

CHALLENGING THE ARAB IDENTITY: 'HYPERLINK FILM' CHARACTER MANIPULATION IN SYRIANA

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, Hollywood has produced a significant number of films addressing the Arab character, the Middle East, and Muslim-related issues. Events such as 9/11 in the United States have intensified Hollywood's spotlight on Muslim Arabs. Many of these films such as *True Lies* (1994), and *The Siege* (1998), offer the American audience with a variety of Arab stereotypes, such as the Muslim terrorist, the martyrdom, the victimized veiled woman, and the religious fanatics. Hollywood is an influential factor

when it comes to determining how the average Americans view Arabs and the stereotypical ideas, they have about them (Aguayo 2009). It is therefore, important to understand how the portrayal of the Arab character in Hollywood affects the traditional stereotypes. The event of 9/11 has been examined in different ways. What is clear is that the event marks the change in the American history, although it actually continues to perpetuate the old myth that in America, the enemy is always from the outside, and not within (Ayish 2003). Mustafa Taha (2014) sees this event as changing the

global political landscape. Suddenly, everything is about the US, and the history of the world is dictated by the 9/11 event. Significant signifiers that are identified as the target of media scrutiny post 9/11 are the change of the Arab and Muslim identity and their portrayal in the media. These signs are rampant and formed a pattern that reflects the idea that all Arabs [are] Muslims [and] all Muslims [are] Arabs.

KEYWORDS: ARAB IDENTITY, CHARACTER MANIPULATION, HYPERLINK FILM

*** Introduction**

Tuesday, September 11, 2001, marks one of the gloomiest days in the U.S. Although it takes place on American soil, the scale of media coverage soon turns it into an important global phenomenon. For Arabs, 9/11 likewise is not only a shocking and sad day, but it also signifies the beginning of a novel era in which they became the victims of the backlash of American international policies (Malos 2010). In the immediate weeks following 9/11 attacks, President George W. Bush gave several speeches to the nation, which mark the beginning of “the

other” discourse (Ibid). Salazar argues that “His (Bush) speech was constructed on stereotypical words and images that are already recognised in more than 20 years of media and popular culture depictions of Arabs as evil, bloodthirsty, animalistic terrorists” (2004:15). Certainly, according to Merskin (2004), the political speech of George W. Bush following 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon employed words and expressions such as “us”, “them”, “they”, “evil”, “those people”, “demons”, and “wanted dead or alive” to describe Arabs (Ibid: 36). In short, Bush has reinvigorated the binary system that consigns the Arabs into “the other” category.

*** PROBLEM STATEMENT**

Before 9/11, Arab villain characters were played by actors of a wide ethnic/racial variety such as Indians and Pakistanis. Nonetheless, after 9/11 more Arab actors have been hired in Hollywood films in order to play the protagonist Arab character or one of the leading Arab characters as seen in films like *United 93* (2006), *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007) and *Green Zone* (2010). Pre 9/11, Arab actors such as Omar Sharif were given

European roles such as in *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), and the communist rebel Che Guevara in *Chein* (1969) in Hollywood films as elaborated by Robert Berkvist (2015). Post 9/11, Hollywood hires Arab actors to play the roles of Arab characters in Hollywood films as explained by Jeffrey Fleishman (2016). This definitely marks the creation of a novel trend in Hollywood.

The increasing number of Arab actors being hired in Hollywood films post 9/11, generally, and the use of Arabs to present themselves on screen, specially, are indeed a curious phenomenon. Hollywood uses character manipulation to re-structure the Arabs stereotypical depiction yet with a new image. On the surface, this can be seen as a way of adding reality and credibility to their representation with more space to show the real identity and image of Arabs. However, further scrutiny of this trend reveals a more complicated ideology at work. So far, no extensive study has been carried out on Hollywood films post 9/11 that scrutinize the use of Arab actors to play Arab characters and to understand the ideology behind this change.

