

# Portrayal of arabs and muslims in hollywood



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Over the years, pre and post 9/11, many people have noticed that Hollywood tends to dehumanize Arabs and Muslims. In most western movies, Arab and Muslim characters are subjected to racial and ethnic stereotyping and have continued to be the center of vilification for the entertainment industry in the states. The mass media has depicted Arab and Muslim stereotypes in a number of ways within the American culture and the west in general.

Through the society's media, literature, theatre, and many other creative outlets, stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims is manifested continuously. Such representations have been negative for the most part, whether they were based on historical facts or on works of fiction. They have also had very negative repercussions on Arabs and Muslims who live in the west especially as a reaction to current events and when it came to daily interactions.

Generally, Arabs and Muslims exist as one-dimensional characters in Hollywood cinematic works and appear almost sub-human. They are typically always a danger or a threat, ignorant, violent, and most importantly obsessed with kidnapping or killing as many Westerners as possible as they supposedly view them as the enemy. Edward Said notably coined the term "Orientalism" to express the cultural habit of converting those from eastern cultures into the "Other". The notion of Orientalism presents exotic characters that are created from a Western political and social biased perspective in order to provoke a powerful reaction against the eastern culture while at the same time confirming western values. Basically, the hero westerner defeats the nameless evil villain from the east and the western audience in turn feels good about itself. In Reel Bad Arabs, Shaheen states

that “ television’s image of the Arab is omnipresent [and] is becoming a part of American folklore.” He also says that Arabs have “ consistently appeared in American popular culture as billionaires, bombers, and belly dancers” which are known as the 3 B’s for the role of a typical Arab character in a Hollywood movie.

What most seem to be forgetting though is the fact that “ Muslim” is no more synonymous with “ Arab” than “ Christian” is with “ American”. In Hollywood movies, Arabs are equivalent to Muslims, though Arabs actually comprise only 12 percent of the Islamic world population. Islam followers or supporters live on every continent and the Muslim majority is not present in the Middle East, rather in the Asia-Pacific region in countries like India, Malaysia, and Indonesia. In fact, the latter has the largest population of Muslims and is a constitutional republic.

It is not very surprising, however, that Hollywood makes Arabs and Muslims synonymous, appearing in such a manner as one. Hollywood is simply reinforcing the concept of Orientalism when it comes to Muslims. Edward Said explains how the image of Muslims in the eyes of orientalists was not any different from anti-Semitic views by saying that, “ Not accidentally, I indicate that Orientalism and modern anti-Semitism have common roots... The transference of a popular anti-Semitic animus from a Jewish to an Arab target was made smoothly, since the figure was essentially the same.” Basically, what Hollywood now does is use a newer and more effective technique to warp the image of Islam; how Muslims are described in Hollywood is similar to how the Jews were portrayed in Nazi-inspired movies.

It is crucial however, to mention that there have actually been some movies after 9/11 that portray Muslims quite fairly; such as *The 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior*. Unfortunately though, the negative image is usually more influential than the positive one as it feeds people's fears. According to a survey done by the Pew Forum in 2009, 35 percent of Americans believe that Islam promotes violence more than the rest of the other religions. Moreover, according to a poll done by Time Magazine, 62 percent of Americans do not personally know a Muslim American. This means that most Americans form their concept of Islam from what the mass media offers them, and this is extremely problematic. Hollywood must give out an image that gives attention to what unites the people of this world, focusing on the positives and the universal humanistic qualities that bring people together instead of dividing them.

*The 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior* is one of the very few Hollywood movies that portray Arabs and Muslims realistically. The Arabs in this movie are portrayed in a way that they appear to be multi-dimensional just as any westerner would be in a Hollywood production. The Arab here is not only depicted as a regular human being but even more so as an actual hero. Even Jack Shaheen deems it as one of the best depictions of Arabs in film; it has a balanced and progressive image of Arabs. The main character, Ahmad ibn-Fadlan Ibn-Fadlan is an Arab, who is at the same time the narrator describing his exploits with the Vikings. He tells his experience with them looking back as an outsider. The life of these Vikings is seen from the perspective of a character who appears to be a learned member of a civilized society, serving as an observer and the viewers' window to a foreign culture from foreign eyes. Through him, we see

and react to traditions that neither we nor him are familiar with, and this makes the viewer discover more about him as well as those he is talking about.

