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## Muslim Heroes on Screen

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## Muslim Heroes on Screen

### Abstract

This is a book review of Daniel O'Brien, *Muslim Heroes on Screen* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

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### Author Notes

Ahmad Nuril Huda is a researcher at Indonesia's National Research and Innovation Agency (BRIN). His research interest includes religion in everyday lives and its entanglement with visual culture, media and technology, gender and sexuality, and foodway culture in Southeast Asian Islam.

**O'Brien, Daniel. *Muslim Heroes on Screen*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2021.**

Daniel O'Brien's *Muslim Heroes on Screen* examines the portrayal of Arab-identified Muslim protagonists in Euro-American cinemas across numerous periods. O'Brien has previously authored *Black Masculinity on Film: Native Son and White Lies* (2017), a book on counter-representation discourses of the "Other" in Western cinemas. The current book continues his interest in the subject, yet this time about Arab Muslims, a subject receiving as much distortion as that of Blackness.

O'Brien starts his book by acknowledging that the depiction of Islam in Western cinema has refracted Said's critique of the West's othered Islam, often considered synonymous with Arab and a reference point to their Orient. However, with his surveying glances at European and American films featuring Islamic characters and settings produced in the Silent Era through to the post-9/11 period, he shows that Western cinematic representations of Muslim protagonists have shifted over time, and (therefore) he argues that their depictions provide a space for Western audiences to sympathize with Islam, despite their inaccuracy. To grasp this space, O'Brien proposes considering these protagonists as "the Muslim heroes," referring to sociologically virtuous figures in Islamic history and folktales depicted by these films as an embodiment of values regarding how to be a Muslim subject. Using this concept, he argues, will enable one to understand that notions of Islamic identity and milieu are integral to depictions and appreciations of screen Muslim protagonists. The rest of the chapters discuss six Muslim heroes he selects based on their significant appearances in Western cinemas.

O'Brien's first Muslim hero is the thief protagonist in four film versions of *Thief of Baghdad*, made respectively in 1924 (Douglas Fairbanks), 1940 (Alexander Korda), 1961 (Walter Wanger), and 1978 (Titanus). This thief is drawn from *The Arabian Nights*, an intertextual opus derived from Arabian and Persian folktales, Ottoman literature, and Islamic traditions, yet often glossed over as having an Islamic origin. O'Brien chooses the thief figure

because of the latter's ability to transform his physical strength, once used for criminal activities, into noble and heroic purposes—in addition to *The Arabian Nights*' dramatic influences on Western pop culture, not least for its imagination about Muslims. He finds out that, while the four films have developed their narratives, settings, and actors differently, such as the use of an Indian actor in Korda's thief, they have portrayed their thief character as an "Islamicized hero" and framed his transformation into a man of nobility in Islamic terms.

The second hero is Sinbad, a protagonist in *The 7th Voyage of Sinbad* (1958), *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad* (1973), and *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger* (1977). Sinbad is widely accepted as part of *The Arabian Nights* tales in Euro-American cultures, despite his absence in its Arabic sources. O'Brien's selection of this figure is based on the latter's often-belittled position in the eyes of film observers, despite his wide reception in European and American stages and cinema cultures. Sinbad's first appearance in Western theater was in the 1800s, and since 1936, his character has appeared in no less than 13 Euro-American films. In this chapter, O'Brien examines how the three films have depicted Sinbad's characters in terms of heroic status, gender, and Islam. He affirms that the films tend to define Sinbad as a courageous and agentive Muslim subject, despite each portraying him in different fashions, such as a "Westernized" figure in *The 7th Voyage*, a "realistic" Sinbad (especially in terms of accent and appearance) in *The Golden Voyage*, and a "sidelined" hero in *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger*. According to the author, such difference lends credence to the West's developing knowledge and shifting relationships with the Middle East, especially after World War II.

O'Brien dedicates the ensuing chapter to discussing Muslim protagonists in Samuel Bronston's *El Cid* (1960) and Julian Blaustein's *Khartoum* (1966), Moutamin and the Mahdi respectively. Both were warrior leaders in Islam-inflected battles against Christian enemies set in 11<sup>th</sup> century Spain and 19<sup>th</sup> century Sudan, a historical fact that confirms their heroic quality. Here, O'Brien focuses on showing how *El-Cid* and *Khartoum* have, in their own ways,

comfortably illustrated their Muslim protagonists as a subject of integrity, evidenced, among other qualities, by their willingness to extend genuine friendship to the Christian generals they defeated in the war; Rodrigo in the case of Moutamin, and Gordon in the case of the Mahdi. *El Cid* even makes it clear that it is Moutamin's respect for Rodrigo's steadfast principles in practicing his Christian faith that has earned the former the status of "Cid" (shaikh), an enshrined quality of respect and authority in Islam.

Chapter 5 discusses the most respected Muslim figure in Western society, Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi, or Saladin, the Kurdish-born ruler of the 12<sup>th</sup> century Ayyubid dynasty in Egypt, Syria, and Yemen. Saladin is famous in the West for his success in leading his Muslim army to conquer Jerusalem in a battle against the Crusaders in 1187. In this chapter, O'Brien examines Saladin's representation in three films of his character widely accepted among Western audiences, including *The Crusades* (1935), *King Richard and the Crusaders* (1954), and *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005), narratives based on Walter Scott's novel *The Talisman*. He concludes that the dramatization of Saladin in these films is still indebted to Scott's novel, meaning that all tended to "play on his Islam-inflected sense of honor, reason, and pragmatism" (182) while devaluing his Muslim faith before the Christian knights. *Kingdom of Heaven*, however, slightly differs from its two predecessors in that it attempts to foreground Saladin's integrity as a Muslim ruler, for example, by depicting him "entering Jerusalem in civilian garb rather than military uniform, suggesting liberation, or reclamation, as opposed to conquest" (181). It also tries to depict its settings and protagonists in historically faithful and realistic ways, such as by casting a Middle Eastern actor as the Sultan, which was not the case in the other two films.

