



Themes Related to Essentialized imagery of Arabs and Muslims in America popular culture

Dr. Basem Alatom^{1*}

[1] *Jordan University of Science & Technology*

*Corresponding author's E-mail: bealatom@just.edu.jo

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to study the themes rooted in the American popular culture, related to Arabs and Muslims. Such themes bear more than a passing similarity to the west East binary derived issues discernible from Edward Said's study Orientalism. The themes extrapolated from the binary oppositions in the texts of orientalism as identified by Said are the applied to the popular texts. The orientalist themes are then compared with the general imagery to show the degree of the correspondence between the traditional discourse and the current imagery. Unfortunately, such themes play major role to influence millions of people throughout the American society and they can determine the way how to deal with Arabs and Muslims.

Keywords: Themes Related, Essentialized, culture.

1. Introduction

In the popular broadcast media , several themes have emerge in the portrayal of Arabs and Muslims. The themes bear more than a passing similarity to the West/East binary-derived themes discernible from Edward Said's study.

Below the themes extrapolated from the binary oppositions in the texts of Orientalism as identified by said are applied to the popular texts. The Orientalist themes are then compared with the general imagery to show the degree of correspondence between the traditional discourse and the current imagery.

2. Literature Review

The most explicit theme of Orientalism reflecting inferiority in the Eastern Subhumanity. Certainly dehumanization arises out of the implication of the other binaries as well. But certain examples of a direct dehumanization can occur. Scooby Doo , a cartoon, had an evil magician as a villai . He was made to be Arab. He receives his punishment when his magic turns back to him and he becomes a monkey.

Jack Shaheen applied the commutation test in the interesting way to this case although he did not use it in a systemized or theoretical way. He imagined what would happen if the magician was American and the heroes were Arabs. Americans will see that as crude political propaganda.

A stranger example of the Aryan/Semitic subtheme of the Subhumanity theme of Orientalist discourse entering the popular media occurred on an episode of The Saint. In that case, the Arab characters all had brown eyes .

In this matter, however, the presence of Aryan/Semitic racialism and the color-orientedness of America racial thinking was revealed by the episode's producer. Real Arab actors were auditioned and one was hired who had blue eyes .The show's general producer, Quinn Martin, disapproved of the actor saying, "Arabs don't have blue eyes ... that's not what Americans think that look like" . The association of Arabs as by nature dark-eyed may reflect a need to put them among groups the American public with a cultural legacy of white supremacy may deem inferior.

3. Methodology

The Theme of Backwardness

The Orientalist binary that the West is advanced and the East is not reinforced by bringing out "backwardness" when Arabs is identified characters. On the TV show Tenspeed , the heroes attempted to distract bodyguards for a visiting Arab potentate in a modern hotel room. The guards became frightened and awed by the operation of a light dimmer switch and a radio .

"How can they be so civilized [wealthy], yet so primitive?" a leading character asks .Using the commutation test one could ask: what if it had been a visiting Dutch nobleman ? It would seem ridiculous. And even if one substituted an underdeveloped country like Latin American one, it might would seem strange that the leader's bodyguard would not be able to handle a radio or a dimmer switch. And if an African country were substituted, and the comment was made, a critic may credibly wonder at the degree of racism that may be involved .

Clearly there is a message transmitted associating primitiveness with Arabs essentially. If one applies the commutation test to substitute setting rather than character, one could imagine meeting an Arab ruler in an undeveloped area and his bodyguards being awed by modern technology. Still this commutation only highlights the essentialism being conveyed. Arabs must be by nature primitive if they cannot, despite wealth and position, be comfortable in a technologically advanced setting.

Another example is a joking comment by comedian Alan King on a TV special in 1980. "What the hell is he dressed up for? Oman has got only eleven people a goat". He said this in reference to a photo of the Sultan of Oman dressed in traditional Arab clothes . The fact that the joke could be made, that there was a shared assumption between comedian and audience that an Arab ruler came from totally undeveloped and "backward" land merely from his ethnic identification, reveals the penetration of the essentialist binary of backward and advanced .

The theme of Irrationality

In an episode of the TV show The Six Million Dollar Man, called "Deathprobe," a mad scientist warns that he has a device which would destroy the world if atmospheric nuclear tests continue. The message to stop these test goes throughout the world. An Arab disregards the message and detonates a nuclear weapon but fortunately the threat was a fake .

