How Does Hollywood Movies Portray Muslims and Arabs After 9/11? "Content Analysis of *The Kingdom and Rendition* Movies"

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Abstract
This research paper is basically a content analyses paper of two Hollywood Movies (*The Kingdom and Rendition*). Both movies were released on 2007 after 9/11 attacks and that is because the paper focusing on the era after 9/11. It consists of two parts: The literature review part where the author looked into numerous articles and studies that aim at explaining the situation on how Hollywood films depicted the Muslim community after the September 11th attack. In addition, the author looked at different articles and books that studied the history of Muslims and Arabs depiction in the Western media in general and Hollywood movies specifically to find out how theses portrayals and stereotypes have changed after 9/11 attacks. The second part involves the analysis of both movies to find out how Hollywood portrays Arabs and Muslims after 9/11. I analyzed and criticized most of the movies' scenes with regard to the language they used, the places where the scenes of both movies took place and other minor details such as how the directors narrated and articulated different events and scenes with different Islamic symbols.

Key words: September 11th; Hollywood movies; Depiction in Western; Muslims and Arabs

INTRODUCTION

The attacks of 9/11 on America's twin towers did not only wreak havoc in the United States but shook the core of the world. Countries all over the world were affected directly and indirectly and people still remembered it as the terrible criminal act. Aguayo (2009) firmly states that "in this post September 11 (9/11) climate of the "War on Terror", Hollywood political-thriller films carry a new cultural currency" (p.1). It left an indelible impression in the hearts and minds of the millions of people inhabiting the planet today, something that still makes them weak in the knees at the slightest thought of the two the gigantic towers of the world tumbling down like a pack of cards and ending in a heap of debris killing and burying thousands of innocent people. As a result of this terrorist act and the scale of its implementation and outcome, security preparedness and defense strategies among nations were upgraded. People also became more vigilant and responsible. A sense of peace and unity like never before emerged in the process. When the time for healing and sobriety should have been encouraged, the media and Hollywood proceeded on stoking the anger and prejudice by depicting Arabs in a most unflattering way. The sudden interest in themes similar to 9/11 led to the production of several cinematic materials that involve Arab antagonists. This contributes immensely to the institutionalization of prejudice against Arabs in America and in most parts of the world. Being an Arab or Muslim even those with Muslim sounding names becomes a target of discrimination because of the strong association with terroristic activities. Consequently, these discrimination and attacks gave rise to inhuman and nefarious treatment of Muslims especially those from Afghanistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Iraq. In this backdrop, the role of media has been significant (Al-Jenaibi, 2014). Media, especially Hollywood films, unabashedly and unfairly portrayed Muslims as nothing but extremists with no regard for human lives.

The objective of this paper is to study, understand, analyze, and showcase the misrepresentation in the media, particularly of American cinema, which covers issues

such as region, culture, gender and race. An important goal is to highlight the theme concerning the negative portrayal of Arabs, Muslims and the Arab world and community before the world. For this purpose, two movies will be analyzed, *The Kingdom* and *Rendition*. Using these two cinematic materials, as presented in case study methodology, this paper will outline the legitimate arguments and concerns in the manner how Hollywood films contribute to growing stereotype of Muslims and Arabs after the 9/11 attacks. It is hoped that this paper, including its analyses and findings, would help change the pervading conversation and narratives in the media and the filmmaking industry so that a meaningful change could be achieved or, at least, for these entertainment popular platforms to act responsibly by refraining to encourage and reinforce many pre-conceived notions and stereotyping.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The occurrence of 9/11 has since modified the theme of Hollywood movies especially in terms of the involvement of Arab or Muslim characters. Immediately after the unfortunate event, there is no group of terrorists is identified without Arabs and Muslims connections. This appears to strengthen the appeal of the narrative of Hollywood thrillers to the viewing public (Al-Jenaibi, 2010). As a result more and more the Hollywood films came to associate Arabs with barbaric acts in the American society. This trend reinforces the stereotype of the Arab or the Muslim as the villain in many movies. Noting this development, Shaheen (2008) argued that something must be done. His position is that there is a need to analyze the impact of 9/11 in American filmmaking in order to raise awareness in the increasing use of Arabs as terrorist characters to the detriment of the ethnic group both in the mainstream American society and across the world. The depictions encourage a framework in which misconception and unfair labeling are perpetuated by the American public (Al-Jenaibi, 2013). Movies are critical in shaping public opinion and in influencing perspectives and attitudes because it is a potent component of culture. If the trend is to persist, Arabs will be demonized and the idea of Islam and Muslims as terrorists, violent and extremists will eventually become entrenched in the collective psyche of the American community.

