

ORIENTALISM ON TELEVISION: A CASE STUDY OF *I DREAM OF JEANNIE*

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Abstract: This article examines Orientalism in the 1960s American sitcom *I Dream of Jeannie*. I argue that Orientalism, as defined by Edward Said, is at the core of this show. *I Dream of Jeannie* is unique in that it transferred existing Orientalist representations from cinema to television. I argue that Orientalism performs two functions in *I Dream of Jeannie*: (1) imagining Jeannie as an “Other” and (2) being a vehicle for comedy. I note that the show is seldom analyzed for its overt Orientalism, reflecting a problematic “tone-deafness” to anti-Muslim racism that continues in today’s television.

Keywords: *I Dream of Jeannie*, Orientalism, television, Muslim representation, Muslim women on screen

Media ethnographers teach us that identity is partly related to issues of how our self and our community are represented in mass media (Bird 2003). No matter the genre, be it news, sitcom, drama, thriller, or comedy, part of our involvement as viewers is to experience the program as it speaks to our sense of self.

In Western mass media, White people have a privileged relationship to this process. “Whiteness” is affirmed as a structural norm, something to be taken for granted (Hall 2014; McIntosh 2014). “Whiteness” disappears behind a panoply of other possible identities: objective and knowledgeable newscaster, hero, best friend, side-kick, villain, mother, father, lover, child, businessman or woman, baker, TV critic, and so on. But “being White” is rarely an identity in and of itself.

Minorities struggle with such relationships to mass media. A limited range of possible identities restricts their representation to a narrow few options: “blacks as criminals, exotic primitives to be feared [or] helpless children dependent on charity” (Rodman 2006: 95), Native Americans as “noble savage” or drunk and disorderly (Bird 2014), or “Italian passions, Irish drinking, Jewish business practices, [and] German problems with the English language” (Marc 1989: xiii). These largely negative representations become stereotypes that are recycled again and again. In the dominant culture, minority identity becomes connected to such negative stereotypes, so that the stereotype is imagined to be the identity of members of that minority. This is the process Hall (2014) pinpoints as the media’s role in the ideological construction of race.

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No group has suffered this ideological process more than Arabs-Muslims.¹ Every scholar who studies Western mass media representation of Arabs-Muslims concludes as had Cainkar (2009: 141):

By commission and omission, interested parties, the mainstream media, and government officials helped to produce a common American understanding that Arabs, and later Muslims, were mostly, and almost innately, about violence and hatred of Americans. “Arabness” as an essence had been put forth as a collectively shared cultural system that stood in opposition to American values and interests, nearly genetic in its individual insurmountability.

This article engages anti-Muslim racism in Western cultural discourse and broader issues of Arab-Muslim representation through a case study of *I Dream of Jeannie* (*Jeannie*). *Jeannie* is a particularly fruitful entry into this conversation for three reasons: first, for the way *Jeannie* mobilizes Orientalism in its production processes; second because of the way most viewers and critics from the dominant Western cultures cannot see these problematic Orientalist representations; and third, how a critical analysis of *Jeannie* contributes to an understanding of the relationship between Orientalism and contemporary Islamophobia (which I identify in this article as “anti-Muslim racism”).² Critical Muslim Studies, a field of study in which my article best belongs, allows for this multilayered exploration because it gives space not only simply to “critiquing Orientalism” but also to my drawing attention to the failures of the Western academy in its assessment of *Jeannie*.

My article focuses specifically on the original *I Dream of Jeannie* TV series, excluding the reunion movies, spin-offs, or show-related merchandising. The “*I Dream of Jeannie*” section provides an overview of the show, placing it into broader Western cultural discourses about Arabs-Muslims; The “Watching *I Dream of Jeannie* in 2018” section assesses how the show’s Orientalist representations matter for understanding contemporary anti-Muslim racism in the West; and finally, in the “The Function of Orientalism in *I Dream of Jeannie*” section, I provide the case study of Orientalism on television by analyzing the function of Orientalism in *I Dream of Jeannie*.

I Dream of Jeannie

I Dream of Jeannie is a sitcom written by Sidney Sheldon for Screen Gems (a branch of Columbia Pictures) from the years 1965 to 1970 (Cox 2000: 27).³ According to the backstory, Jeannie was born in 64 BC in Baghdad, but when she refused to marry an evil genie (the Blue Djinn), he turned her into a genie and

bottled her up.⁴ 2000 years later, Major Tony Nelson, an American astronaut, accidentally rescues her after finding her magical bottle on a deserted island.⁵ Although Nelson sets Jeannie free, she immediately falls in love with him and chooses to stay with her new “master.” The comedy of the show usually revolves around Jeannie trying to get Nelson to marry her and Nelson resisting (he loves her but is perplexed by the prospect of a genie for a wife) or else mix-ups Jeannie causes by her misunderstanding of the modern world.

I Dream of Jeannie is an example of Nance’s (2009: 25) claim that the *Arabian Nights* was a source “repeatedly reread and raided for plot ideas [and] stock characters.” In conceiving a show about a genie, Sheldon was loosely tapping into the *Arabian Nights* heritage in Western culture. *The Arabian Nights*, also known as the *One Thousand and One Nights*, was a manuscript based partly on Middle Eastern and South Asian folk tales (Grotzfeld 2006). It was introduced to Europe and North America from a loose French translation by Antoine Galland, published between 1704 and 1717, and became a phenomenal success (Irwin 2010: 16). The first of many English versions was the Grub Street translation (1706–1721), published as *Arabian Nights’ Entertainments Consisting of One Thousand and One Stories, Arabian Winter Evenings’ Entertainments* (Irwin 2010: 16).

