suggest that perpetuation of such stereotypes and inaccuracies may greatly impact on the children, the most vulnerable. Growing up as a Muslim or Arab child in North America is a challenge in itself without the added burdens imposed by the media and Hollywood.

Hollywood cinema has stigmatized Muslims as dangerous, pre-modern and uncivilized people which is informed by certain biases and is contributing to prejudgments and stereotypes towards the Muslims and Islam. The representation of Muslims in Hollywood films directs the orientalist discourses about Muslims. Moreover, west is depicted as all pervasive and monolithic which needs to be addressed. Professor John Esposito, in an interview granted to Karlin (2001), suggests that there is a need to deconstruct monolithic perceptions of the West in the Islamic world, as well as to transform the perception about Islam as a “threat” to Islam and as a “challenge” in the West.

Shaheen (2008) critically analyzes US policy to win the “war on terror” in Hollywood films after 9/11 and suggests that the century-old stereotypes of Arabs/Muslims helped the United States to integrate and get the support of other countries for winning the so-called “war on terror.” Media in post-9/11 era has declared Islam as an ideology of “fundamentalism,” “extremism,” and “radicalism” (Mesic, 2008). Butt (2001) has endorsed the same point through content analysis of Hollywood films that project a negative and biased image of Muslims and Islam. Muslims are portrayed as brutal, violent and terrorists, and most of the Muslim countries are shown to be anti-American. The study concludes that the perpetuated images of Muslims in Hollywood movies suggest that “Muslims are not terrorist but all terrorists are Muslims” (Butt, 2001, p. 41).

In a qualitative study, Elayan (2005) explores the portrayal of Arab Muslims in six popular films released from 1994 to 2000 that carry any Arab/



Arab-American characters. The movies include *True Lies* (1994), *Executive Decision* (1996), *the Siege* (1998), *the Mummy* (1999), *Three Kings* (1999), and *Rules of Engagement* (2000). In-depth analysis of the characteristics, including speaking with an accent, traditional/native attire, acts of hostility and aggression, affiliation with terrorism, depictions as victimizers or victims facilitate the findings. The study demonstrates frequent existence of negative portrayals of Arabs/Arab-Americans in popular films prior to 9/11. The stereotypical images associated with Arabs and Arab-Americans include “speaking with different accents, wearing traditional/native attire, doing acts of hostility and aggression, affiliated with terrorism and victimization are evident in Hollywood movies which tend to marginalize them from American and western culture and they are viewed as cultural *others*” (Elayan (2005, p. 52). The conclusions suggest that stereotypes are evident in films and detrimental to Arab/Arab-American races and cultures. Such depictions end up in constructing peculiar identities.

Similar research carried out by Batool (2006) regarding the portrayal of Muslims in Indian movies proposed the same findings. She states,

The cognitive frame of reference through which members of the ethnic majority premise their arguments is largely based on mental models of ethnic events that are constituted by media-mediated themes and topics on minority issues in the daily news flow of the national media. (Batool, 2006, p. 32).

Media has emerged as the most significant tool to construct and reconstruct realities and shape mental images. Consequently, the mental images affect and are affected by the reality surrounding the world.

Shaheen (2008) identified four stereotypes that dominate after 9/11 for the unfavorable depictions of Muslims in Hollywood films: a) they are fabulously wealthy; b) they are sex maniacs; c) they are barbaric and uncivilized; d) they enjoy acts of terrorism. Similarly, Menchawi Fawal (2013) reaffirms the stereotypical and negative representations of Arabs/Muslims in Hollywood by examining the depiction of Islam and Muslims in Hollywood movies. He finds that Islam and Muslims are persistently portrayed negatively and associated with stereotypical images of violence, terrorism, fundamentalism and extremism. He writes,

Historically, Hollywood has been circulating the negative image about Muslims as ignorant, evil, violent, and terrorist. He contends that misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims in American and western media particularly Hollywood movies are ‘inherited misconception of the Muslim world’. These ideological constructions have served to maintain



Western political power and hegemony over the Muslim world. In addition, these manufactured constructions continue to dichotomize the world into Good West versus Evil East. (Fawal, 2013, p. 57).

The studies suggest that stereotyping is adopted as a deficient and biased means of processing information. Therefore, there is a dire need to develop critical media literacy among viewers in order to demystify the stereotypical images of Muslims and Islam that leads to a more democratic and peaceful co-existence.