Chapter Six discusses the portrayal of the unportrayable Muhammad the Prophet on two different screens: Moustapha Akkad's *The Message* (1976) and a *South Park* episode of "Super Best Friends" (2001). In recent history, many Muslims have aversions to picturing

Muhammad and it can also be controversial in Western societies, albeit for different reasons. In this chapter, O'Brien highlights the cinematic renderings used by *The Message* to depict Muhammad's screen presence without crossing Islam's iconoclastic boundaries, which he reads as the film's attempts to honor Islamic traditions. An example of this strategy is the use of point-of-view (POV) shots in which Muhammad's eye-line is placed parallel to the camera lens, in addition to placing the camera's focus on items attributed as Muhammad's property, such as his stick and his camel's head. O'Brien also notes that some films about Muhammad produced afterward have, to an extent, followed *The Message's* approaches, including the Iranian production of Majid Majidi's *Muhammad: The Messenger of God* (2015). In this chapter, however, O'Brien has misunderstood the film's scene depicting Muhammad's shoulder hovering above the crowd, equating his prophethood with a "godlike power" (199). Another interpretation of this scene reads it as gesturing towards a literal translation of an invocation of prayer originated from Islamic tradition, whose text is widely chanted among Muslims, not least in Southeast Asia, affirming that Muhammad's shoulder is always miraculously placed above that of the crowd. On another note, O'Brien's exploration of *Super Best Friends* seems to argue that the sympathetic Western portrayal of Muslim protagonists is identifiable in different screen formats, evidenced by the series' animated depiction of Muhammad as a hero of the world's harmony, together with other religious leaders depicted as Jesus's best friends, such as Buddha, Khrisna, Moses, and Lao Tzu.

In the final section of the book, meant as an epilogue, O'Brien attempts to reflect on the arguments he has laid out in the previous chapters by exploring the Muslim protagonist in *The Wind and The Lion* (John Milius, 1975), Raisuli, derived from a Moroccan historical tribal leader, Muali Ahmed er Raisuni. The film is about Raisuli kidnapping an American citizen and her two children in Tangier as a critique of the local regime he viewed as being in thrall to American foreign power. O'Brien says, despite displaying minimal concern with historical

precision, the film succeeds in illustrating that the personal qualities ascribed to Raisuli as a scholar and leader seeking to liberate his land from Western imperialist oppression lend credence to his deep faith in Islam and its teachings. One of these is the concept of *baraka*, a divine blessing, which Raisuli believes to be the inspiration and purpose of his battle. O'Brien proves his point by showing the film's last scene, where Raisuli is captured sitting on the saddle of his horse in a calm, measured, and stoic state, remaining in vision until the film's credits end—suggesting that the battle he waged, irrespective of the outcome, has a long-lasting influence, strengthened by the *baraka* he has earned, on the memory of the local government and foreign countries.

Treating film as a text, O'Brien has a sharp eye for capturing and interpreting the details of narratives, dialogues, visual factors (such as make-up and lighting), and framings deployed by the films to picture the characters and positions of his Muslim heroes. To a certain extent, he is also successful in presenting the various social, historical, and political contexts that have emerged around and potentially influenced his heroes' cinematic portrayal, as well as showing how Western film-related media have reviewed the films. However, his analysis is sometimes too descriptive, perhaps because of his reluctance to flesh out the manners in which the external contexts around the films are relevant to the cinematic emergence of his Muslim heroes: he seems to leave out this task for his readers. In addition, his critique of the Westerner's tendency to equate Muslims with Arabs ironically extends to his book. One way to avoid this convergence would have been to make comparisons to the portrayal of his Muslim heroes with similar characters made in film industries from Muslim majority contexts such as Southeast or South Asia, and add further commentary about Egyptian, Turkish, and Iranian cinemas. This is quite the task for just one author, but it would have strengthened his argument and analysis. O'Brien does an excellent job of providing additional information in the book's footnotes.

However, the book's substantial number of citations has the potential to distract the readers from enjoying the flow of its text.

With O'Brien's accomplishment in investigating the counter-discourses about Islam in Euro-American films, some of which are still under-researched, the publication of his book warrants an appreciation. It is a good entrance for undergraduate and graduate students wishing to understand the representation of Islam in (Western) cinema, not least for its excellent example of how to view film as a text. With a lack of theoretical sophistication, his book is easy to comprehend, even for those unfamiliar with the subject. For a more profound insight into the subject, though, one needs to support the book with related scholarship, such as Sophia Rose Arjana's *Muslims in the Western Imagination* (2015) and Waleed F. Mahdi's *Arab Americans in Film: From Hollywood and Egyptian Stereotypes to Self-Representation* (2020). Its publication resonates with a recently emerging spirit in related fields, one that attempts to expand the dynamic and alternative aspects of Islamic representations in cinema, as reflected in Kristian Petersen's edited volume, *New Approaches to Islam in Film* (2021). Overall, the book is a sound contribution to the literature on the study of Islam and Muslim societies in film.