Shaheen identified four stereotypes in the manner by which Muslims are depicted unfavorably in Holllywood films. The four stereotypes that dominate the post 9/11 cinema include: a) the fabulously wealthy; b) sex maniacs; c) barbaric and uncouth; and, 4) those that revel in acts of terrorism (Shaheen, 2009). All these stereotypes serve in perpetuating false representation of Arabs as a group. Shaheen states, "Arabs remain the most maligned group in the history of Hollywood. Malevolent stereotypes equating Islam and Arabs with violence have endured for more than

a century...Arab=Muslim=Godless Enemy." The manner by which the derogatory treatment is undertaken could be likened to the attitude of the pre-Nazi Germany against the Jews. Shaheen draw the parallel by pointing that, then, Jews were seen as dark, shifty-eyed, venal and entirely different. The same predicament is argued to be faced by Arabs in America today.

The repercussions of 9/11 on the Arab depiction in films could consider convenient to Hollywood's taste for drama, sensationalism and propensity to shock in the name of entertainment. Put in another way, there is so much materials present in the 9/11 narrative and in the classic tales between good and evil or hero and villain, the Arab became the most likely candidate for the latter in fictitious thrillers involving terrorists out to harm America and the world. Most of these movies include scenes of bombing with the most recognizable mercenaries being the Arabs and Muslims (Al-Jenaibi, 2008). The producers make them recognizable by ensuring that they use Arabic accent besides their usual gowns. Then scenes usually take the form of 9/11 whereby the Arabs and Muslims disturb the peace in a given area through spectacular explosions leaving a trail of blood and gore at its wake. Some of these movies go to the extent of depicting the Arab characters as suicide bombers. This concisely shows the influence of 9/11 on the structure of Hollywood narratives.

Said provided the background history of how Muslims have been portrayed and depicted in the western media prior to the 9/11 terrorist attack (Said, 1981). During this period, Hollywood tended to depict Arabs as uncultured and barbaric. According to Marger, this may be attributed to the political and economic events in the Middle East during the 1970s, as induced by the Arab-led OPEC oil cartel (p.348). It supposedly fueled suspicion and disdains the group's stereotype in America. The occurrence of 9/11 has further reinforced the view that Arabs are sleazy, brute, dim-wits and abusers of women. Along this line, Hollywood filmmaking has portrayed Muslims as having no formal culture to control their deeds and is juxtaposed alongside the heroics of the righteous Israelis, for instance. Their association with 9/11 implies that they had little to control them in caring for the lives of their fellow men. There was implicit suggestion that Muslim societies condone the mass killing of people for to advance self interests. It is not unusual for movies to depict them as heartless and ready to go on any mission related with killing (Aguayo, 2009). They are the most hired mercenaries in the movies, especially those involving bombing. This is not unlike the trolls in Tolkien films, they exist to make the hero look good, to be the villain so there is the opportunity for the hero to be one.

There are several manifestations of prejudice against Muslims as a result of the pervasive misconceptions of barbarism and extremism. If one enters America, for instance, a Muslim or an Arab is more likely to undergo stricter and unique inspections at the airport. Onwudiwe

pointed out that inspection could be done on Muslims twice than those done on other individuals with different nationalities.

The 9/11 terrorist attacks have also encouraged Hollywood movie directors to depict the Arabs as fabulously wealthy. They are considered fabulously wealthy in the sense that they have money to support luxurious acts such as bombing and making weapons. The 9/11 terrorism was such a planned event that required the masterminds to spend a lot of money and time in ensuring the success of the mission. According to Halse (2012) the serial killers and the terrorists, mostly Muslims and Arabs in Hollywood movies, are usually rich. The rivalry between them usually ends up in a fight involving expensive weapons, which are not accessible from among the poor. Said asserts that the storyline of these movies normally ends up with the protagonist saving the poor from the barbaric act of the rich Muslims. Consequently, it is clear that the association of the Muslims and Arabs with the 9/11 attacks drives the stereotype of the fabulously wealthy.