Framing as the “Other”

McComb and Shaw's (1972) theory of agenda-setting explains that media is stunningly successful in telling people what to think about. Media manipulates the public opinion by assigning positive and negative attributes. According to Christopher Smith (2013), “Prejudice against Muslims will undoubtedly remain commonplace so long as Islam remains a salient issue in American partisan politics, but careful framing can go a long way to mitigate those feelings” (p. 12). The agenda-setting theory suggests how the media agenda is inter-linked with public agenda and policy agenda. The perpetual anti-Muslim depictions in the media corroborate this subtle relationship.

Visual representations shape public discourses that leave greater impact on the audience and develop perceptions about a certain class, race, and religion. Dyer (2013) views cultural representations in terms of power relations that reflect and affect our perceptions and dealings with them in the real life: “[...] how we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation” (Dyer, 2013, p. 2). The representation of Muslims in Hollywood films are guiding, reinforcing and perpetuating the orientalist discourse about Muslims. The anti-Islam and anti-Muslim image in the media manifests itself in the politics of America. According to Mesic (2008) several scholars propose that terrorism and modern global communication go hand in hand.

According to Haynes (2011), the NATO Secretary General Willy Claes in 1995, announced that Muslim fundamentalism is at least as dangerous as Communism once was because it represents terrorism and religious fanaticism. Such statements from political leaders not only influence the media agenda but also shape public perceptions. While examining the contributory factors for this shift, Christopher Smith (2013) points out an

apparent interactive effect between the news cycle, partisan affiliation, and lack of first-hand knowledge of the faith. This is likely because: 1)



Democrats and Republicans tend to patronize partisan media outlets, 2) right- and left-leaning media outlets used increasingly divergent frames to represent Islam over the course of the decade, and 3) those with the least personal knowledge of the faith are the most susceptible to these competing media representations.

The divergent, confused and negative representations of Islam and Muslims in the media led to a misinformed public opinion. As a result, Islam and Muslims are also perceived as a threat to western culture, norms and values. The coverage of the September 11, 2001 incident followed by media coverage framing it as a “war on terror” may be considered as rationalization process. The phrasing of the term *war on terror* amplified the fears of the West as well as presented the West as a champion of human rights.

Yin (2010) analyzes the depiction of Muslims, especially Arab Muslims, in Hollywood in the pre-9/11 and post-9/11 eras. He finds that Arabs and Muslims are more frequently portrayed as “terrorists” in primary roles while “good” Arabs are still portrayed as “secondary characters.” He further argues that many of the programs have produced a new type of sinister: “the sleeper,” associated with the Arab-American who viciously “plots terrorist attacks from inside the country.” Television shows and movies based on terrorism and counter-terrorism policies leave a great impact on the minds of the audience as how they perceive the policy of terrorism and counter terrorism. He argues that, along with post-9/11, the depiction of Arabs in pre-9/11 television shows is apocalyptic. Muslims in general, and Arabs in particular, are suggested as threats to the US in the guise of terrorists, equipped with biological or nuclear weapons. The rhetoric continues as the post-9/11 shows presented Arabs as more “sinister” terrorists. He evaluates that television shows and movies that portray Arabs and Muslims involved in “lethal plot aimed at mass casualties can inflame and distort public views of Arab and Muslims as being potential sleeper terrorists” (Yin, 2010, p. 120). Further, he suggests that, if Hollywood cannot avoid portraying Muslims and Arabs as “villains,” at least they can overcome their bias by portraying Muslims and Arabs involved in counterterrorism as well.

El-Amine (2005) points out that the racist caricatures projected and reinforced in Hollywood films have played a significant role in developing negative associations with Arabs and Muslims. She proposes that Islamic menace “has replaced the red menace, and the ‘evil empire’ of the cold war has become... ‘evil doers’ of the Arab and Muslim world” (El-Amine, 2005, para. 2). She further suggests that “Arabs in films are portrayed as being terrorists, fanatics, dirty, irrational, violent and above all disposable... The fictional world of Hollywood does not stop with films; even the news media uses the same stereotypes and images” (para. 18, 19).



