Journal Homepage: - www.journalijar.com

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED RESEARCH (IJAR)

Article DOI: 10.21474/IJAR01/15931
DOI URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.21474/IJAR01/15931

ISSN NO. 2320-5407

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Representations of the Iraq War in *American Sniper*

Mohamed Ennaciri[1] and Dr. Abdelhak Jebbar[2]

1. Doctoral Student, Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Department of English Studies.
2. Professor, Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Department of English Studies.

Manuscript Info

Manuscript History
Received: 25 October 2022
Final Accepted: 28 November 2022
Published: December 2022

Key words:-
American Sniper, War, Representations, Culture, Muslims, Hollywood, Identity.

Abstract

This study investigates portrayals of the Iraq war in *American Sniper*. The war film encapsulates Hollywood's sensationalist rhetoric following the 9/11 terrorist attacks. In an effort to prime public opinion for armed intervention, and lay the groundwork for policies that were bound to encroach upon civil liberties, Hollywood sought to foster the perception of Muslims as benighted, unruly savages, and promote a narrative that obfuscates the boundaries between patriotism and support for military action. Like many films of its ilk, *American Sniper* echoes a discourse that conflates mainstream Muslims with radical extremists, and decries Americans who call into question the moral legitimacy of the unprecedented measures the Bush Administration introduced in the wake of 9/11. This article draws upon the premise that when the United States emerged as a dominant superpower in the aftermath of World War II, supplanting the once mighty and far-flung French and British empires, a diverse cohort of novelists, journalists and anthropologists sought to resurrect essentialist tropes and perpetuate reductive clichés about Muslims. The film *American Sniper* is replete with familiar misconceptions and derogatory stereotypes, which aim to instill fear, sow distrust and lend credence to a deep-rooted discursive tradition that has for long presented the Other through a warped lens.

Introduction:-

For more than a century, Hollywood has projected Muslims through distorted prisms. Like several other ethnic, racial and religious groups, Muslims and Arabs have been relentlessly maligned and unsparingly derided in a plethora of American motion pictures, film serials and television series. The reasons behind Hollywood's unflattering portraits of the "Other" are multifarious. The prevalent myths and enduring tropes that have come to define minority groups—such as African Americans and Native Americans—have historically fostered an atmosphere of fear and hostility, one that aggravated racial tensions and set the stage for restrictive, discriminatory laws. More than any other group, the Islamic Orient—exotic, foreign and distant—failed to break free from the negative stereotypes and hackneyed clichés that have pervaded American cinema since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Corresponding Author:- Mohamed Ennaciri
Address:- Sultan Moulay Slimane University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities, Department of English Studies.

The suicide, mass-casualty attacks of 9/11 attracted extensive press coverage. Cohorts of political pundits, foreign policy analysts and former government officials flocked to major media outlets to opine on the unfolding national security crisis. The gravity of the attacks provoked a vociferous outcry, prompting world leaders to pledge their support for the nation's battle against terrorism. The mayhem, shock and confusion that the attacks had triggered created a strained, highly charged atmosphere. An anti-Muslim rhetoric, freighted with sinister overtones and racial innuendo, quickly began to gain traction. The terrorist attacks provided endless fodder for the American media. Demands for forceful military retaliation crept into the American political discourse. The public, understandably outraged and grief-stricken, clamored for tough and decisive action. Enlisting the help of the media to justify its swift and aggressive response, the Bush-Cheney administration set off on a course of action that severely eroded its moral standing, fueling geopolitical tensions and unleashing a war that drained the treasury of trillions of taxpayer dollars. The abrogation of civil liberties that accompanied the military response came to define George W. Bush's tempestuous tenure and cast a long shadow on his contentious legacy.

In addition to corporate media, the American film industry also offered the newly elected government a platform to promote its foreign policy agenda. In the wake of 9/11, the silver screen became increasingly saturated with imagery that vilified Muslims. The incendiary rhetoric that the American media deployed in the aftermath of 9/11 instigated a wave of frenzied attacks against Muslim Americans.[1] The polarizing policies that had been enacted sparked intense controversy, but the pressing need to ensure public safety outweighed all other considerations. The contentious policies that had been pushed through had a profound, long-lasting impact on Muslims[2]—the vast majority of whom roundly denounced the terrorist attacks. In an attempt to halt the rise of extremism and foil future terrorist plots, the Bush administration scrambled to enforce a raft of drastic measures—such as launching the NSA warrantless surveillance program, the enhanced interrogation program and the USA Patriot Act[3]. In an effort to dampen the controversy of these measures—which severely curtailed individual freedoms and circumvented the rule of law—Hollywood released films that championed an ends-justify-the-means approach to national security.

