



RESEARCH PAPER

Historical Misrepresentation of Islam and Muslim: A Descriptive Review of Hollywood

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ABSTRACT

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This paper is an attempt to find out the historical roots, which gave birth to tarnished depiction of Muslim world in Hollywood movies. Hollywood movies are offering a consistent stereo typical image and vilified/abusive picture of Arab Muslim across the decades. It is necessary to find out the historical roots which gave birth to discolored depiction of Muslim world in Hollywood movies. Researcher has adopted qualitative method of descriptive review of Hollywood. After a descriptive review of Hollywood it is summed up that although all races may be depicted in negative way one time or another, but some races specifically Arabs and Arab-Americans are all time victims of indecent depiction. History depicts number of apple of discords i.e. crusades of Islam and Christianity, role of colonisation, post II world war scenario and Neo-Colonialism; shifting of power-pillars from Europe to America in terms of misrepresentation of Islam and Muslims

Introduction

Some holy practices and rituals are very imperative to Muslims as these create a significant basis and groundwork through which followers of Islam remember history, express fervor, and grow in fidelity. Some rituals are accomplished every day, like prayer; others are practiced year wise, like those associated with specific Islamic holidays. The religious practices and rituals of Islam are not many in number, but immense in importance. The Five Pillars of Islam are five practices respected and recognized by all sects and factions of the Islamic religion as pivotal to the Muslim faith (Ahmad, 2004).

The Five Pillars of Islam are the five religious duties obligatory on every Muslim. The five pillars are referred throughout the Qur'an and Hadith as the most vital and integral part of Islamic teachings. The very first and basic of the Five Pillars

of Islam is the "shahadat". "Shahadat" is the Islamic expression of faith, announcing the two basic convictions that make one a Muslim which are: There is no god but God and Muhammad is the prophet of God or in other words "Shahadat" is monotheistic foundation of the Islam coupled with abolition of further prophet-hood. Offering prayers is second pillar of the Islam. It is probably the most famous and popular Muslim practices among non-Muslims. It is known as "Salat" and is ritual prayer by nature which is offered five times per day i.e. at dawn, mid day, afternoon, sunset and evening. Almsgiving is third pillar of the Islam. It is another leading practice and obligation in Islam. The teachings of Holy book of Islam i.e. Quran explicitly requires it to be paid to the poor and the deprived. This pillar of Islam is having social essence in it. Sawm or fasting is another pillar of Islam which commemorates the teaching of the Quran to humanity during Ramadan, the ninth month of the Islamic year. Last but not the least, once in his or her lifetime, every Muslim is directed to undertake a pilgrimage to Mecca which is the Holy city of Islam because of Bait Ullah (Khanakaaba). This sacred journey is known as the hajj in Arabic. A person who is practicing and following Islam as a religion is known as the Muslim. There are approximately 2 billion followers of the Islam worldwide. Middle East, East Africa, south Asia, south East Asia and central Asia may be credited as the hub of Muslim population (Armstrong, 2002).

The way Islam and Muslims are identified and perceived now a day by the western world including USA is a sheer outcome of the philosophies coined by the orientalist school of 18th and 19th century. It has been derived through the yellow pages of history that the image of the Muslim and Islam in west is presented in an odd manner by fabricating and falsifying the data. Hollywood movies extracted such sort of fallacious cognition from the school of orientalism which was adamant about declaring the Muslim as uncultured, orthodox, militant, barbarian and volatile. In contemporary world, western media and Hollywood is arraying and disseminating these fabrications about the Muslim in an altogether new stylistics and techniques for creating a blunt propaganda against the Muslim world. (Kabir, 2003)

Historical course of Misrepresentation of the Muslim

First Apple of Discord

It is necessary to find out the historical roots which gave birth to tarnished depiction of Muslim world in Hollywood movies. It is only history which can justify how and why certain stereotypes have been associated with the Muslim. A school of thought is of the view that prior to European orientalism and colonial age, Islam was recognized as an apprehension by the Christianity since its initial days. The Muslim were labeled as worshipper of the wrong god and ridiculed by them. This led both parties to a state of war which was executed in terms of crusade. (Gaertner & McLaughlin, 1983)