The film *The Kingdom* (2007) carries the same rhetoric of Muslims as dangerous. Aguayo (2009) decodes verbal and visual codes assigned to Muslims in the film, which is a fictional, political-thriller, and a terrorism centered movie. The three allegorical interrelated figures that emerge in the film are: “dangerous Muslim man,” “the imperiled Muslim woman” and “the civilized European” (Aguayo 2009). The leading character in *The Kingdom* is American female Janet Mayes, who implicitly distinguishes herself from Muslim women as she did not veil, and worked with her male colleagues, thus earning the condemnation of Muslim Saudi men. The character of Mayes illuminates “imperialist discourses,” and the hyper-invisibility of Muslim women suggests that they are suppressed and imperiled, as they are not given equal rights to work with men and they have to veil their bodies. The film advocates that Muslim men are dangerous, since they are shown to be lecherous, pre-modern and uncivilized. In order to portray Europe as civilized, Muslims are portrayed as ignorant, uncivilized, and gender biased. They have deprived Muslim women of their liberty, which contributes to the identity of Muslim women as different from liberal, modern and civilized western women. These depictions become the firsthand knowledge for majority of non-Muslims and shape a negative discourse about Muslims and Islam.

As images are value laden, dealing with the politics of representation and meaning making processes thus prove to be cultural signifiers. Makarushka (2016, p. 2) writes, “Postmodern interpretations of religion locate its significance in the creative process, religion becomes the engagement of individuals and communities in making life meaningful.” The biases can be reduced with the contribution of both producers and consumers. Producers need to do careful framing and provide alternate perspectives, while consumers of such content need to develop media literacy, educate themselves about Islam from multiple sources, and engage themselves in contrapuntal readings which can help to overcome the anti-Islamic framing and overwhelming prejudice.

Marginalization and/or Prominence

In the modern age, media has become more powerful and instrumentalist as it can wage war on ideological fronts (Shrivastava, 1992; El-Farra, 1996). Post-modern and ideological approaches to religion serve as a means to analyze media content related with religion from various perspectives. Muslims may appear as being marginalized in the media and particularly in films, but at the same time they may appear as getting prominence with negative associations. Studies suggest that Muslims have been frequently receiving negative and stereotypical coverage in American media.



Hollywood cinema continues to further the orientalist discourse and is engaged in the process of “othering”. Gul (2013) has evaluated the representation of Muslims in Hollywood films from 2008–2011. The films include *Body of Lies*, *The Four Horsemen*, *Hurt Locker*, *The Messenger*, *Green Zone*, and *The Essential Killing*. She proposes that Muslims are marginalized and given unfair projection in Hollywood films, concluding, “...representation of Muslims in Hollywood cinema is derogatory. They are portrayed as terrorists, killers, kidnappers, fundamentalists, extremists, ill-mannered and uncivilized. The representation of NATO forces and US officials is that of heroic, ultimate savior, peacekeeper and Nationalists” (Gul, 2013, p. 24).

According to the study of the Duke University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (2010, p. 1), “the terrorist threat posed by radicalized Muslim-Americans has been exaggerated.” These perceptions are constituted by the media. The 9/11 narrative has offered a huge content for stories in the perspective of hero and villain, or good and evil. According to Al-Jenaibi (2008), the Arab became the most likely candidate for the latter in fictitious thrillers involving terrorists out to harm America and the world. Most of these movies include scenes of bombing with the most recognizable mercenaries being the Arabs and Muslims.

By claiming Muslims as terrorists and as a threat to western security, western media tries to justify their invasion in Afghanistan and Iraq which is declared as “War on Terror.” Acts of terrorism in the 21st century including the bombings of September 2001 in the United States, March 2004 in Madrid, and July 2005 in London have been associated with Islam and Muslims. Though there has been a series of terrorist attacks throughout the world, particularly the Muslim countries have been suffering. It appears that severe victims of these terrorist attacks are Muslims but Islam and Muslims are perceived as a danger and threat by the west. An increase in the animosity towards Islam has been observed in the last decade.

Recurrent negative associations of Muslims have also been evaluated in the backdrop of conspiracy theory. Karim (2003) proposes the idea of Journalistic conspiracy against Islam and investigates his postulates based on in-depth research on the media coverage of violence involving Muslim individuals and groups. He suggests that media tends to focus the religious link to Arab/Muslims or Islam-related violence but when it comes to Christians and Jews, they fail to do this; even when the link between their actions and their religious beliefs may be equally possible or sounds more reasonable. He has identified four themes associated with Muslims in Hollywood films, which include violence, lust, greed, and barbarism.