The way he adapts to their cultural ways and even adopts some of their social patterns as well adds more layers to his character, and this encourages respect and tolerance for other religions and races. Neither the Arabs nor the Vikings seem to be radical or fanatic and no faith is criticized or put down. In *The 13th Warrior*, from the point of view of the Arab “other”, we see characters from two distinct cultures and backgrounds learning from each other and growing from the experience. The main character and protagonist in this Hollywood movie is actually a likable Arab who realistically tells the tale of his encounter with a strange culture and convincingly demonstrates his attempts to connect with this odd and bizarre world that he has stepped into. In turn, the Vikings treat him kindly and put aside his differences instead of distrusting him for them. They even come to a point where they refer to him as “little brother”.

The Arab is portrayed as rational and intelligent vs. impulsive and primitive. Ibn-Fadlan quietly learned the Vikings’ tongue by immersing himself into their conversations during their nights next to the bonfire and carefully dissecting their language. He learns to understand it and speak it by merely listening to them talk and repeating the sounds in his mind, a task that would probably be impossible in real life. This helps his character appear as an educated man who is clever enough to accomplish incredible tasks quite quickly, which earned the respect of the Vikings.

Another act of intelligence by Ibn-Fadlan is when he deciphered what the oracle had told him and his fellow warriors when they went to see her. The men wanted to ask about the whereabouts of some men who had attacked them earlier, but the woman was quite mad and could not speak very coherently. When no one was able to understand what she was hinting at, Ibn-Fadlan was able to put the clues together and finally tell the warriors where the men who had once attacked them lived. Not to mention that the Arab was the only one who was able to provide a token from the enemy for the oracle to derive energy from.

“ Drawing sounds”, which referred to the writing of letters and words, was something the Vikings knew only the Arab was capable of doing amongst them. A fellow warrior found Ibn-Fadlan drawing these sounds into the sand with a stick and wondrously questioned him about it. Ibn-Fadlan explained to him how he could also speak them back – read them – and showed him how it could be done. Even though the Viking still did not quite grasp this notion, he recognized Ibn-Fadlan’s spectacular ability to comprehend such a novel and complex idea and eventually learned from him, as Ibn-Fadlan did from the Vikings.

Even though Ibn-Fadlan is Arab and Muslim, there is no direct assumption that just because he is Arab he is also a Muslim. The emphasis of his identity remains on the fact that he is an Arab and that is where the focus lies. We discover he is Muslim when he tries to explain to the Viking that there is only one God, and that Mohammed is his prophet, which is an actual prayer in Islam. Also, we see him praying on the prayer mat only once in the entire movie, which helps in showing that Muslims are not necessarily praying and

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saying “ Allahu Akbar” all the time as they do in most other Hollywood productions.

We are used to seeing the intolerant and angry Arab who cannot accept other cultures and religions other than his own. In this film the Arab surprisingly shows tolerance to the others’ religion and cultural practices unlike a stereotypical Arab, as depicted by Hollywood, who is always at war with the West and their ways. When Ibn-Fadlan gets injured in battle, a Viking woman attempts to heal his wounds by applying cow urine. When he learns what she is putting on his cuts he reacts quite disgustingly and asks her for clean water instead. After explaining how this is better for the wound to heal properly, he complies and puts his recovery in her unusual methods.

You would never imagine an Arab falling in love with a Western woman and actually having a respectful and polite interaction as Hollywood almost always portrays the Arab man to be abusive and oppressive to women. Ibn-Fadlan falls in love with a Viking woman and they share a mutual admiration to one another; neither looks at the other as an “ other” but rather as true equals. Unlike the usual Arab depiction of them mistreating women, here the Arab treats the Western woman with utter appreciation and affection. He even makes love to her outside of wedlock, that night after the big battle where they find themselves unable to resist their attraction to one another, which is also not allowed in Islam. Ibn-Fadlan finds himself trying out new things and not resisting exposing himself to alien traditions.

