Research Article

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Hollywood and Wicked Other: The Identity Formation of “Western Us” Versus “Muslim Others”

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Abstract: An image on a screen can produce a greater effect than thousands of words in conveying a message and in popular culture, movies with images as a representation, create a discourse. Out of many, Hollywood which has become a flagbearer of western cinema, plays an important role in constructing identity and images including the stereotyping of Muslims. This paper attempts to identify the discourse of ‘US’ verses ‘THEM’ through Hollywood and in which ways Hollywood has constructed the stereotypical identity of Muslims. The main research question is whether the stereotyping of Muslims in Hollywood is a result of 9/11 global terrorism or has it been shaped by the historical discourse of western orientalism. The case study method has been employed to derive the insights of the discourse with the theoretical lights of Orientalism. A number of Hollywood movies have been cited to validate the identity formation process led by Hollywood in pre and post 9/11 American society and illustrate how the image has been used by Hollywood to construct ‘US’ verses ‘THEM’ in popular culture. This paper argues that Hollywood has depicted Muslims as barbaric, wicked others as a result of the civilizational mission of the West, orientalism and post 9/11 Hollywood cinema advocate these roots, yet with 9/11 Hollywood cinema plays a pivotal role in the securitization of ‘Muslim others’ and politicize Muslims as a threat to western society by stereotyping Muslim society in a post 9/11 epoch.

Keywords: 9/11; Hollywood; Cinema; Identity; West; Muslims; Orientalism.

1 Introduction

Can it be that the memory is not present to itself in its own right but only by means of an image of itself?

–St. Augustine (cited in Kilbourn, 2010)

An image on a screen can produce a greater effect than thousands of words in conveying a message. In a way, movies, with images as a representation create a discourse. As Judith Butler says, “Images don’t just postdate the event, but become crucial in its production, its legibility and its very status as reality.” (cited in Hansen, 2011). Hollywood, which has become a flagbearer of western cinema, has played an important role in creating and shaping the identity of Muslims. Over the years there has been a stereotyping of Muslim in the Hollywood cinemas. What makes this stereotyping important is the wide-spread popularity of Hollywood, which is the world’s leading exporter of screen images (Shaheen, 2003)

Being so, it has the ability and power to allow the audiences to generate thoughts, views and opinions about what they see and perceive (Azmi, Rahman, Rouyan, & Rashid, 2016). After the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Centre, there has been growing hatred towards Muslims. Muslims after this incident have been often equated with terrorists in western societies. As a result of this, more and more Hollywood movies came to associate Muslims with barbaric acts in American society. Such a representation of Muslims resulted in the institutionalisation of prejudice against them in American society and across the world (Alalawi, 2015). However, even before 9/11, Muslims were portrayed in a negative

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light. This paper aims to show how Muslims have been vilified in Hollywood movies historically and to show how this depiction was transformed after the 9/11 attacks. For this purpose, the paper has been divided into two parts, where the first part would focus on the image of Muslims created in western movies before 2001 and the second part would look into the image of Muslims after 2001.

2 Discussion

2.1 Muslims in Hollywood- Before 2001

Muslims in Hollywood movies have been stereotyped since the beginning. Stereotypes involve a process of categorisation and are often a negative, imprecise and shallow evaluation of individuals, groups, nations, or ideologies that stand out as abnormal to the majority (Azmi, Rahman, Rouyan, & Rashid, 2016). These stereotypes have shown Muslims to be barbaric, uncivilised and have vilified the image of the Muslim. Though it is thought that Muslims have been demonised as a threat to national security after the 9/11, this demonisation and othering of Muslims existed before the occurrence of this incident. Muslim communities and families face bias, sweeping arrests, popular and media hostility and official assumption of ‘guilt by association.’ For decades the west has viewed Islam as violent, confrontational and barbaric. This fear of Islam, traced through the conflict between Christians and Muslims, has been transmitted through various mediums, including films (Ramji, 2015). For the past hundred years, Hollywood has created an image of Islam and Muslims in a different yet negative way.