This change is manifested in the way Hollywood employs a different strategy via the use of Arab actors playing Arab characters in post 9/11 films. Current theories such as orientalism that often employed to analyze Hollywood films of this nature are insufficient to help understand this new strategy (Almond 2007). Therefore, this new global phenomenon becomes a problem that needs to be addressed in the area of film studies. This research identifies this as a problem that needs to be tackled by analyzing the films produced post 9/11 textually, using the lens of New-Orientalism

*** OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY**

This research purpose to achieve the following objectives:-

- 1- To identify the types of Arab identity that can be found in SYRIANA
- 2- To offer an alternative reading of Post 9/11 Hollywood films by using new Orientalism.

*** RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This research purpose to answer the following questions:-

- 1- What types of Arab identity that can be found in SYRIANA

2- How the Arab identity offer an alternative reading of Post 9/11 Hollywood films by using character manipulation?

*** RESEARCH SIGNIFICANCE**

Hollywood has the power in building the images of ethnicity and religion in the viewer's mind. Arab images have the lion's share. Pre 9/11 Hollywood stereotypes the male Arabs as villains, money seekers, and the women as belly dancers, uneducated, and oppressed housewives. These Arab stereotypes can be found in films such as *Sheikh* (1917), and *The Rules of Engagement* (2000). Post 9/11, Hollywood starts to employ new strategies in portraying the Arab characters by Arab actors which I in this study is referred to as AaA. Examples of such portrayal can be found in films such as *The Citizen* (2012) and *Traitor* (2007). My hypothesis at this juncture is that Hollywood re-constructs the portrayal of Arab in a way that serves the American agenda on global terrorism. Therefore, this research highlights the new portrayal that has not been scrutinized before extensively.

Previous studies that focus on Arab character portrayal in Hollywood

films post 9/11 are limited, due to the fact that many Arab characters before this period are played by non-Arabs. There is a trend that shows an increase in the use of Arab actors to play Arab characters in Hollywood films. This is considered a new type of Arab portrayal in Hollywood films. Arab actors are being currently hired to play new roles in Hollywood films, in addition to the stereotype characters as terrorist, directors have made a great effort to show Arabs actively participating in counterterrorism. Through this involvement, Hollywood represents the Arab identity in such a way that agrees with the New Orientalism perspective. This research will scrutinize the new Orientalists; i.e., the Arab actors and characters in Hollywood films post 9/11, arguing that these actors and characters serve the interests of new imperialism. This research will examine seven Hollywood films post 9/11 that hired at least one Arab actor to play the protagonist roles or one of the leading characters.

*** RESEARCH SCOPE**

This research will examine one of Hollywood films post 9/11(*Syriana*) that employed at least one Arab actor

to play the protagonist role or one of the leading characters. The film has been chosen due to the actor presence of Arab actors.

*** SAMPLING AND SELECTION CRITERIA**

This section explores the sampling and selection criteria for the film analysis. After film viewing and observation, I have selected seven films produced post 9/11. The films selection was based on purposive rather than random sampling because they have to meet a certain criterion.

First, the films were selected based on the presence of Arab actors and actresses who are important characters. Important role refers to a leading Arab actor, leading Arab actress, Arab star, or simply leading character, who plays the role of the protagonist in a film. The word leading may also refer to the largest role in the film and leading actor may refer to a person who typically plays such parts or an actor with a respected body of work. In order to analyze the concepts and representation in each of the film; all seven films were watched in their entirety.

Second, the film involves intensely the cultural, political and

ideological inferences with the Arab character, and thus offer a rational approach, representing the Arabs as neither good nor bad, but as replying to their awareness and knowledge of the political realities.

Third, I believe that this films break the classical representation of Arabs and Muslims. They represent a different, more rationalistic image and meaningful representation of the ideological and cultural struggle in the Middle East.

Fourth, I discuss the new representation of Arabs in Hollywood post 9/11, these films are produced in Hollywood, and are available to the public to view. Also, the research emphasizes on films that enjoyed box office success, including blockbusters such as the films of George Clooney, Jarnie Fox, Orlando Bloom, Ridley Scott and Steven Spielberg.