Role of Colonization

Relatively more recent representation of the Muslim can be traced in early orientalist works. France and Great Britain were eager to colonize the Muslim world and they successfully kept on invading since the advent of 17th century and till the end of Second World War “orient” had been conquered in toto. This wide-spread colonialism indoctrinates hostile racial discriminations and hierarchies which gradually shaped the views and behaviors against the Muslim. (Bates, 1975)

Edward Said advocated that modern images about the Muslim as barbaric, uncivilized and inferior are sheer outcome of this colonization (Said, 1997, p.5).

Post-Second World War Scenario

Despite the fact colonialism came to an end after Second World War; imperialism was still standing firm. It was implicating its dominance in cultural, political, ideological and economic spheres. The harsh and hostile norms and cannons against the Muslim remained intact in this post-colonized era. (Said, 1994, p.9)

Said narrates that post-2nd world war scenario can be attributed by flood of racist material printed widely and finally a popular mind was constructed against the orientals in the west (Said, 1994, p.11).

Neo-Colonialism; shifting of power-pillars from Europe to America but proposed and perceived oriental Image remains the same

At the end of Second World War, United States of America appeared as the super power. The capital of imperialism shifted from Europe to USA. It was an end point of colonialism; however, it was beginning of a new era of the same merchandise with altogether a new brand. Nevertheless, distorted image of the Muslim in this new world order remained intact with same old stereotyping (Said, 1994).

Glittering Identity Bubble

In 1979, cold war entered in the premises of Afghanistan. USSR raised a military coup, killed the Afghan president and installed Babrak Karmal at the throne. In the Mid 80's, the Afghan resistance movement launched by the natives and the Arabs duly backed by USA in association with Saudia and Pakistan. This is a time when Cold war proceeds to Afghanistan and heroic portrayal of the Muslim is in vogue Courtesy to Hollywood. Final outcome of the resistance was fragmentation of USSR into multiple units and creation of a Uni-polar world. It is pertinent to mention that Holly wood again, serving as the strategic partner of US government ,portrayed the resistance movement led by Arab Muslims, Afghan Muslims and South Asian Muslims in a heroic manner (though the common stereotypes were unaltered). “The living say lights” and “Rambo-II” represent this phenomena taking place in Hollywood in its vigor and vitality. (Yancy, 2008)

Post Cold War Scenario and Portrayal of the Muslim in Hollywood

Peeping into post cold war scenario is the finding of removal of heroism associated with Muslim resistance movement; rather we see convoluting of it into terrorist image; whereas maintaining the previous stereotyping associated with them at the same time.

Muslim images are generally seen to be ridiculed and tarnished right after cold war. This phenomenon can be clearly observed in movies like "True Lies", "Black Hawk Down". "The One that got away", "Three Kings" and "The finest hour".(Shaheen,2001)

Image of Muslim in Hollywood Movies

Shaheen (2001) in his book "Reel Bad Arabs" has discussed that Hollywood movies are offering a consistent stereotypical image and vilified/abusive picture of Arab Muslim across the decades. Shaheen is of the view that this whole process has been carried out through a conscious attempt to tarnish the image of Arab Muslim by presenting them in an indecent way. Shaheen presented his analysis after going through more than thousand movies of Hollywood ranging from the earliest period of motion pictures till now. He identifies that the specific patterns in portrayal of Arab Muslims are evident which are hateful and offensive in their orientation and presentation.

He concluded that Arab Muslims have been the most criticized and maligned segment in the history of Hollywood cinema. Negative portrayal of Arab Muslim exceeds even the negative portrayal of black, red Indians, Asians, Hispanics and Jews.