Films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Executive Decision*, *The Siege*, *East is East*, *Aladdin*, *House of Sand and Fog*, etc., contribute in giving prominence to Islam and Muslims as “bad guys” (Ward, 2007). The report concludes that popular films ranging from Hollywood blockbusters to children’s cartoons are depicting “crude and exaggerated” stereotypes of Muslims and perpetuating Islamophobia. Films as diverse as *The Siege*, a portrayal of a terrorist attack on New York starring Denzel Washington and Bruce Willis, the Disney film *Aladdin* and the British comedy *East is East* have helped demonize Muslims as violent, dangerous and threatening, and reinforce prejudices. Projecting one’s identity as alien to the dominant culture tends to set aside or marginalize their identity. There is a need of visual media literacy in order to negotiate with dominant meanings and demystifying the negative connotations assigned to Muslim and Islam. According to Barber (1995),

Hollywood is McWorld’s storyteller, and it inculcates secularism, passivity, consumerism, vicariousness, impulse buying, and an accelerated pace of life, not as a result of its overt themes and explicit story lines but by virtue of what Hollywood is and how its products are consumed. (p. 97).

Global media constructs social reality through simulations and representations that influence upon identity construction and consumption experiences. Oumlil (2012) examines expressions and articulations of counter-hegemonic discourses on the part of Muslim, Arab, South Asian, and Middle-Eastern women in the US and Canada, with a particular attention to race and gender. She has analyzed films produced by female filmmakers and proposes that

Counter-hegemonic works of arts maintain voices above the surface of the water. They can contribute to the creation of a counter hegemonic language that creates noise; noise that disturbs the tranquility of the status quo as it awaits a potential mass-mobilization that would enable the creation of significant political change. (Oumlil, 2012, p. 244).

The idea of counter-hegemonic discourse seems to be too idealist in the conglomerate capitalist world. The alternative discourse needs to be depicted through films but it has to face the challenges of popularity, prominence and revenue. Distribution of US media products at global level and domination of Hollywood products on world’s cinema is challenging the frontiers of local media markets as well as ideologies.



Representative and Referential

Films can serve to create a common worldview towards religion by making audience conscious for inaccessible entities and realities. Marty (1997) describes this process as “cinema awakens homo religious,” which means engaging and supporting elements of religious dimension inherent in every human being. Highlighting in films the common mysteries and questions unaddressed in religions may lead to developing a common consensus about their very nature of beyond reasoning:

It brings back to life the sense of mystery by making us love what is not immediately perceivable, what is beyond appearance and evidence. It suggests the invisible... Thus, cinema binds us again with the poetic and religious expression of humanity... Everything that is human, every relationship to the world and to nature, treated artistically by the cinema becomes a poem, a tale, a re-reading, a proposal of meaning, a celebration — in short, something that resembles a first religious step. (p. 132).

Most of the studies quoted above suggest that stereotyping of Muslims and Islam is obstinately recurring in the Hollywood cinema therefore, stand as representative of Islam and Muslims for people who do not have a firsthand knowledge of Islam and direct interaction with Muslims.

Merali, head of research at the Islamic Human Rights Commission and co-author of the report (Ward, 2007), says that the problem with Muslims' portrayals in films is not the fact that they are negative images, but that they are the only images. The report suggests that repeated juxtaposition of Islamic ritual practices such as prayer in a mosque and the call to prayer from a minaret with scenes of exploding bombs and indiscriminate killing implies that “terrorist acts are intrinsic to Islamic beliefs and practices” (p. 36).

Ameli (2015) describes the role of media in defining an average Muslim, perceptions developed and images circulated that how he looks like. Merali and Ameli (2015) summarize the themes of anti-Muslim representation as follows,

The sexual groomer, pedophile, predator, harking back to the idea of the seraglio. Tied to this is the idea of perverse and extreme violence, sexual depravity, misogyny and disloyalty. All of these feed into the idea of inferiority to a western, i.e. white British majority, but also to that of an inherent lack of values, a deficiency that can never be overcome. (p. 569).



The negative associations explain why there is an environment of hate for Muslims.