The *One Thousand and One Nights*, with its “strong erotic content” (Irwin 2010: 16), is not a children’s story, and the early translations were not intended for children. “Bowdlerized abridged or selected stories from the Nights aimed specifically at a juvenile market” (Irwin 2010: 98) proliferated only by the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The shrunken canon contained “‘orphan’ stories (that is stories from which we have a Galland text but no original Arabic) . . . Aladdin, Ali Baba, the Ebony Horse, and Sindbad” (Irwin 2010: 98).

It is hard for us to imagine this in the early twenty-first century, but *The Arabian Nights* was one of the most popular books in Europe and North America (Nance 2009) for at least 350 years, “part of the common literary stock of educated people” (Irwin 2010: 10). Irwin points out that nowadays the *Nights*’ “primary legacy . . . is a visual one, delivered by film, pantomime, and comic books” (Irwin 2010: 10). Disney’s *Aladdin* and the sequels *The Return of Jafar* and *Aladdin and the King of Thieves* are now, for instance, the prime visual carriers of the European and North American heritage of *One Thousand and One Nights*.

As a spring from which producers, writers, and actors draw *The Arabian Nights*’ heritage still runs strong for Western cultural production – the 2016 Season 6 of *Once Upon a Time* opens with a camel riding across the desert and Jafar confronting Aladdin. *Jeannie* and *Once Upon a Time* (due to space limitations I cannot discuss the latter in this article) confirms Edward Said’s (1979: 26) claim that one

of the aspects of the electronic, postmodern world is that there has been a reinforcement of the stereotypes by which the Orient is viewed. Television, the films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds. So far as the Orient is concerned, standardization and cultural stereotyping have intensified the hold of the nineteenth-century academic and imaginative demonology of "the mysterious Orient."

I Dream of Jeannie stands as the earliest television example of Orientalism as a key production feature, with *Once Upon a Time* as one of the most recent. The fact that this represents an over 50-year continuity of television's negative stereotyping of Arabs-Muslims is one of the reasons I wrote this article.

Sidney Sheldon was not breaking any new ground with his production of *I Dream of Jeannie*, although casting a female genie at the heart of his production was new. However, in all other aspects, the Orientalism in *I Dream of Jeannie* is a direct carryover from preexisting Hollywood stereotypes: a standardized *mise-en-scène* (i.e. setting, including props, costumes, lighting) which invariably includes some of the following: deserts; domed buildings with arches; camels and/or donkeys; bazaars; and tents filled with rich looking décor such as cushions, carpets, pools, mirrors, and bowls overflowing with fruit. Men appear with the following: sporting turbans,⁶ bloomers with a waist sash, a bare chest and bolero jacket, frequently carrying a scimitar (curved sword); alternatively, men may be dressed in long flowing robes not unlike striped nightgowns. Women appear dressed as belly dancers. Dialogue is peppered with terms like "Allah," "salaams," "effendi," and "infidel." The standardized characterizations of Arab-Muslim men as barbaric and women as submissive, highly sexualized harem girls are on par with such offensive racial stereotypes as Black criminals or greedy Jews, the kind of depictions we no longer consider entertaining or acceptable (Said 1979; Edwards 2000; Michalak 2002; Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008; Shaheen 1984, 2009).

Every aspect of production in *Jeannie*, from the set and costumes to dialogue, characterization, and plotline, calls on and reproduces a rather limited set of Hollywood's Orientalist stereotypes. Jeannie herself, of course, exemplifies this: she is a genie (i.e. wields magical powers) dressed as the Hollywood harem girl:⁷ a skimpy, rib-high top, see-through bloomers, and pink gauze veil floating down from a bun on the top of her head (this is her primary costume in every episode, although she appears in public dressed in Western clothing). What is striking about Sheldon's sitcom is that, while other television shows might have an isolated episode or character that is Orientalist (Shaheen 1984),⁸ *I Dream of Jeannie* was the *first* television series (five seasons, 139 episodes in total) *based entirely* on Orientalist stereotypes. In other words, the show's Orientalism is essential rather than incidental, and the way it functions bears closer examination.

Watching *I Dream of Jeannie* in 2018

Said's theory of Orientalism connects Western cultural representations of Arabs-Muslims to the geopolitical power structure of the hegemonic West over the weakened "Orient." Kahf's (1999) study of Western representation of Muslim women in literature finds a similar connection. The early Middle Ages' reader knew a Muslim woman as a dominant noblewoman – a termagant – holding powerful sway over a European hero, for example, Bramimonde, Queen of Zaragoza, from the eleventh century's *Chanson de Roland*. Conceived at the time of expanding Muslim empires, such a representation encapsulated the tangible European anxiety of being invaded. Yet, symbolic textual victory ensued: by the end of the story, the noblewoman usually converts to Christianity, betrays her father/husband, and allows the Christians to capture the kingdom (Kahf 1999: 19).

In the nineteenth-century colonial era such symbolic textual victory was actualized due to European political hegemony in the region. Visual and textual unveiling of Muslim women in paintings like those representing the odalisque (a sexualized woman in a harem, awaiting rescue from the European hero) was actually enforced by European rule and education systems introduced into the Middle East. Muslim women were slowly unveiled during the twentieth century (Bullock 2002). The veil came to represent backwardness, oppression, and submissiveness of Muslim women. The medieval power relations were reversed, and thus while the Orientalist representations of Arabs-Muslims were demeaning and unflattering, promoting Western superiority and Oriental inferiority, a Medieval European feeling of threat was absent. This is different from today's post-9/11 period in which a neomedieval attitude of fear toward Arabs-Muslims has resurfaced. We have then two different systems of representation of the same ethnic and religious groups: an Orientalist one (pre-1979 and pre-9/11) and an Islamophobic, or anti-Muslim racist, one (post-1979 and post-9/11; Alsultany 2012; Green 2015). They are not chronological systems. They exist side by side and are mobilized in Western cultural discourse at different times and for different reasons, yet both also contributing to public support for US wars of "liberation" in Iraq and other Middle East countries (Giroux and Pollock 2010).