Jewell, S.K. (1993) suggests that Muslim and Islam have been misconceived and misrepresented in the American media. This phenomenon is even more particular in Hollywood which has a prolonged history of portraying Muslim and Islam in an inappropriate way. Jewell has identified the direct relationship between portrayal of Muslim in Hollywood and feelings of a common American towards the Muslim. Jewell concludes that Hollywood shapes the feeling of its American audience, therefore if it presents a certain group in negative manner, people/audience develop negative emotion towards that group.

According to a gallop poll conducted in America in "US Today" (2006), forty percent Americans are of the view that the Muslims living in America are dangerous and they should never be trusted because they are not showing faithfulness and loyalty towards America. Almost one third Americans discussed their reservation about Muslims residing in USA alleging that these people are having a soft corner for Al-Qaeda. Nearly one fourth Americans suggested that they don't want any Muslim as their neighbor.

Lewis (2004) asserts that Muslims were taken as an infidel or pagan group launched against Christianity and this practice continued for a very long span of time. According to him, it was an attempt to undermine a new mono-theistic religion which was in many ways resembling to Christianity and Judaism (P-19). Lewis concludes that the church scholars of the western world instigate their followers regarding Islam and the Muslim. Said (1994) elaborates that since 2nd world war, radical image of the Arab Muslims and Islam was under construction. Said is of the view there was a continuous attempt to represent and portray the Muslim as a major apprehension. Hence they were portrayed as a scary and dangerous creature or they were shown in a state of subversion.

Ahmed (2008) is of the view that Hollywood movies present Muslims in cheaper, selfish and narrow-minded roles because of the stereotypes prevailing in Hollywood film industry. Crux of this discourse asserts that the portrayal of the Muslim in Hollywood movies may be attributed with negative mannerism and the Muslims are being misrepresented in the Hollywood film industry.

Butt (2001) made an academic investigation into the image of Islam and the Muslim in Hollywood movies to find that numerous Islamic concepts were misrepresented. He derived that the projection of Muslim world in such movies was completely negative or gray shaded. He concluded that common impression associated with the Muslim was their identification as terrorists, militant and an anti-American.

Said (1997) shows his concern by revealing the fact that America was lacking any such scholar who was willing to curb this misrepresentation of Islam. He blamed the US government for formulating blind policies towards the Islam and the Muslim. Said declared this as an alarming sign for America because this attitude will generate negative and reactionary emotional vibes against American policies and policy maker. He further asserted that Hollywood film industry is creating a "hateful, negative and unfair" pictorial display of Muslim by depicting them as fanatics, fundamentalist and terrorist. Said concluded that this biased attitude of Hollywood cinema will hamper and hinder the establishment of any peace process between the West and the east.

Null (2008) in his article "American school text books: How they portrayed the Middle East from 1898 to 1994" argues that the stereotypes of the Arab and the Muslim in America have been disseminated in different forms by US media. These representations are generally negative which in return bring bad consequences for the Muslim and Arab-Americans in their daily lives. Null concludes that in American text books, the same negative stereotyping of the Muslim is visible, which as a matter of fact, is quite far from the reality.

McCrisken and Pepper (2005) suggest that Arabs do not deserve the image which is being offered to them in Hollywood cinema. He is of the view that negative image assigned to Arabs out of nothing is unfair and unjust. He, through the critical analysis of Hollywood movies, derives that Rudolf Valentino's roles in "The Sheikh (1921)" and "The son of the Sheikh (1926)" stand among the pioneers for the

sake of explanation of negative portrayal of the Arabs and the Muslim in Hollywood. Both movies depicted Muslim characters as looters, murderers and gruesome. They further derivate that other foreign movies of 20's share a common theme of representing the Arab Muslim as power centered, maniac and cruel entity which was finally flogged by the west. "A son of the Sahara (1924)" is the most vivid and vital sub-conscious strike on the Arab culture. He concluded that the same themes were prevalent into the 70's and beyond by bringing the examples of "Black Sunday(1975)", "The Black Stallion(1979)" and "Back to the Future(1985)" in front of us.