*** FILM ANALYSIS**

Syriana is an example of a "hyperlink film" (Sulaiman 2009:80), by which he means that the film plot is complex and complicated. According to Kenneth Turan (2005:67), "the film makes your head spin, but more importantly, your mind thinks". The film is about the politics surrounding

the oil industry. The narrative centres on a few male-centric characters: Central Intelligence Agency operative (George Clooney), an energy analyst (Matt Damon), a Washington, D.C. attorney (Jeffrey Wright), and a Pakistani migrant worker (Mazhar Munir) in an Arab state in the Arab Gulf. The film also features a comprehensive supporting cast including Amanda Peet, Alexander Siddig, Tim Blake Nelson, British Egyptian Mark Strong, and the Egyptian actor Amr Waked.

Gaghan starts *Syriana* with a call for prayer, to inform the audience that the events are taking place in the Middle East. It is Aurora in the Gulf desert, and workers are striving to live. The director uses exorbitant bright light to awe the scene on the workers to make this scene stuck in the audience's memory. In the scene that follows, Gaghan welcomes us to look behind the shade, where CIA specialists Bob Barnes played by (George Clooney), is going to a gathering in Tehran. Gaghan utilizes a hand-held camera and cold light to elevate the experience of a maze, uncovering scenes of drinking and lewdness. There are meant to surprise

the audience. This cinematographic method, i.e., the camera movements, creates a sense of anticipation of what come for the audience. For example, in the scene, Bob Barnes gives two propelled stinger rockets to an Iranian young man, particularly when he understands that Bob is a CIA specialist and the Iranian is managing a fundamentalist association. The scene is stacked with offensive components, talking in three languages - English, Persian, and Arabic - with long quiet pauses between dialogs without significant impacts (Abed Rahman 2014). This scene is important because it shows the new characteristic of the new orientalist which is the Arab actor who plays the Arab character.

In *Syriana*, the plot is structured in a very complicated way, which Sulaiman has described in his analysis as "hyperlink film" (2009:80). Sulaiman took this term from Roger Ebert in his analysis of *Syriana*. Roger Ebert refers to "hyperlink film" as a film with the presence of more than one storyline within one film, which intertwines with each other. The Americans, Arabs, Pakistanis, Iranians, and Hezbollah seek to achieve their interests. However, the

narrative mendaciously takes Israel out of the pictures. The plot is structured by focusing on Bob Barnes's (George Clooney) role, a CIA agent who is asked to sell two missiles to a group in Tehran with the aim of intriguing it and blowing the group. However, he finds out that one of the missiles will be immediately handed over to an Egyptian terrorist, Wasim, played by an Egyptian actor, Amr Waked.

The story involves three parallel narratives setting a mood of the story as thriller. The first story tells the inclusion of the CIA in the region for the sake of protecting American political and economic interests. The second highlights continuous effort of American oil organizations to control the oil business in the Middle East. The third story shows the American impedance power in constructing the eternal legislative issues in the Middle East. The way the constructed help them to achieve their particular interests. The three parallel narratives intertwine simultaneously, this effectively creates a sense of impending danger. For example, when Bob Barnes sends a report to his leaders in Washington about what has happened, they do not take the matter

seriously. Instead, they tell him that the threat would not come from Tehran as it is ruled by the reformists. At the same moment, the missile is blown up in an American oil tanker by a desperate young man, Wasim Khan after his dismissal from an Arab oil company.

A parallel storyline including Bob c has been structured wittily. For example, in another operation, Bob travels to Lebanon in disguise as a Canadian man to chase the crown prince of an Arab oil (Prince Nasser), played by Alexander Siddiq. He resorts to one of Hezbollah leaders Sayed Hussein Hashmi, played by another Arab actor Mohammed Majd, to have his permission and assure him that his operation in Lebanon has nothing to do with the Hezbollah as if Beirut is all under the rule of Hezbollah which should approve everything happening in it. In another scene, Barnes asks for help from an Iranian agent (Al Mosawi) who also behaves as if he is in Beirut, as a hint of the Iranian influence in Lebanon. Al Mosawi surprises his friend Barnes by kidnapping him and torturing him brutally in order to obtain the names of the parties who sent him. If it was not

for the intervention of Hezbollah to rescue him at the last moment, Barnes would have been beheaded.