The influence of 9/11 on Hollywood movies can best be summarized by Onwudiwe's view that movies are representation of what is happening in real life thus, are taking their ideas from what is currently happening in the world (Onwudiwe, 2005).

2. MOVIE ANALYSES

The film, the Kingdom (2007) directed by Peter Berg is a classic fiction movie but it is inspired by actual event, particularly, the terrorist bombings on American forces in their Riyadh compound in Saudi Arabia. This unfortunate event transpired in the year 2003. The film was headlined by Hollywood's A-list stars, which include Jamie Foxx, Chris Cooper and Jennifer Garner, among others. The impeccable casting underscored its significance as a commercial film. The plot followed the attack and its immediate aftermath. A team of four FBI agents - Adam Leavitt, Grant Sykes, Janet Mayes and Ronald Fleury - was sent to Saudi Arabia where the attacks had taken place in order to investigate. This situation was tense and volatile. The team proceeded with their investigation with extreme caution and vigilance because the investigation had to be carried out under the suspicious eyes of the Saudi Colonel, Faris al Ghazi. Proceeding ahead in the movies amidst all the violent scenes, gore and earth shattering killings, the American agents realized that the investigation was, after all, a complex undertaking. They are soon lost in a tangle of deceits, lies, contradictory loyalties, treacherous friendships, and watchful enemies. Treading carefully, they are supposed to execute their tasks of finding out who the perpetuators of the attacks are and what their motive was. Gradually, they discovered that al Ghazi is a law-abiding individual, trustworthy and willing to help them. What followed were the struggles of the investigators in finding the culprits in the attack. An exciting part in the film was when the investigators discovered and cornered the perpetrators only to lose Al Ghazi to enemy hands in the process. After having raided a terrorist center, the investigation project is called off and the FBI officials are ordered to return to America.

All in all, the plot of movie has all the ingredients of a highly entertaining blockbuster of a thriller. It also provided excellent – if fictitious – insights in regards to Saudi Arabia's partnership with America and its engagement with terrorism. Basically, the movie was about four American heroes who came to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and killed the villaions or what they eventually called as "terrorists". The movie – as a Hollywood film – entailed so many violent scenes such as: killing people, bombings, cars crashing and so much blood. What really draw my attention with these disturbing scenes is that they were mostly associated or involved with Muslims and Arabs.

At the beginning of the movie the "terrorist" man Abu Hamza was forcing his son who was less than 10 years old to watch the suicide bombing that he was leading. The young boy was scared and terrified of watching people get killed and burned alive but Abu Hamza was making sure that his son would follow his chosen path in the future, which was shown in other different scenes in the movie.

"Savages" is one of the old Arabs' stereotypes in Hollywood movies that, unfortunately, is still very much alive as demonstrated excellently in the scenes in "The Kingdom". For example, there is the part where the "terrorists" were executing their attack and they killed the American in a very brutal way. They even killed a man in cold blood in front of his son. Another scene that depicted Arabs as "Savages" was when Saudi police officers was torturing one of his employees because he assumed that the employee knows who was behind the attack.

The "Kingdom" took this old stereotype to the extreme and did not hesitate to concoct many violent and gory tableaux with different kind of Islamic symbols thrown in. For instance, when Abu Hamza and his followers were busy making bombs the director focuses on the different symbolic accessories that were in the room such as the "Sejada" (small piece of carpet Muslims use to pray on it), and the "Quran" in addition to the subtle emphasis of other small details and Muslim symbols. The production value involved a contrived world where the Arab fits the "bad-guy" stereotype.

Talking about the old Hollywood stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims, there was another old and inaccurate stereotype that an Arab would immediately find ridiculous because it is so inaccurate. This concerns the depiction of the relationship between people from the Middle East, specifically the people from the Arabian Peninsula, and camels. There is more than one scene in "The Kingdom" where the director decided that he wants the camel to be in the scene for some reason; as if the camel is an

indispensable element in depicting the Middle East. There were also several scenes with several sheep bleating in the background such as the part when the FBI team was assaulting Abu Hamza's neighborhood. These demonstrate the inaccuracy in the depictions and the impunity by which they are perpetuated.