So, current representations of Muslims on television perpetuate prior Orientalism in some aspects and depart from it in others. The strongest continuity can be seen in the ongoing tropes of barbarism, anticivilization, and violence, while the biggest difference comes in the portrayal of Muslim women (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008: 38–9; Cainkar 2009: 101–02; Hirji 2011; Green 2015: 99). Very few viewers today would interpret Jeannie, the harem girl dressed as a belly dancer, as representing a Middle Eastern woman. Today's most extreme stereotype of a Muslim woman, completely veiled by a black cloak, may be a far cry

from the seductively dressed Jeannie; however, both systems of representation envisage the woman as trapped and oppressed, be it in a harem or behind a veil. The visual rupture hides an underlying similarity, and the substitution of one stereotype for another does not change the fact that both images are misrepresentations of real cultures and real people.

As for *I Dream of Jeannie* in this regard, it is important to understand that when *Jeannie* was being produced, Muslims as a group did not provoke social anxiety as has been the case from the 1970s onward, and most especially in our post-9/11 era. Pointing to events such as the 1973 OPEC crisis and the 1979 Iranian revolution, which brought American apprehensions of the Middle East to the fore, scholars note how Orientalist representations shifted from being focused on ethnicity, as in “Arab,” to being concerned with religious identity, as in “Muslim” (Semmerling 2006; Cainkar 2009; Alsultany 2012). Prior to the above events, social anxieties in the West revolved primarily around communists. NASA, the organization that defines the central male characters in *I Dream of Jeannie*, was itself founded in 1958 as a direct response to the Soviet’s launch of the world’s first satellite, *Sputnik I* (NASA n.d.). *I Dream of Jeannie* is set, and should be viewed, against the background of the US–Soviet Cold War (Spigel 2001), as opposed to the contemporary War on Terror (United States vs. Islam). The representation of Jeannie, as well as her friends and family, is therefore held within the confines of the earlier Orientalist representations, rather than contemporary anti-Muslim racism. There are continuities as well as ruptures between these two systems of representation, and the distinction is important. It is equally crucial, however, to recognize that while contemporary representations are often nastier than the kind of Orientalism we see in *I Dream of Jeannie*, the difference does not make the latter any less racist and unflattering or any more acceptable.⁹

I Dream of Jeannie episodes like “Is There a Doctor in the House?” (S4E18) can remind us of how much the context in which we interpret Orientalist elements has changed. In this episode, Jeannie wants a reluctant Tony to run for governor of Florida; to distract her, he sends her to her hometown – Baghdad – to drum up absentee ballots from the thousands of Floridians living there. One can only imagine how unlikely it would be for a contemporary show to imply that thousands of Floridians could be residing in Baghdad or that one can travel back and forth between Florida and Baghdad on a whim (clearly, there is no “No Fly List” in Jeannie’s world).¹⁰ And yet, the same episode makes it clear that Floridians living in Baghdad are quite distinct from Baghdadians, the latter represented by Orientalist stereotypes of Arab men as dishonest and disorderly. Baghdad itself is portrayed as a place of chaos, laziness, and corruption in direct contrast to rational, hard-working, and honest Florida. That specific trope of Arab corruption and untrustworthiness can still be found in contemporary cartoons (Gottschalk and

Greenberg 2008: 77), highlighting my point that, in spite of certain departures, contemporary anti-Muslim representations continue to draw on the themes established by their Orientalist predecessors.

If *I Dream of Jeannie* was a 1960s show that nobody knew about or watched anymore, my concern to focus on the Orientalism in the show would be lessened. However, analyzing Orientalism in *I Dream of Jeannie* is more than just an archeology of a television show from the 1960s: while *I Dream of Jeannie* was never a smash hit, it was popular enough and has remained so during re-runs. During its initial run on television (1965–1970), *I Dream of Jeannie* made the top 30 shows (according to Nielson ratings) twice (Brooks and Marsh 1999: 1249) and was even nominated for an Emmy in 1967 (Sheldon 2005: 342). Sheldon (2005: 343) recalls enormous quantities of fan mail and the successful merchandising of Jeannie dolls, bottles, and her own magazine, *The Blink*. The show was deemed sufficiently popular to warrant two reunion movies – one in 1985 (*I Dream of Jeannie: 15 Years Later*)¹¹ and another in 1991 (*I Still Dream of Jeannie*, NBC’s movie of the week (Eden 2011: 233). Showing disconnectedness between geopolitics and mass market comedy, the 1991 movie was aired the same year the First Gulf War ended.

The Jeannie persona is now very widespread in contemporary American culture: many ballet schools, for instance, still have their girls perform “Jeannie” dances at family concerts (search “Jeannie ballet” on YouTube); the Jeannie costume can be found among Halloween outfits. There are spin-offs, such as Jeannie board games, slot machines in casinos that play Eden’s voice (Eden 2011: 259), a Jeannie porn film, and a cartoon series (Brooks and Marsh 1999: 477). There is even a robust trade in Jeannie artifacts (Grandinetti 2005). The show itself seems to be well liked to this day, judging by keen interest in the DVD sets on Amazon and appreciative online consumer comments. In a special interview for the 40th anniversary in 2013, Sheldon said that the show was Number 2 in the United Kingdom (*Jeannie* 2013: disc 4). So, while it was not a blockbuster, *I Dream of Jeannie* is still being viewed by millions worldwide. Its ability to purvey Orientalist stereotypes thus remains strong and begs analysis.