Market Driven and/or Popular Taste

Films have the potential to create, reinforce and replace myths, icons, and values that are celebrated and reinforced in a ritualized manner and sustain that very culture. Bryant discusses film as a central ritual in our modern civilization, saying,

As a popular form of the religious life, movies do what we have always asked of popular religion, namely, that they provide us with archetypal forms of humanity, heroic figures; and instruct us in the basic values and myths of our society. (Bryant, 1982, p. 106).

According to Benjamin Barber, filmmakers, advertisers and pop culture purveyors are now inspiring us more than teachers as “Disney does more than Duke, Spielberg outweighs Stanford, MTV trumps MIT” (1996, p. 12). Critical studies inform that Muslims and Islam have been receiving stereotypical and negative associations in the history of Hollywood cinema. The stereotypes against Muslims have been inherent in the US media and it is really an unintelligent idea to refute them as they are aligned to popular taste (Hollick, 1992).

Muslims are receiving a continued depiction of the “other” as innately strange and dangerous; as a threat to peace; as foul creatures. In his study, Michael Pickering claims how stereotyping of Muslims/Islam in the media has distanced and threatened Muslims. In some circles of the western world, there is a realization of erroneous representations of Muslims/Arabs/Islam in the media and particularly on the silver screen. This realization has resulted in a culture of political correctness. Therefore, a few films appeared with positive or neutral depictions of Muslims/Arabs/Islam, such as *House of Sand and Fog* (2003), *Hidalgo* (2004), *Sorry, Haters* (2005), *Syriana* (2005), and *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), *The Visitor* (2007) and *The Kite Runner* (2007), *American East* (2008), and *Traitor* (2008), *Mooz-lum* (2010), *Day of the Falcon* (2011), though most of them didn't do well at the box office and remained less entertaining and unpopular.

In capitalist societies, media is driven by profit maximization. Popular taste becomes the choice of the media. Hollywood films with negative depictions of Muslims/Arabs/Islam usually become popular and do good business therefore; the preferred choices of the producers remain negative and stereotypical depictions. Overall, Muslim characters are downgraded, marginalized and generally relegated to the negative depictions that reflect the power structures



and satisfies the popular taste. Repetition and reinforcement of such depictions in films earn popularity, prominence and yield revenue to them as well.

Critique on Negative Depictions of Muslims and Islam in the Films

Post-structuralist scholarship suggests that a text is polysemic, can possess multiple meanings and can be explained in myriad ways. From this standpoint, film as a text can also be interpreted in multiple ways. Therefore, the claim for particular films promoting stereotypes for Muslims and Islam is challenged. If one accepts it as an argument and finds cohesion and similarities in multiple meanings, dominantly referring to negative depictions, it means films are informing the same conclusions from a post-structuralist perspective as well.

Another argument from the tradition of film studies challenging the claim of promoting biases in films is proposed by Zywiets (2011). He maintains that a film should be without claims to be representative or referential. Films are merely a presentation and not a representation, and therefore it should not be linked to everyday phenomenon. He questions, "Why we suppose that movies should reflect reality in terms of statistics, fairness or complexity. Why not accept that 'True Lies' or 'The Siege' show us just some but not all Muslims and Arabs" (Zywiets, 2011, p. 191). He claims it is an unscientific approach to look for *Angemessenheit*, (a German word for "adequateness," "fittingness, or "appropriateness") in fictional films. However, if we accept it as an argument, the fact does not change that media agenda has the potential to influence public agenda and policy agenda. Films constitute perceptions and sometimes serve as efficient information system about distant cultures and peoples and therefore become representative.

Literature review points out the trends and patterns of studies related to the depictions of Islam and Muslims in western films and suggests that six scholarly engagements emerge: One is the discourse that "clash of civilization" is dominant and perpetuates as compared to discourse of arbitration. The second is how stereotypes are used as a deficient and biased system of information processing to extend, reinforce and endorse negative associations. The third is how media framing of Muslims is obsessed with "othering" and aligned with the foreign policy of imperial powers. The fourth is how Islam and Muslims are apparently marginalized, but this marginalization and negative framing is bringing prominence to them. The fifth is how anti-Muslims and anti-Islam films serve to be representative and referential and therefore serve as a source of information to unknowing people. The sixth is how market-driven forces develop content from popular taste and simultaneously constitutes popular taste.



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