There are lots of issues in the plot structure that foreshadow what is to come. For example, representing the conflicts of the oil industry between the countries. These countries are eager for benefits and taking part in the degenerate practices to secure the oil. Second the U.S. Government makes a show of reining oil; however, at last, the countries are complicit in corrupt practices, and on a few occasions will go about as the military arm of petroleum. Third, the U.S. Government's talk about spreading the majority rules system and opening up free markets is void. The U.S. takes actions against these standards to secure access to oil for the U.S. only. *Syriana's* structure drives the audience to concentrate on the thought of the scene, and the connection to the present circumstances of instability in the Middle East, which works to the advantage and interest of the west. Watching the film, the audience will think that the Middle East controls the west, while the truth is the Middle East works to the advantage of the west particularly the US.

The conflict in *Syriana* is related to the main character Prince Nasser played by Alexander Siddiq. Yet this conflict is linked to what I argued previously, about inserting a Patriotic Arab Character (IPAC) to reveal the idea of exploitation. In *Syriana*, Hollywood's enthusiasm for Arabs and Muslims character is conceived in a political connection. This prompted the quest for more nuanced delineations of the circumstance and more credibility of Alexander Siddiq, a Sudanese-British actor. He expresses this inclination in an interview with Aljazeera, a Qatar-based Television station, as a pan of a documentary titled *Hollywood: Casting the Enemy* (Abed Rahim 2010).

The documentary, which was circulated on Aljazeera English, follows the direction of Arabs' depiction in Hollywood films alluding to what he sees as another environment in Hollywood in which the disposition toward Arabs has altogether moved forward (Ibid: 2010). Siddiq says "I am here essentially because a change has occurred" (Ibid). He refers to a few late changes in which Arabs were given a reasonable portrayal. He confirms that some political changes such as 9/11

attacks happened around the world, which requires from Hollywood to give the Arab a reasonable representation.

The exploitation of Alexander Siddiq in *Syriana* does not come randomly, rather it is thoughtful; Gaghan exploits Siddiq who tries to wean his economy off oil dependence and American dependence. Moreover, the director utilizes him to be an educated Saudi prince working to bring democracy from the US to his country, indicating that the Arabs do not know anything about democracy unless the US helps them to achieve it. This idea of “uncivilized Arabs” matches what Bernard Lewis (2001) says in his book *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, primitive Arabs are incapable of decent, civilized, open government. He says the creation of democracy in the Middle East is the US mission (Sulaiman 2009).

The film tries to break the stereotype of Arabs as Shaheen lists *Syriana* as “a film attempts to break away from the stereotype of the Arab” (2008: 39). The characters may be more complicated than the previous

cardboard depictions of the Arab, but the same tropes are at play. *Syriana* gives a remarkable representation of the Arab world a long way from the commonplace, new orientalist implications (Ibid). The film has a tendency to regard the Arab as exploited people even with American oppression. It is reasonable even in its delineation of Hezbollah, though some sensitive portrayals are utilized for emotional reasons instead of political reasons (Sulaiman 2009). I can say, there are no "good" or "bad" people in the film, *Syriana* does not criticize the Muslim world, its people, religion or culture. Rather, it warns the audience to be careful about force moguls, men who consider the death of honest people as reasonable.

Prince Nasser is a static major character who does not change until the end of the film. This character has been exploited to lead the audience to link between the current situation of instability in the Middle East and the US policy. As seen in the film, the US existence in the Middle East is merely to secure oil supply, not for the sake of the people in the Middle East or their future. When Prince Nasser appoints an American economic analyst, Bryan

Woodman (Matt Damon), as his consultant, Woodman is keen to warn Prince Nasser of the plots being woven by the latter's father and brother against him to seize the oil.

Prince Nasser: Your president rings my father and says I've got unemployment in Texas, Kansas, and Washington States. We're stealing out our social programs in order to buy overpriced Airplanes. We owed the Americans but we've repaid that debt.