This need to scrutinize *I Dream of Jeannie*’s Orientalism has been disappointingly underappreciated by the academic community. While a few scholars have included *I Dream of Jeannie* in their broader study on Islamophobia (Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008) or representations of veiled women (Shirazi 2001), there has been no sustained analysis of *I Dream of Jeannie* and its significance in the context of Arab-Muslim stereotyping. Shaheen’s (1984) pioneering analysis of the TV representation of Arabs-Muslims focused on the 1975–1976 season, 5 years after *Jeannie* had ended. Jones (1992: 180), in an otherwise serious study of American sitcoms, dismisses the show in two sentences, calling it a “kiddified male sex fantasy.”

The understudied nature of Orientalist representations in *I Dream of Jeannie* is itself a symptom of the widespread “tone-deafness” (Mandvi in Ryzik 2016) to the issues of Orientalist/racist representation of Arabs-Muslims in the West. Semmerling (2006: 2) discovered in his study of the portrayal of “Evil Arabs” in film that European/North American film critics usually overlook negative stereotyping of Arabs/Muslims in their film appraisals. Shaheen (2009: 15) experienced something more troubling: not only did he find that studies of ethnic stereotyping in films often do not mention Arabs but also that in his conversations with writers, producers, and directors, he faced disbelief, even resistance, when trying to draw attention to Hollywood’s stereotyping of Arabs (Shaheen 1984: 70). Zarqa Nawaz, creator of a Canadian Broadcasting Commission television sitcom about Muslims in a small prairie town (*Little Mosque on the Prairie*), relates a similar experience: “I pitched a show to one of the networks about a Muslim family, and I was told by the executive, ‘There is no way an American network is going to have a Muslim woman with a hijab on television. Get her out. We will not do it’” (Ryzik 2016).¹²

When it comes to *I Dream of Jeannie*, a few scholars have mentioned the sitcom as part of their broader study on representations of women on television (Marc 1989; Jones 1992; Douglas 1994; Spigel 2001; Spangler 2003; Mittell 2010). Meanwhile, as mentioned, I came across *only three* scholars who pointed to *I Dream of Jeannie* as an example of negative representation of Arabs/Muslims (Shirazi 2001; Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008). It is noteworthy that these three scholars were already looking at the show in a context of analyzing Western cultural stereotypes of Arabs/Muslims. Other specialized television scholars were “tone-deaf” to the critique I am making in this article. David Marc’s 1989 book, *Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture*, opens with a kind of apology for the way TV inherited racism and sexism from vaudeville, mentioning Blacks, Germans, Irish, Italians, Jews, and women. He does not mention Arabs/Muslims, even though he also analyzes *I Dream of Jeannie*. Douglas (1994), Jones (1992), Mittell (2010), and Spangler (2003) explore the show only through feminist lenses. Spigel (2001) sets her discussion of the show within a study of how the 1960s space race affected representations of suburban life. I can only conclude that without proper training on Orientalism, Arab-Muslim stereotyping in *I Dream of Jeannie* is easily overlooked.¹³

The Function of Orientalism in *I Dream of Jeannie*

Said’s (1979) theory of Orientalism, seminal as it is, provides the basis for many studies of Arab-Muslim representation in Western culture (Shaheen 1984; Stockton 1994; Poole 2002; Karim 2003; Balfe 2004; Semmerling 2006). Produced by academics, scientists, travel writers, novelists, painters, and colonial politicians,

Orientalism posited Western superiority, rationality, and civilization in contrast to Oriental inferiority, irrationality, and barbarism. Said demonstrated convincingly that Orientalism, itself a reworking of medieval Christian apologetics against Islam, was a discursive viewpoint located in an asymmetrical power relationship between a hegemonic West and a dominated “East,” then called “the Orient.” Orientalism, Said (1979: 123) argues, facilitates the perpetuation of Western imperialism in “the Orient” at great cost to the peoples who live there. Orientalism produced a host of stereotypes such as exotic women in the harem and Arab-Muslim men as “camel-riding, terroristic, hook-nosed, venal lechers” (Said 1979: 108). These influenced television portrayals. Shaheen (1984: 5) describes, “The Instant TV Arab Kit: The kit, suitable for most TV Arabs, consists of a belly dancer’s outfit, headdresses (which look like tablecloths pinched from a restaurant), veils, sunglasses, flowing gowns and robes, oil wells, limousines and/or camels.”

Balfe (2004: 79) argues that the function of Orientalism in the fantasy genre is to reinforce the binary of “good” (Western) hero and “evil” (Oriental) Other. Fantasy novels usually feature a quest where the heroes prove their worth; the hero is often implicitly coded as a White Westerner, with the evil they have to vanquish being coded as Oriental.

Semmerling (2006) builds off a similar premise in his study of US films and documentaries featuring Arabs/Muslims, such as *Rollover* or *Rules of Engagement*. Yet Semmerling (2006: 7) argues that beyond analyzing films and shows for their stereotypes, it is important to understand what the stereotypes are doing for the viewer, the stereotyper. He concludes that while many films in the Orientalist genre perpetuate the simple binary of good Westerner/evil Arab (as in Balfe’s analysis of *Fantasy*), other films actually use Arabs to rupture this dichotomy. Semmerling (2006: 21) writes of a hybrid film genre developed since the 1970s, he labels “Orientalist fear,” concerned with consistently inscribing the evil Arab as a way to assuage real-world American anxieties in the wake of the 1973 oil embargo, the Arab–Israeli conflict, and the 1979 loss of Iran, which was a “humiliation that seemed to highlight American impotence.” In these films, Arabs attack Westerners, but instead of a neat “evil Arab/good Westerner” dichotomy, the Western heroes themselves may not have acted completely nobly, rendering their eventual victory more ambiguous (Semmerling 2006: 23). However, the “evilness” of the Arab character is thoroughly reinforced ultimately vindicating the American victory. Viewers, meanwhile, experience a “sadoomasochistically entertaining visual and narrative ride” (Semmerling 2006: 24) from doubt about the Western hero to final reassurance of American nobility. Thus, the audience’s constant need to be reassured of American nobleness is fulfilled at the expense of the evil Arab character, who is required to recur again and again in different films (26), hence the “Orientalist fear” category.