Qumaiyeh (2004) in his article "100 years of anti-Arab and anti-Muslim stereotyping" suggests that initially it was Thomas Edison who made a short movie in 1897 for his invented Kinetoscope in which an Arab woman with short dress, dances in a public gathering to seduce the male characters. This clip was titled as "Fatima Dances" which was beginning of "belly dancer" stereotyping of Arab females. Later on "Billionaire" stereotype was assigned to the Arab Muslims especially in the era of oil crisis which took place in 70's. Qumsiyeh concludes that during last three decades, the dominant stereotype for that Arab Muslims is "Arab Bomber".

Lamani (1997) in her piece of writing "Why Hollywood owes me money?" satirically offers a twelve step guide in making a successful anti-Arab movie like there will be beard-bearing villains, they all will be wearing keffizhs, they will have names like Ali, Abdul and Mustafa and they will be in the mood to explode themselves.

Dittmar, and Michaud (1990) argue that the representation of Muslim in contemporary times can be taken as freeze frame in many aspects of discourses. They identify this phenomenon as "stereotyping". They are of the view that through this processes, the most conservative and rigid tendencies of the Muslim are highlighted (P.24). The researcher concludes that this essence of freeze frame may be seen in Hollywood movies right from their very early flicks. (P.242)

Macfie (2007) brings into light another film which is famous for its stereotypic portrayal of the Muslim. It is David Lean's, "Lawrence of Arabia (1962)". It may be credited as a classic "sun and sand" movie. According to Macfie, this film is demonstration of a typical "white man" who dominates over the Arabs, henceforth affirming Said's debate of orientalism who overtly declares the "western style" as a portrayed symbol of dominance, re-structuring and authority over the orient. (said, 1978:3)

Strobel,(1997)contrary to Macfie's view, leads himself to another direction while deconstructing "Lawrence of Arabia". He suggests this film can't be labeled as an archetypical orientalist piece of work. Contradicting Macfie, Strobel reveals that this film throws light on matters such as gender and sexuality and it has nothing to deal with assertion or affirmation of orientalism.

Elonardaoni (2006) grasps the picture from other side by contemplating that only negative representation is not obvious in Hollywood motion industry. He

describes that there are some critically accepted and commercially blockbuster mega-budgeted chunk of movies such as “Babel (2006)” and “Kingdom (2007)” that present positive as well negative representation of the Muslim. He derivates that while deconstructing Babel, Richard’s relationship with the Moroccan guide Anwar is somehow an effort and attempt to construct a positive and meaningful image of the Muslims. However, the researchers don’t forget to mention that Anwar’s family living in a small village & having miserable live is repetition of the same stereotype which is used to look down upon the Muslim identity in terms of their supposed backwardness.

Peter Moray (2005) has deconstructed the “kingdom (2007)” by concluding that black male lead in an extremely nationalist movie is a keen attempt to settle historical racial tension in America on an imaginative scale; however this movie is asking and demanding for the alignment of white and black Americans against the mutually shared foe, which is definitely “The Muslim Arab”.

Ahmad (2008) proclaims that with Osama Bin Laden dead, Hollywood has wasted its major symbol for the Arch-villain ship. However, the obsession of Hollywood with the notion of Arch Villain is not coming to an end. Laden’s death, no doubt, offers a bit of closure to the real life narrative of the “war on terror” , however, on the reel life, the massive space is still present for sequels to come. This will definitely bring even bigger and worse Muslim terrorists on the silver screen in the upcoming days. Game isn’t over yet .

Thomas and Malte (2010) unfold the fact that past 9/11 Hollywood cinema re-created the notion of vigilant masculinity which had otherwise faded away at the end of cold war. Movies like “Few Good Men (1992)” were attempting to present sensitivity and sobriety of a male person more significant than his masculinity; however, the insecurity among Americans after 9/11 forced them to re-generate a hero equipped with considerable masculinity and proactive vigilance.