Woodman (embarrassed and looking to the floor)

Prince Nasser: I accepted a Chinese bid, the highest bid, and suddenly I'm a terrorist. I'm a godless communist.

I argue, from the dialogue, that the film is disparaging of American policy approach in the Middle East and offering a voice to enslave bunches that attempt to oppose misuse of power. In this dialogue, the director represents a stage forward in understanding the talk of social power and authority among predominant groups that are built principally on political interests. Gaghan represents a future in political world by exploiting

Prince Nasser's character to show how money controls the world. James Berardinelli, a film critic, argues that *Syriana's* irony is obvious in the point of the complicity between politics and economy. He comments that the US political decisions are greatly subject to the avarice of large companies: "Government doesn't do what's best for the people; it does what's best for Big Business, with enough occasional misdirection" (Sulaiman 2009: 76). *Syriana*, consequently imparts the influence of American political and financial intervention in the region daily life. Radical Islamic groups are said to have been by this intervention. These components of *Syriana* are intelligently structured. For example, in the film the US force's misuse of one group over another and how commanded groups such as Hezbollah might oppose such misuse of power.

That leads me to the story of Wasim Khan and his friend, Faruq. They exhibit how authority abuse, economic abuse, and social disappointment result in particular types of resistance where the dominant groups are religiously and politically radicalized. For example, in the film, the audience can infer that Wasim

Khan and some of his companions live in hopeless conditions. The converging of two American oil companies caused the dismissal of Wasim and numerous other immigrant workers. Wasim, who communicates in Arabic ineffectively starts to search quickly for any work to keep up his legal status in the nation.

Wasim's urgent requirement for work is exhibited in the accompanying discussion between him and an Arab specialist from the Gulf:-

Arab man: Two of my wife's relatives were deported from this country. Do you know why? Because they have no job.

Wasim: You do need to pay me now. Let me do something for you and then you can decide.

Arab man: I am sorry, but I have a long list of people who want to apply for this job.

This dialog demonstrates Wasim's most extreme endeavours to discover a job with a particular end goal to escape extradition. This collaboration is illustrative of the discourse of social control of a selected group regarding assets over the troubles of poor foreigners. The substance of this dialogue gives a good pattern of how one group that holds

more power, has more benefits or more assets and utilizes the "distinction" as a legitimization to rule and oppress the other.

Prince Nasser's character has been exploited to help the audience understand some Arab cultural values, such as, hospitality, and honour. Film's space and real time was given in *Syriana* to elaborate such values not seen before 9/11. For example, in the following quotation, Prince Nasser shows an unpredictable social cooperation and power relations inside the Arab society.

Your generosity is bigger than the mountain that shades us from the burning sun. My house; however, has grown too small for us. If you could show your generous side by giving us a piece of land, my son can use it to build a house. (*Syriana* 2005)

In *Syriana* the director exploits Prince Nasser's cooperation with Barnes to show the dark side of American policy in the Middle East. The US is determined to secure its control of oil, even to the detriment of their dedicated workers. American business people or huge organizations meanwhile escape because they find themselves unable to control the

Justice Department. Barnes works against his CIA taskmaster after he figures out that he is nothing more than a handy device in the tournament of power and money.

The exploitation in the form of the character manipulation, creates emotional ally between the audience and Prince Nasser. He serves as a pointer of interior political complexities and the power talk inside the Saudi ruling family. The following discussion between Amir Hamid and his two children illustrates this point:-

Amir Hamid: Please sit down. I am tired my son.

Prince Nasser, may you live longer! Who is going to be the emir?

Amir Hamid: Your brother Prince Mash'al. Thank God. I would like to ask you to continue in your position as the foreign minister.

Prince Nasser: You cannot do this. He is barely qualified to run a brothel much less a country.

This dialog represents multi-layered structures of talk showing types of strength that resulted in social treachery and disparity. As a significant aspect of the internal power

in the Saudi ruling family, I see that Prince Nasser challenges his father's power because he is getting old. Also, Prince Nasser try to control his brother as he will be the Crown. Prince Nasser communicates here the foul play and control misuse on two levels. First, as the most seasoned child, he should be the genuine successor after his dad death. Second, his brother does not meet all the requirements for this position due to his weakness and he does not have any direct connection of the American administration.