Coming just before the 1970s, Orientalism in *I Dream of Jeannie* fulfills a slightly different function than the examples discussed above. I propose that in *I Dream of Jeannie*, Orientalism is used to position Jeannie as (1) an exotic and irrational “Other” and (2) vehicle for comedy.

Jeannie as an exotic and irrational “Other”

Probably the most obvious (and least interesting) function of Orientalism in *Jeannie* is the use of Orientalist tropes in the show as markers of Jeannie’s “Otherness” in relation to the show’s setting and its other main characters. The sitcom takes place in a fictional town in Florida, with the interior of Major Nelson’s home and his office being the most common scene locations. The main male characters are all astronauts at NASA: Major Tony Nelson, his friend and colleague Major Roger Healy (the only other person to know the truth about Jeannie), and Dr Bellows. Sheldon deliberately made Nelson an astronaut to position him as a scientifically minded, rational character most likely to be “befuddled” by a genie with magical powers (Cox 2000: 58).

Said (1979: 45) notes that part of Orientalism’s enduring power is its ability to set up a radical and unfaltering difference between the Occident and Orient: the Occident being superior, rational, ordered, while the Orient is inferior, irrational, and disordered. This contrast between order and chaos plays out repeatedly between Nelson (as well as his NASA colleagues) and Jeannie who, being from the magical, barbaric world of the Arabian nights, constantly brings turmoil to both Nelson’s life and his quiet Florida town.

Every episode reminds us through costume, plot, setting, or dialogue that Jeannie is a “foreigner”; more precisely, she is an “Oriental” character to be connected in the audience’s mind to the *Arabian Nights*. In fact, in “How to Be a Genie in 10 Easy Lessons” (S2E08), Tony buys the book *Arabian Nights*, so she can read about her “hometown.” Even though he has not read it, he is convinced it will teach her how to be a proper genie (she makes him sleep on a bed of nails and hangs him over crocodiles).

In other episodes, the references to *Arabian Nights* are less central, but they nevertheless exist as a constant reminder to the audience of Jeannie’s foreign, exoticness: Jeannie cooks a dish for Tony’s guests and calls it “*ragu a la Sindbad*” (S1E04) – Sindbad being one of the “orphan tales” of the *Arabian Nights* collection and well known in Western culture. In another episode, upon exiting a cinema, Jeannie asks Tony to watch the movie (*Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves*) for the third time (S4E07), pleading, “I knew Ali Baba, and it is so much fun seeing my old friends, please, please.”¹⁴ Tony’s reply is, “Yeah, just like home movies,” followed by a laugh track; the audience understand that the statement is ironic rather than empathetic, because, of course, counting Ali Baba among one’s friends is a

thrilling and scary notion all at once, and his exotic adventures have nothing in common with safe, wholesome home movies.

In one particularly offensive episode they even go to Mecca for a “pilgrimage” (“Get Me to Mecca on Time,” S1E16). It is the day of Ram, and Jeannie begins to vanish unless she and her Master travel to Mecca for him to perform the special Masters’ ritual. The ritual is ludicrous: Tony must face the sun, balance on his right leg, raise his right arm, place his left hand on his right elbow and recite, “bottle to genie, genie to master, master to Mecca, Ramdah.” Some tourists thinking he is doing a “native custom,” imitate him. This episode, which surely unwittingly mocks the Muslim ritual of pilgrimage (*hajj*), is one of the best examples in the entire show of the disjuncture between Western cultural discourse around the “Orient” and Muslim identity. The pilgrimage to Mecca is one of the five pillars of Islam, a sacred ritual. But, in *I Dream of Jeannie*, the sacred ritual at Mecca is farcical.

The use of Islamic terminology in the show initially confused me and my children, because we interpreted these words as coding Jeannie (and her family) as some kind of Muslim.¹⁵ Guests at Jeannie’s wedding say “May Allah bless you” (“My Hero,” S1E02); her relatives bear common Muslim names such as “Ali,” “Hamid,” or “Abdullah”; her dog is named “djinn-djinn.” When we meet Jeannie for the very first time on the show, she emerges from her bottle in a puff of smoke and begins speaking to Nelson in a foreign language. In the actor commentary on the pilot prepared for the DVD set (*Jeannie* 2013), Eden says that it was not Arabic she was speaking, but Farsi; the studio had brought in a professor to teach her. Farsi is the language of Persian/Iranians, while Baghdad, Jeannie’s hometown, is a city where Arabic is common language – but this easily verifiable fact does not matter in an Orientalist depiction: one Oriental is like another. In one episode, Jeannie takes a sacred oath of genies, swearing “*baba-labim-allah*” (S1E21). Just as gibberish performed by actors meant to be foreigners is an aural proof of their “foreignness” for the audience without any care about authenticity in language or character representation, the insertion of the word “Allah” into this nonsensical phrase provides the aural linkage between her character and the “Orient.” It also takes in vain a word sacred to Muslim and Arab Christian believers.