The Arab is usually never adaptive or social in Hollywood films, but more closed off and unwilling to interact with the outside world. Ibn-Fadlan breaks

this stereotype and engages in a give and take relationship with the Vikings where he accepts that he can learn a few things from their culture just as they could from him. One of these examples is when he attempts, for the first time, to taste an alcoholic beverage which a Muslim cannot have. Religiously at the time, the fermentation of grapes and of wheat were forbidden in Islam, so when the Viking offers Ibn-Fadlan a drink after battle, he politely rejects. However, when the Viking explains to him that this was actually made of honey, Ibn-Fadlan dares to take a sip from the Viking's horn.

At the beginning, Ibn-Fadlan is given a sword by the Vikings as this is what he would be using in battle. Arabs back then were used to fighting with lighter and much thinner swords, which meant there was no way the Arab was able to strategically fight and win with a sword that weighs almost twice or three times the one he usually uses. He adapts to certain fighting styles by observing the Vikings fight and learns to use new armory, such as the wooden shield used for protection which he is also not accustomed to. At the same time though, while learning that he would be a much better fighter and far more useful as a warrior, he decides to stick to the same old kind of sword he is used to and goes to the blacksmith asking for one according to his own specifications. Through this, the Vikings see the advantage of a lighter and therefore faster sword and are impressed with his wit. He successfully shows the Vikings that although his sword is lighter, although his horse is smaller (which he was ridiculed for), he can be far more effective.



Despite the fact both Arabs and Vikings are portrayed fairly and as both having equal negatives as well as positives, the Vikings are portrayed as somewhat more barbaric than the Arabs. Ironically, the way Arabs are portrayed as primitive in Hollywood movies is how the Vikings are portrayed in this movie, to some degree. They appear to be aggressive and impulsive, lacking hygiene, and not all that clever, while the Arab is the epitome of self-control, decency, and wit. Generally, neither is depicted as evil or bad; they are both righteous and pious warriors as shown by this film, but the underlying qualities of culture and traditions that are present for each are shown in different lights. The Vikings, in the beginning, are made out to look like complete fools and dirty slobs who possess limited intellectual skills. They share a bowl of water to remove snot from their noses and rinse their mouth with which they pass around for everyone to use. They also cast a few of bones to predict future events that might take place. However the Arab appears to be very clean and even shows disgust to their unhygienic ways (it is not shocking how he was unable to adapt to this specific cleansing method).

The usual poor misrepresentation of Arabs and Muslims that dominates Hollywood movies is what seems to be pushing movies such as *The 13<sup>th</sup> Warrior* into the background. The twisted depiction of Arabs and Muslims is a representative image of how they truly are; it is a myth and does not fully reflect reality. A certain connotation is masquerading as a denotation and it became so literal that people started believing it as fact. There exists this dominant meaning or understanding of Islam or Arab-ness, which is not fixed or inherent, rather created based on a complex of social interaction among

the two parties or sides. The interplay between the different cultures created this iconic image and a certain decision was made when it was chosen to be represented in this manner; it was agreed upon in a particular context to portray this value and this culturally imposed meaning.

One thing is for sure: Hollywood's determination on reacting to the same political and social spurs for years and even decades now is pretty consistent. No group of peoples provide more ground for Hollywood's degenerating stereotyping than Arabs and Muslims, and it seems that this is probably not going to change any time soon. As the world's leading cinematic industry, the Arab stereotype has a greater negative impact on audiences today than it did decades ago. Nowadays, Hollywood's films are created, developed, and disseminated world-wide, reaching viewers globally. The international success of a movie has become the decider of its popularity; it is not just domestic and local approval that deems a movie a hit anymore. Also, Arab images not only affect international audiences, but international movie makers as well in this case.

Arabs and Muslims have given the world quite a lot throughout the years, from architecture to mathematics, but how much of it has found its way onto the movie screens? They have grown tired of seeing rudimentary and inaccurate depictions of themselves that are causing them to be extremely misrepresented to others on this planet. In fact, what does Hollywood think the 1.6 billion Muslims around the world are thinking when they see movies that they are depicted so unjustly in? Hollywood realizes that it has a key role to play in shaping public opinion (domestically and internationally) but only time will tell whether it ever decides to deliver a realistic and just

viewpoint on the Muslim world, the Arab world, and their peoples. The most effective films are the ones that remind us that the essence of our collective human experience shows us at our best, free of nationality, ethnicity, politics or religion. But before a movie can ever deliver that, it must be completely and utterly without stereotype to say the least, Muslim, Arab or otherwise.