There are some dialogues in "The Kingdom" that are clearly making fun of the Saudi Arabia's environment and the Arab countries in general. For example, when Adam Leavitt (Jason Bateman) asked Grant Sykes (Chris Cooper): "How does it look over there?" Grant: "It's a bit like marc. Marc?" Adam: "It sounds that I didn't pack right"! There is also another example when Jennifer Garner as Special Agent Janet Mayes, said to her friends "they don't have fire exits your are in the jangle now" as response to Jason Bateman as Special Agent Adam Leavitt when he was looking for away out of the gym where they stayed.

The director of *The Kingdom* was also very creative in recreating compelling imagery. For example, there was a shot of an idyllic community, where Muslims are being portrayed as normal people, who just live their daily life and practice their religious rituals. However, this scene was immediately corrupted by shots that are violent in nature such as people assembling bombs or people loading cars with explosives. These images are very effective in establishing the connection between Muslim communities and terrorism.

The film Rendition is supposed to provide a different perspective in the terrorism subject in Hollywood films. This is easily evident in the plot, which was inspired by real life events: the abduction and the torture of Khalid El-Masri. It told the story of a man, Anwar El-Ibrahimi who was wrongfully taken by the Central Intelligence Agency and detained because he was mistaken for a terrorist who bombed and killed several CIA agents in North Africa. He was linked to the attack on account of several phone calls and sound of his name. He was tortured until such time that he confessed to the crime he did not commit. Thanks to the help of a rookie CIA agent, Douglas Freeman, who – after interrogating him – did not believe that he was guilty. Anwar was then spirited back to the United States to be reunited with his family. In the end, Freeman leaked the story to the media dragging several personalities responsible for the torture to public humiliation.

The story should be an excellent attempt at providing a different take to the Arab character. Instead of the villain, the main Arab in the story was a victim. In addition, the film directs the attention of the audience to the practice of torture sanctioned by the government and the manner by which the American law enforcement treats Arabs and Muslims in its ongoing war on terror. However, the film was still guilty of several stereotypes, which was in the same mold as those found in other post 9/11 films. Consider, for example: Aside from Anwar and a girl named Fatima, most of the Arabs with significant roles in the movie, were depicted to be terrorists, cruel

interrogator, ignorant and a host of other characteristics straight out of Shaheen classification of Arab myths. The story also suggests – in different parts of the narrative - that the tragic fate of many Muslims such as the death of loved ones were their own doing. There was the subplot concerning Fatima the daughter of Abasi Fawal, who was killed because she tried to stop her boyfriend from assassinating her father. Even Anwar was not saved from this kind of depiction. He stubbornly refused to reveal the nature of the call from the terrorist Rashid's phone call to the point that his capture and torture could have induced the viewers to think as his own comeuppance.

Moving to a different kind of Arab's stereotype in the "Rendition" movie, that considered being an old time portrayal of Arabic women who tend to be depicted as the "sexy" lady who know exactly how to seduce her man. This stereotype embodied in Hadar Ratzon as Safiya character who was the mistress of Jake Gyllenhaal (Douglas Freeman) and his coworker. Even though her role was not very significant, but the director would miss this opportunity to show the Arab women in her old time stereotype.

CONCLUSION

The Kingdom and Rendition have almost the same subject, structure and characterization. In both of these materials, there was a terrorist attack and a team of American experts was called in to address the problem. In the Kingdom, these experts were the FBI agents whereas, in Rendition, it was the CIA. The characterization for both of these films showed the well-entrenched conception of Arabs as extremists, uncultured, and prone to violence. Even Rendition, which was a criticism to the government and its treatment of Muslims and Arabs, could not help but subscribe to the same stereotypical practices.

The common factor in both movies (*The Kingdom and Rendition*) was that both directors were very good at making the connection between the normal daily life of Arabs and terrorist activities seems to be natural. They did not give any kind of justifications for how did these young people turned to be this way. Contrariwise, the only justification that was given is that "terrorism" exists in Arab communities instinctively. There is implicitly claim that people in that area are raised to be this way, and mostly because it is in their religion or what commonly been used as "Jihad" duty.

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