The subtheme of fanaticism is also engaged . In the cinematic movie Network, a popular TV broadcaster denounces his TV network's proposed scale to a business connected with "Arabs." He denounces them as "Medieval fanatics. "All the while he is a champion of the people and his characterization is not challenged. Orientalist stereotypical themes are obviously assumed as acceptable discourse.

The theme of Oriental Submissiveness

In the Trapper John, M.D. episode in which the wealthy Arab "gives" Gonzo his daughter, his daughter tells Gonzo, "Your will is my will" . "Centuries of tradition" stand behind her subservience . In an episode of McCloud it takes only one punch apiece for the main character, a cowboy police officer, to knock out several large Arab bodyguards .

Although the first image is partly related to gender submissiveness within Middle Eastern society, it is included in this category as it occurs in the context of sexual submission before a Westerner. The second suggests the ease with which Arabs fall before Western righteous force. Each however, reinforces the idea that there is an essential connection between Arabness and submissiveness to force.

4. Finding

The theme of Islam-As-Threat

Islam appears in the popular entertainment media in a disparaging way. In one TV dramatization, Terrorist on Trial :The United States v. Salim Alami (1989), a fictional Palestinian is brought to the U. S. for trial after killing Americas overseas . The opening credits contain images of Muslims peacefully at prayer while the words "Terrorist on Trial" appear and scenes of a fictional terrorist incident are interspersed. In the movie True Lies (1995), Terrorists belonging to "The Crimson Jihad " Try to detonate a nuclear device in the United States.

The Message is that Islam is a dangerous enemy, not merely fanatics or militants . No effort is made to distinguish these groups from Islam as a religion embracing a billion people. The role of Arab women is often used to this end. Jack Shaheen notes

“The contemporary Arab woman is seldom depicted realistically in television programs. In the minds of many viewers, the Arab woman’s world is restricted to three things: the veil, seclusion, and polygamy all of which are blamed on Islamic tradition. ”

Here a feminist/patriarchal opposition appears as an anti-Islamic subtheme. This gives rise to a special ideological message because it fosters hostility among liberals or leftists to Islamic societies and to Muslims.

The Theme of Untrustworthiness

The same poll of the American public reported by researcher Shelley Slade in the Middle East Journal in 1980 revealed that the image of Arabs was associated with “cunning”. Here, one finds the Orientalist binary of “Trustworthy West/untrustworthy East” functioning quite strong.

The Six Million Dollar Man episode “Deathprobe” mentioned earlier also indicates this and with a political message. If an Arab country is willing. To detonate a nuclear device against the safety of the world, how can they be trusted on lesser matters? Curiously, If one applied a commutation test as

Shaheen does implicitly and substitute Israel, the only state in the Middle East which actually is believed to have nuclear devices , the image would shatter the image of trust underlying the basis of the Israeli-U.S. relationship. Thus, the choice to make Arabs trustworthy serves an important political goad besides reinforcing an essentialized image of untrustworthiness.

In this situation , Shaheen’s inquiries revealed that the original script called for Russians to break the testing ban .But the producers of the program intervened. Later, they approved an Arab state as substitute . The influences of political concerns is demonstrable at a time of detente with the Soviet Union when the episode was broadcast .

Arabs are chosen as the subject when family strife is the theme. “Sons fight against each other to gain control of the father’s kingdom.” . The essential Arab is a schemer against his own. The message appears to be if Arabs cannot trust each other, how can they be trusted at all ? The classic Orientalist theme of untrustworthiness is thus realized in popular presentation.

5. Discussion & Conclusion

In the TV show *Police Woman* , a twist was put on the Arab white slavery theme. When a policeman comments that the girls are young, another observes “ for people with normal tastes” .Thus, in addition to being backward and barbaric in engaging in white slavery, the Arabs are sexually perverted as well.

The theme of strangeness is not an accident. Shaheen’s conversations with major media figures confirmed this. The Arab world is “dramatic and mysterious . . . and thus draw upon for fictional source material, “ according to Van Gordon Sauter, formerly CBS network’s Broadcast Standards Vice President . Sauter stated that such imagery was based upon “ years of misrepresentation of one form or another in the mass media” .

Producer Meta Rosenberg told Shaheen much the same thing. The Image of the Arab in an exotic one. “They are strange to us . . . they are different,” she stated .A clear statement of the essentialized sense of difference that Orientalism expounds is thus seen articulated by one who has power of the creation of popular texts.

The existence of stereotypes based upon the binary paradigms of Orientalist discourse for them appears to be strongly confirmed. The syntagmatic approach reveals much the same results. The essentialized Oriental does not change.

References:

1. Jordan University of Science & Technology