Ahmed (2015) acknowledges us by illuminating that Muslim are neither orthodox nor ignorant as they are supposed to be in the portrayal of the western media including Hollywood. Rather they have won Nobel Prizes in various domains. They have produced thinker of the greatest possible caliber like Ghazali, Sina and Ibn-e-Rushd, mystics like Rumi and Ibn-a-Arbi, scholars like Khuldoon and Al-Hazen, poets like Umar Khayam and Ghalib and buildings like TajMahal etc. It is only the power and aggressiveness of western media and its anti-Islamic notion through which Muslims appears to have lost the capability to express themselves, even to represent what they see and know as truth and reality of their lives.(P.257)

Hamza Ghaznavi (2015) vide his piece of writing “These misinterpretation Hollywood has about Pakistan are ridiculous” suggests that even in The Oscar and Golden Globe award winning movies like “Zero Dark Thirty” truth is twisted and tormented when the representation of Pakistan comes into question. He points out that Abbot Abad, a city in the north of Pakistan is a beautiful city famous for its greenery and mountains; however it is presented as a deserted waste land in “Zero

Dark Thirty". He further narrates that Hollywood has associated certain myths and stereotypes with the image of Pakistan such as Pakistani women always wear burqas and have no lives; Pakistani speak Arabic, Pakistani males are always in beard and Islamabad is a war zone with AK-47's always in action. The author concludes that Hollywood should come out of the stereotypes and proper research is now a prerequisite before portraying a nation.

Savage (2002) recollects that Hollywood movies have a vital and vivid influence on the minds and cognition of American masses. Thus it has created a situation where millions of people have brought up believing they are well aware of Arabs as well as Muslim culture whereas same is not the situation. Savage determines it as a delusional state of audience and bluntly blames Hollywood motion picture industry for it. Goodstein (1998) argues that Arab-Americans, after decades of virtual invisibility in

Hollywood cinema has finally found the prominent presence but unfortunately this presence is negative one. They are either a terrorist or simply a villain of another kind. They are definitely not the first victim of Hollywood; rather they are the latest ones in a very long list of ethnic group and nations.

Hall (2001) argues that the gruesome and faceless characters can also be seen as problem in more qualitative term, as a representation of an established media stereotype that will easily be communicated to the viewers because of their previous exposure to it. Resultantly, the modern terrorist is a simple common Arab character type in contemporary American entertainment industry. (P.406)

Contemporary Perspective

The existing relationship between the west and the Islamic world is a relation between the superior and inferior, lord and the slave, strong and the weak. It can be characterized by brutality, bloodshed, cultural misunderstanding, dominance and control. There is a long history of warfare, crusades and mistrust between west and the Muslim world which is playing an important role in distorting all the serious attempts of peace and reconciliation among both stake holders, sabotaging the process by adding an element of suspicious and pre-cooked ideologies even till date. US government, being the hegemony, come up with project of universal militarism which brought rift and collision between Islam and the west at the advent of 21st century in the reign of George W.Bush Junior. He is of the view that persisting act of occupying the Muslim land across the globe by the US government is the reminder of an ill-fated trajectory and path of America, as a state. USA is heir to the advantages of modernity. In the west, modernity has been playing a vital role in neutralizing and side-lining the forces of religion, irrationality, radicalism and other prejudices. But the "war on terror" is a threatening factor for the modern face of USA.

Administration of Trump should be vigilant in keeping aside the biblical religion and imagery out of its foreign policy formulation in order to preserve the true modern face of USA which is necessary for the global peace and tranquility.

Conclusion

“Patterns of bias in motion picture content” argues that it is matter of unfortunates that some races may be portrayed in a more positive manner, whereas others may be depicted in a biased manner. It is sumed up that although all races may be depicted in negative way one time or another, but some races specifically Arabs and Arab-Americans are all time victims of indecent depiction. Myths about Arabs usually instigate directors, producers and screen writers to create a plot which is always relying on stereotypes. The word “Muslim” in media is applied in such a narrower sense which eliminates and eradicates the existing distinction of citizenship, ethnicity and nationalistic differences despite the fact these are very much existent in reality.

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