The function of Orientalism in *Jeannie* is not to code a hero/villain binary. The examples above demonstrate Jeannie’s positioning as the “Other,” an Oriental figure whose foreign nature can be mined for dramatic and comedic contrast with Major Nelson’s – and the audience’s – rational position. For the American audience, Jeannie is ultimately a blend of “Otherness” (her Oriental attributes) and familiarity, due to the casting of Barbara Eden. Eden’s Jeannie is blond, warm, and bubbly; qualities that endear her to the American viewer. Eden (2011: 1–2) herself always wondered why Sheldon did not cast “a tall, willowy, raven-haired

Middle Eastern beauty queen as his Jeannie instead of a short American blonde like me.” As for Sheldon (2005: 329–30), he had seen Eden perform on the Brass Bottle, and liked her: “. . . [O]ur genie had to be seductive without being blatantly sexy, and likeable with a sense of whimsy . . . [Eden] was perfect . . . She had a warm and naïve quality that would appeal to an audience, along with a wonderful comedic sense.” In the sitcoms of 1960s, the ethnic diversity of earlier television’s characters, such as a Jewish family in *The Goldbergs* (1939–1946), an African American woman in *Beulah* (1945–1954), or an Italian immigrant in *Life with Luigi* (1952–1953) had been replaced by shows peopled with only “white, middle-class families” (Spangler 2003: 31). So, Jeannie had to be White (she could have been a brunet), but Eden’s likeability makes her “Otherness” benign, merely a chaotic counterpoint to the orderly personality of the American hero, Major Nelson. She is familiar enough for the viewers to identify with her, and yet “Othered” enough to come across as peculiar: the true nature of being “exotic” (Nance 2009), and a formula that allows Jeannie to be a source of comedy rather than one of anxiety.

Orientalist comedy in *I Dream of Jeannie*

I Dream of Jeannie was part of a cycle of sitcoms known as the “fantasy sitcom” (or “magicoms” Marc 1989: 129) that includes *Bewitched*, *Mr Ed*, and *The Munsters*. The mid-1960s coincided with the height of both the Cold War and the space race between United States and the USSR. The United States of this period was still processing the recent Kennedy assassination and getting bogged down in the escalating Vietnam War; meanwhile, both the civil rights movement and the feminist movement were gaining traction. The rise of the latter two social movements was cautiously explored in these shows through supernatural creatures, as networks were anxious not to alienate their overwhelmingly White, middle-class audience and sponsors, who might have been upset by more realistic portrayals of sexism and racism (Spangler 2003). Marc (1989: 128) argues that these anxieties were not usually part of the decade’s sitcom material: the 1960s sitcom was a period of “deep escapism.” Spigel (2001: 108) dissents, arguing that the “fantastic family sitcom” was a “hybrid genre that mixed the conventions of the suburban sitcom past with the space-age imagery of President Kennedy’s New Frontier.” Neither writer, however, refers to the Orientalism in the show.

The trope of an irrational, female disruption to a rational, male world (Marc 1989: 130) is the feminist lens through which sitcoms like *Jeannie* are normally considered. While Spangler (2003: 84) sees few redeeming qualities in a show where the female protagonist is constantly addressing a man as her “master,” Douglas argues that, much like the show *Bewitched*, *I Dream of Jeannie* spoke to the cultural ambivalence of its time, reflecting both the growing women’s

liberation movement and the unease that movement sparked in some quarters. Jeannie may indeed call Tony Nelson “master,” but she also has the power to transport him to seventh-century Persia, demonstrating to the audience “that male authority wasn’t so impregnable or impressive at all” (Douglas 1994: 138). Eden (2011: 132–3), the actress who portrayed Jeannie, herself resents the antifeminist conclusions of critics, arguing that although Tony was Jeannie’s “master,” she usually had the upper hand. Spigel (2001: 131) makes a similar assessment, maintaining that the “fantastic fantasy” genre presented critical views of suburban life, and Jeannie’s supernatural feminine powers were a way to problematize the “patriarchal splendors of the space project.”

If we shift the discussion of *I Dream of Jeannie* to an anti-Orientalist lens, we can appreciate how the comedy on the show reflects not only silly female/ordered male but also a confrontation between the “irrational” Orient and the “rational” Occident. Indeed, the Orient itself was feminized in Western discourse, hence the congruence of Orientalist and antifeminist tropes that reinforced each other in Sheldon’s attempts to make his audience laugh.

The comedy of the show often rests on role reversals of the normal schemata of Orientalist stereotypes. For example, when a slave trader in ancient Baghdad threatens to sell Tony in the slave market (“My Hero,” S1E02), Nelson tries to get out of the situation by leveraging his citizenship. “If you push around a US citizen, it could mean war,” Tony threatens – but in the topsy-turvy world of the “Orient,” the threat is empty. “What is this United States of America,” the slave trader asks? Someone being unaware of the very existence of the United States, let alone its global superpower status, is the comedic opposite of normal. The reversal is meant to be funny, but it is funny precisely because the viewer knows the role reversal is not true: in reality, the United States *does* have hegemony over the Orient (this is what Orientalism as a discourse was about, after all). Rather than undermining Orientalist stereotypes, the role reversals ultimately reinforce Orientalist stereotypes.

Jeannie’s character herself is meant to be a comedic role reversal, a female substitution for the traditionally male genie in Orientalist films. Sheldon, a writer/producer whose formative years were spent in Hollywood during the era of Orientalist cinema, was quite familiar with the studios’ typical representations of Arabs. Sheldon had even worked with Sol Bloom, the entertainer responsible for inventing the music and name (“hoochie coochie” and “belly dancing”) for a dance attributed to Middle Eastern women (Shay and Sellers-Young 2005). Scandalously received at the 1893 world’s Columbian exposition in Chicago (Edwards 2000: 38), it gave America its first representation of the “harem” costume later standardized in Hollywood films and introduced to television through Jeannie’s attire.

Sheldon (2005: 326) himself explains how the idea of the show stemmed directly from the genie gender reversal:

I knew that genie projects had been done, but they had always consisted of a giant man, like Burl Ives, coming out of a bottle, saying, "What can I do for you, Master?" I thought it would be intriguing to make the genie a beautiful young nubile girl, saying, "What can I do for you, Master?" That was the project I decided to create for Screen Gems.