This depiction has espoused the idea of Orientalism, put forth by Edward Said. This notion of Orientalism presents exotic characters that are created from a Western political and social biased perspective to provoke a powerful reaction against eastern culture while at the same time confirming western values (Kobeissi, 2017). Said, in his book *Orientalism* (1973), characterises Orientalism by four major ideas, which he calls the ‘dogmas of Orientalism’. The first is an absolute and systemic difference between the Orient (irrational, undeveloped, and inferior) and the Occident (rational, developed, and superior). The second is the viewing of Orient as a single monolithic entity, which further widens the gap between Orient and Occident; the third dogma is the idea of the Orient as eternal, incapable of defining itself and scientifically objective, which helps the west to justify its hegemony over the Orient. The last dogma is that the Orient is something to be feared or controlled (Khatib, 2006). Said further states, “implicit and powerful differences posited by the Orientalist as against the Oriental is that the former writes about, whereas the latter is written about” (Said, 1978). By this, the Orientalists have created a representation of the Orient. One such avenue of representing the Orient has been Cinema.

One can find the dogmas put forth by Said in Hollywood movies before 2001. These movies have shown Muslims to be barbaric and uncivilised. As Matthew Sweet points out, “The cinematic Arab has never been an attractive figure...in the 1920s he was a swarthy Sheik, wiggling his eyebrows and chasing the [Western] heroine around a tiled courtyard” (cited in Shaheen, 2003). For example in the movie ‘The Sheik’ filmed in 1921, the sheikh after being enchanted by the beauty of Diana, Kidnaps her. In the movie, he says, “When an Arab sees a woman he wants, he takes her!”. This shows Arabs as a people with a disregard for women. The world of Islam, during the early 20th century, was depicted as mysterious and exotic, filled with images of bejewelled, yet, veiled women in harems, bearded sheikhs and dark-skinned villains living in places in the desert landscapes surrounded by palm trees and camels. American films embellished the portrayals of the Arab caricatures written about by the Europeans. Then, in mythic Arabia, bearded Arabs rode camels in the desert, waved swords, killed each other and coveted Western heroines. Women were kept in harems and belly danced in revealing clothing (Ramji, 2015).

With time the image of the Muslim transformed. It became more vilified and was influenced by the political dynamics that were taking place during this period. These images were affected by the creation of Israel and the Iranian revolution, the Arab-Israeli wars, the oil crisis of 1973, etc. For example, the movie ‘*Not Without My Daughter*’, shows a bigoted society after the Iranian Revolution (Elba, 2016). By the 1970s Muslims had been identified as terrorists and Islam came to be seen as a radical and violent religion which was at war with the West. The Islamic threat narrative has become a constant imagination of impending terrorism on the Hollywood silver screen (Ramji, 2015). Around this time, in 1986, the movie ‘*Delta Force*’ was released. This movie showed the hijack of American Travelways, Boeing 707,

by the Lebanese terrorist group. Along with this, there have been other movies, which showed Muslims as terrorists during this time. *'Death Before Dishonour'* is one such movie, released in 1987. It shows Palestine Muslims as terrorists.

Similarly, movies like, *'Cast a Giant Shadow'*(1966) and *'Black Sunday'*(1977) show Palestinian Muslims as cruel, bad and violent. This idea of Muslims as terrorists and a threat to society was created even before the 9/11 attack, in movies like *'True Lies'* (1994) and so on. However, with the September 11 attacks, there was a change in the depiction of Muslims in movies made in America.