From the film geographical setting, it is important to say that, *Syriana* avoids presenting the Arab countries in an awful status. Most of the scenes are taken in luxurious locations: palaces, hotels, and upmarket areas. In fact, Bryan calls his wife Amanda to tell her that Beirut is the "Switzerland of the East." Regarding what was said about the sympathy of *Syriana* with the Arabs by showing them as victims of the American imperialism, in my view this is a double injustice. The film is dealing with what is going on in the region with the new oriental conceptions and visions. This is reflected when Prince Nasser declares

to the American consultant his plan to reform his country by legislative amendments taken from his study at Oxford University. Consequently, this gives the impression that the good Arab is the one who is educated in the West and returns to his underdeveloped country with enlightened European thoughts. He, to *Althusser's idea (2006), becomes the imperialist's ideological apparatus.*

The film has a fantastic start by framing the location connection between the three shots, beginning with a TV news report declaring that the Gulf state signs an agreement to supply oil to China. In the first shot, this comes as strategically debacle for Connex, based oil company in the US competing for the same width. The camera then shifts to the second shot using a long lens-framing while, at the same time, a mysterious company called oil Killeen gets a contract to excavate oil in Kazakhstan. From the audio commentary, the audience recognizes that Connex will merge with Killen to secure oil in Kazakhstan and solve its casualties. Before the details of the transaction, the camera turns to show CIA agent Bob Barnmes, appearing in a different cinematic

style. Here the medium focal length close-up shows dirty bearded man who seems to provide two US advanced missiles to the Iranian guy in Iran. He figures out, however, that the Iranians are deceptive and have given the weapons to one of the devotee organizations. At first glance, it seems that this shot is derisive technically. They concern merely about light and dark, and the size and depth of camera movements. Nevertheless, they do not seem to add to the progress of the film. These scenes provide the locative method, which generates a noticeable distortion of perspective and invites the public to the maze of the film, a game of power and money.

The film is full of symbols such as the offensive stereotype of Hezbollah party and the centers of their influence in Beirut. The beautiful city looks as it used to be during the civil war, full of destruction, poverty and armed men filling the streets as if they are preparing for an expected attack. The Gulf woman appears in her traditional image with a commentary in the voice of the analyst Brian (Mat Demon). Brian comments on the country as women wearing black clothes and walking five meters behind

their husbands; thus, reinforcing Arab serotype. Meanwhile, men are wearing clean white clothes, and they are not obliged to work in this hot climate, so they depend on the Asian labour force. The image of Arabs and Muslim is negatively presented: they are lazy, underdeveloped and terrorists. Their rulers are portrayed as collaboration of the political and capitalist regimes in the West.

* CONCLUSION

In summary, the director succeeds in manipulate with the Arab character as embodied by Prince Nasser, who plays the main role in *Syriana*, and represents him in a new form of Arab portrayal in Hollywood films post 9/11. By using the method of Arab character manipulation, new representation has been elaborated in the above section. In that vein, the exploited Arab character is a device that shows the dark side of American policy in the Middle East. In *Syriana*, Prince Nasser's character has been exploited to lead the audience to link the current situation of instability in the Middle East with the US policy. Likewise, the exploited Arab character – being the civil one – evinces that Arabs, even those who contend to be

allies, as untrustworthy, predictably rough, and uncivilized. America's foes, the Arabs, are seen susceptible to corruption and able to use unbelievable violence to fulfil their objectives. This consequently keeps America's dark side of the US hidden. Suffice to say that this dark side was never highlighted in Hollywood films pre 9/11. As Michael Suleiman believed that "Hollywood was periodic as the US administration line by showing the Arabs to be the genuine risk" (2009: 389). The analysis of these films is in accordance with this, yet in the current setting, it also shows that the Arabs to be a real threat, where they can control the world only with their cooperation with the Americans.

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