Sheldon believed it would be funny to invert the mighty male genie trope by making mighty genie female,¹⁶ but making this character female also allowed him to mine the resulting sexual tension between Jeannie and Tony for comedy. The sexual tension is implicit throughout the show, as beautiful Jeannie in her sexualized "harem costume" attracts Nelson (and the viewer), all while her antics repel him. In the highly censored world of the 1960s – Jeannie was not allowed to show her belly button; her smoke was not allowed to follow Nelson into the bedroom; she was not to flirt with him (Eden 2011; 119–20) – the sexual tension had to be played as Jeannie trying to get Tony to marry her, and her lack of success in that department was another central motif in the comedy. Sheldon (2005: 346) even argues that the decision, at the end of Season 4, finally to get Jeannie and Tony married (at the insistence of an NBC executive, concerned with the scandalous nature of their unmarried cohabitation), is precisely what "destroyed" the show.

Centering *I Dream of Jeannie* on a female genie allows the show to play with ideas around the women's liberation movement, but in much of the comedy, Orientalism and Jeannie's "Otherness" is what the show falls back on. Jeannie's attempts to become "normal," that is, more "American" as opposed to Oriental, repeatedly fail. In an episode actually titled "The *Americanization* of Jeannie" (emphasis added, S1E08), Jeannie reads a women's magazine out of boredom, learns about emancipation, subsequently decides not to do any housework and get a job at a store selling ovens. Jeannie proceeds to market an oven to other women by claiming it can cook whatever they desire instantly (to prove her point, Jeannie roasts a turkey in said oven with her blink-of-an-eye magic). As a result of these shenanigans, Jeannie is swamped by excited female customers and has to be "rescued" by Tony, who suggests she forget all this "subversive literature" and just get a pet instead. This episode is often cited as a classic example of the way *I Dream of Jeannie* attempted to mock and mitigate the emerging feminist movement (Douglas 1994: 136). But when Jeannie complies with Tony's suggestion, the resolution is exotic and hyperbolic, straight from the Orientalist playbook: Jeannie blinks her old pet lion (a Sultan's gift, of course) into Tony's quiet Florida home. The last laugh is reserved for the fact that Jeannie's nature as an Oriental outsider interferes with

both her attempts at emancipation and Tony's attempts at her domestication. Similarly, in "GI Jeannie" (S1E05), Jeannie joins the Women's Auxiliary Airforce (WAAF) to get closer to Tony, but when she attempts to train without using magic (whether as a nurse, dentist, secretary, or driver), she fails miserably.¹⁷ Jeannie is a woman whose place is in the home, but more than that, she is a genie who cannot integrate into ordinary human ways: the Orient remains the Orient.

Violence is typically the male preserve in Orientalist imagery (and does figure in the representation of "Oriental" men on the show), but Jeannie is also shown casually contemplating violence, another comedic reversal. In "This is Murder" (S1E28), NASA tasks Tony with entertaining a visiting Princess Tarji, daughter of the "Sultan of Pakwait," with whom NASA is looking to sign an important deal. It turns out Jeannie has a blood feud to settle with the Princess, whose family insulted hers over 3000 years ago (something to do with stealing "camels and wives," staple properties of the TV Arab). Jeannie vows to "avenge this insult" by killing Princess Tarji with the "death of a thousand knives."¹⁸ The contrast of Jeannie's outrageous murderous plans being laid out in her sweet, bubbly voice, are verbal slapstick for the audience, but the humor of the premise also relies on the fact that Jeannie, being from the Orient, sees her revenge plot as completely normal and is actually excited by the prospect of murdering the Princess. Tony, the voice of the "civilized" audience, protests: violence may be the way of the Orient, but that is not how disputes are settled in Florida.

Another example of role reversal played for comedy takes place in the aforementioned "My Hero" (S1E02). The slave/harem woman was a common theme in Orientalism, especially paintings (for instance, in Jean-Léon Gérôme's famous "Slave Market"), but in this episode, it is Tony, a White American man, who is being sold at the slave market in ancient Baghdad. Tony is bought by a grubby looking man, Mr Bey (an "unkempt Arab" stereotype) for three shekels (though shekel is in fact an Israeli currency) and taken to Princess Fateema. The haughty princess orders Tony to "peel [her] a grape," and Tony's refusal is met with threats of whipping. A male Sheikh kidnapping women to add them to his harem is common in Hollywood Orientalist movies, maintaining the stereotype of Arab/Muslim women as weak and oppressed; seeing a woman in the position of powerful oppressor is meant to be funny precisely because it is the opposite of the audience's expectations.

This section has shown how analyzing *IDream of Jeannie* from an anti-Orientalist lens reveals not only the existence of troubling stereotypes but also the usefulness of such a methodological approach in revealing hitherto underexplored aspects of the show. This latter point highlights a particularly disquieting aspect of Arab-Muslim identity in Western society: if anti-Arab and anti-Muslim racism is to be addressed, the media's role in perpetuating hostile ideologies about their identities needs to change, but if media personnel, critics, and viewers cannot see the racism in the

representation, change will be slow or nonexistent. Arab-Muslim viewers will continue to feel offended by media representation of their communities, and the gulf that separates these communities will be difficult to bridge (Massey and Tatla 2012; Rane, Ewart, and Martinkus 2014; Bullock 2015). As Hall (2007: 487) maintains, cultural studies “has to analyze certain things about the constitutive and political nature of representation itself, about its complexities, about the effects of language, about textuality as a site of life and death.”

Conclusion

The aptly titled study of negative media representations of minorities, *Images that Injure* (Ross and Lester 2011) contains multiple articles that point to the consequences of such misrepresentation on the self-esteem and identity of the peoples represented. In this article, I have presented an analysis of the Orientalism in *I Dream of Jeannie*, arguing that this show draws on the legacy of the *Arabian Nights* to perpetuate negative Orientalist stereotypes of Arabs-Muslims. In spite of the ruptures in the representation of 1960s Jeannie and today’s “veiled Muslim woman,” the Orientalist system of representation forms the bedrock from which contemporary anti-Muslim racism grows.