2.2 Muslims in Movies After 2001

As mentioned above, the image of the Arab in Hollywood movies has been negative and often have been viewed as barbaric, uncivilised, violent, one who needs to be tamed and cultured. With the attack on the twin towers, the image of Muslims as terrorists which was slowly developing, due to the political events in Middle-east, received an impetus. With this incident “old stereotypes have been replaced by new ones. The sheikh and lusty despot have slowly disappeared, leaving hijackers, kidnappers and terrorists. Muslim women have disappeared behind the chador and burqa” (Ramji, 2015, p. 2). After these attacks, there has been a growing curiosity in American society and the rest of the world to know about Muslims and Islam. These masses turned towards movies to understand them. However, these movies further perpetuated the stereotypes that were generated earlier. The impact of the 9/11 attacks is made evident in movies by the depiction of the evil and the good where the former is shown to be a Muslim with an Arabic accent who poses a threat to the peace of American society through explosions by leaving the trail of blood and at its wake. These movies even show the Muslims as suicide bombers who don't value life and are involved in mass killings by killing themselves too. The occurrence of 9/11 has further reinforced the view that Arabs are sleazy, brutish, dim-wits and abusers of women (Alalawi, 2015). It also encouraged directors to show Muslims as fabulously rich, wherein such wealth can be used to develop bombs and other weapons. Shaheen identified four stereotypes in the manner by which Muslims are depicted as unfavourably in Hollywood films. The four stereotypes that dominate the post 9/11 cinema include:

- a) the fabulously wealthy;
- b) sex maniacs;
- c) barbaric and uncouth; and,
- d) those that revel in acts of terrorism (Alalawi, 2015).

There have been several movies that were filmed based on the 9/11 attacks which depicted and narrated the incident. The movies such as *World Trade Centre* (2006), *September 11* (2002), *Twin Towers* (2003), *United 93* (2006), *Flight 93* (2006) were made, showing the attack on the World Trade Centre. Along with this, movies like *The Kingdom* (2007), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) were also filmed. The former is based in Saudi Arabia, where the American Foreign workers compound is bombed (Azmi, Rahman, Rouyan, & Rashid, 2016). The latter is about the manhunt of Osama Bin Laden, the mastermind behind the 9/11 attack, conducted by US military forces. These movies reinforce the general stereotypes that have been constructed around Muslims and show them indulging in terror practices.

However, post 9/11, a positive change has occurred in the movies wherein unlike the past, a more realistic picture of Muslims has been presented. Shaheen remarks that “refreshingly, about a third of the post-9/11 films [...] a total of 29, projected worthy Arabs and decent Arab Americans: Arab champions—men and women—are displayed in 19 movies; Arab Americans appear as decent folk in 10 of 11 films” (cited in Elouardaoui, 2011). Elouardaoui (Arabs in Post-9/11 Hollywood Films: a Move towards a More Realistic Depiction?, 2011) further says that *Babel* (2006), *The Kingdom* (2007) and *Rendition* (2007) are among those movies which give a realistic depiction of Muslims. *The Kingdom*, despite showing Muslims as the terrorists, also shows them in a positive light, thus bringing in complex and diverse understanding, moving away from a single, monolithic image creation of evil as in the past. Consequently, although there have been very few images of positive Muslims in American film pre-9/11, it seems that, since 2001, there has been more of a mixture of films that have attempted to address the imbalance of representation when it comes to Muslims (Ramji, 2015). It is a positive development because over a period the continuous portrayal of the bigoted image of the community would tarnish the understanding of its people and culture. With this, the wider American audience would understand that Islam and Muslim do not always equate with terrorism and there is a lot beyond that, and there is no single truth about religion.

3 Conclusion

Over time, Hollywood has presented a negative image of Muslims. It has portrayed them as savage, barbaric, backward, untidy, violent, brutal, womanizers, greedy and lusty. These images of Muslims in movies, especially Hollywood are dangerous as such depictions have generated stereotypes about Muslims as people who are a threat to the social fabric of the society and that common people and America have a role in fighting against them and saving the World. Such an idea legitimises the US interventions in the name of ‘War on Terror’. Another problem with these stereotypes is that they become deeply ingrained into the minds of people and self-perpetuate which makes it difficult to eliminate them. With their huge presence and their ability to draw attention, films have a major role in moulding viewers’ perception in reality. Thus from above, one can understand the role of Hollywood in creating an image of Muslims in Western societies, which initially began as uncivilised and later transformed into terrorist and inhumane, one who did not value life. With the 9/11 attacks, the image in these societies became further degraded. However, with a change in the nature of movies recently, there has been a shift in the portrayal and movies which represent facets of Muslim life are coming, but yet there is a lot to change and reform to uproot the prejudices that these movies have instilled.

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