Given the connections between Orientalism and contemporary anti-Muslim racism, the sitcom’s enduring presence makes understanding its Orientalism necessary. I hope that writers, producers, and actors interested in removing negative stereotyping of people on TV shows are able to use this article as a way to become more aware of the problem of Orientalist stereotyping.

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Notes

1. Arabs are an ethnic group, and Muslims are a religious group of which Arabs are a minority, yet in the dominant North American culture, these two different kinds of identities are merged. That is why I write “Arab-Muslim.” Cf. Gottschalk and Greenberg 2008: 69: “Cartoonists routinely use the bodies of Arabs as symbols to caricature Muslims” (e.g. drawing Pashtuns in Arab dress). Of the 1924 film, *The Thief of Baghdad*, they comment, “The film deliberately connected Arab characters with Islam through the depictions of them praying in a mosque” (2008: 36).
2. In the field of Islamophobia studies, the definition of “Islamophobia” is contested. I follow Carr (2016) in preferring the term “anti-Muslim racism,” both for its defining ability to focus on the prejudice as a form of hatred, and its strategic utility in mobilizing widespread activism.

3. Sheldon (2005: 342) wrote nearly all the episodes, sometimes using pseudonyms to give the illusion of a team of writers.
4. Even the naming of Jeannie's hometown as Baghdad from 64 BC is an Orientalist stereotype. Baghdad was founded in 762 by the second Abbasid Caliph, al-Mansur (Bennison 2009). Historical accuracy is not the point; it is to pull out from the audience any kind of "exotic" "Oriental" city name that they will recognize. Of course, Baghdad is an important part of the *Arabian Nights*.
5. One of the inconsistencies of the show is that in Season 3, her evil twin sister, a genie also named Jeannie, appears, and in subsequent episodes, sometimes her mother, uncles, or cousins appear, all of whom are genies.
6. The constant representation of "Oriental" men in *I Dream of Jeannie* wearing jeweled and feathered turbans is quite striking and sheds considerable light on why so many Sikh men were mistaken for Muslims and attacked after 9/11.
7. Only belly dancers were actually dressed similarly to Hollywood's harem outfit. Women who lived in harems wore more respectable clothing. The harem has held a special place in European fantasies of Oriental/Arab/Muslim women. No matter that a "harem" was simply the women's quarters of a house, and in spite of a European women's travel literature that depicted "harem" life as more mundane and closer to reality (Melman 1995), the notion that prevailed was that of a scene of sensuality and latent sexuality, captured superbly by paintings of naked women lolling around a bath (Bullock 2002: 20).
8. Examples: Season 1, Episode 21, *Bewitched*, Sam turns a Siamese cat into a human because they want an "exotic" model; Season 2, Episode 18, *Fantasy Island*, Don Knotts' character meets Sheikh Hameel Habib, who expresses an interest in "re-stock[ing] my harem."
9. The evil terrorists in *Homeland* or *24* for instance are quite different from the corrupt, but bumbling "Oriental Arab."
10. The same is evident in an episode of *Friends*, "The One with all the Ruby" (S04E15), when Chandler flies to Yemen as a way to avoid an ex-girlfriend.
11. "*I Dream of Jeannie: 15 Years Later* placed a close second to a World Series game that night and ended up as the eleventh-highest rated TV movie that year" (Cox 2000: 198).
12. Rowe (2012) traces similar erasures of the Middle East and Arabo-Islamic influences in the study of US literature, suggesting the problem can lie with lack of language and cultural competency skills.
13. An audience study of 14 interviewees (seven Muslim women, six non-Muslim women, and one non-Muslim man) found that the non-Muslim viewers did not notice the Orientalist features in the show, while the Muslims were offended by the representation (Bullock 2015).
14. In the 1985 reunion movie, *I Dream of Jeannie: 15 Years Later*, Ali Baba and his forty thieves become her relatives.
15. My youngest, then aged 7 years, actually became distressed after watching an episode where Ali tries to torture Nelson, worrying "Why are they showing a man about to be hurt when Muslims are good people? . . . How do they even know about Allah?" he asked. The eldest (aged 11 years) tried to explain to him that "they said in the market if you attack someone that's a marriage proposal and that Jeannie had been turned into a jinn because she wouldn't marry a devil." But he was not able to explain why they were showing Muslims like that. I tried to explain to them about Hollywood and stereotyping of Muslims and Arabs, yet I was not able to help them see this phenomenon well, and they did not feel better. I regretted them seeing the show.
16. The *Brass Bottle*, starring Burl Ives as the genie, and Barbara Eden as a fiancé of the main character (Tony Randall), has orientalized dialogue: "Alhamdulillah I am of the green jinn," the genie

announces when coming out of the bottle after being trapped for 3000 years. He wears a turban. He says “Allah be praised,” and Randall says frustratingly to him: “Oh for Pete’s sake this is not Baghdad, it’s Pasadena.” He conjures up belly dancers as a gift to Randall and serves him eye-balls cooked in honey for dinner. An interesting anomaly is that the genie is portrayed as a kindly and not a duplicitous man in a turban, although like Jeannie for Tony Nelson, he also represents distress for Randall as his magical attempts to help usually backfire.

17. The only area Jeannie is shown to be competent is dealing with children. She writes a famous book about dealing with kids (S2E16).
18. In this episode, there is a rare nod to the contemporary Middle East, whereas the Princess’ secretary appears in a business suit with *kafiyeh*, the Princess herself is in a shoestring dress, her cleavage showing with a see-through veil draped loosely over her head. Tony fumbles around, “I didn’t expect you to be dressed . . . I expected more veiled” (and he passes his hand over his face). “You mean this?” she asks, pulling her veil over her face, “We are quite emancipated in my country,” and drinks some champagne with Tony.

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