Despite its questionable moral underpinnings and devastating human toll, the Bush Administration's military campaign was projected as the sole possible route to keep the homeland safe. To justify the government's decision to invade Iraq, Hollywood constructed apocalyptic scenarios and created ominous plotlines that conflated moderate Muslims with the radical fringe. Indeed, the threat of terrorism—always present and imminent—was a central theme in numerous films that were released after 9/11. To persuade the public to support Washington's war efforts, Hollywood peddled a narrative that incited religious discrimination and exploited patriotic passions. Critics who opposed the government's harsh measures faced fierce, heavy criticism. Keeping in line with the vitriolic discourse that characterized the post-9/11 era, Hollywood churned out motion pictures and television series that amplified blatantly divisive rhetoric. Anti-war sentiment was dismissed as moral cowardice. Sympathy towards the plight of innocent Muslims was viewed as misplaced loyalty. Even more pernicious was the media's effort to lump violent extremists with Americans who took issue with their government's military response to the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

The first part lays out the theoretical foundation for this study. Edward Said's detailed critique of Orientalism exposes the insidious nature of the hegemonic discourse that permeated European scholarship and paved the way for French and British imperial endeavors. Said's deconstruction of the Orientalist literary canon underscores the endurance and potency of essentialist representations. The myths that persisted for centuries about the East were resurrected with the advent of film, giving birth to a vast body of visual work that seared the Orient into the American popular imagination. Despite many of its conceptual shortcomings, this study makes use of some of Said's arguments to uncover the racial overtones embedded in the film *American Sniper* (2014).

[1] See Alsultany, E. (2012). *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11*. New York: New York University Press.
[2] Ibid
[3] See Bush G. W. (2010). *Decision Points* (1st ed.). Crown Publishers.

This work also borrows from Noam Chomsky's arguments in *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda.* The social critic's detractors often dismiss his political views as cynical, if not conspiratorial, but his theories about wartime propaganda offer interesting insights into the close relationship between corporate media and hawkish interventionists. While some of Chomsky's positions are indeed simplistic and at times ideologically rigid, his critical analysis of the warmongering discourse that pervaded American media during the Vietnam War sheds crucial light on the profound impact that propaganda has on public opinion. His work is indeed instrumental in understanding how the media is wielded as a cudgel to suppress anti-war narratives.

The second part of this article examines *American Sniper*'s depiction of the Iraq war. The film exemplifies Hollywood's concerted effort to frame the 2003 military invasion of Iraq as a moral and national security imperative. Despite the bitter backlash that the Iraq war had generated—both at home and abroad, films like *American Sniper* continued to champion the government's military intervention. Instead of redirecting its focus to the ill-fated trajectory of the Bush Administration's foreign policy, Hollywood promoted a discourse that incited more hostility and urged more confrontation. *American Sniper* encapsulates Hollywood's long-standing tradition of producing films that excite jingoistic sentiments and glorify gratuitous military conflicts.

It is important to note that the measures that had been implemented following the 9/11 terrorist attacks drew scathing criticism from human rights activists and watchdog organizations. Undaunted by the backlash, the Bush administration continued to advocate for the necessity of policies that, by many accounts, violated international treaties and contravened federal laws.[4] The chorus of moral voices—led by politicians like Senators Ted Kennedy and Russell Feingold—struggled to moderate the barrage of incendiary rhetoric that the media unleashed post 9/11 to justify the government's actions. Indeed, Hollywood played a pivotal role in associating all Muslims with terrorism, spreading panic and legitimizing measures that targeted people based on their religious affiliation rather than reasonable suspicion.

Part One: Theoretical Framework

1. Edward Said's *Orientalism*

Said's *Orientalism* is widely credited with laying the foundation for postcolonial theory, revolutionizing the humanities, and inspiring a paradigm shift in various academic disciplines such as media studies, politics, history, anthropology, and arts.[5] In essence, Said's magnum opus traces the genesis of Orientalism and explores its complex workings. The Orient, according to Said, is a European creation that evokes haunting landscapes, an odd juxtaposition of romance, exoticism, and eerie memories.[6] As an academic discipline, Said's definition of Orientalism extends to a wide range of fields such as anthropology, sociology, history, and philology. An Orientalist, by extension, is anyone who "teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient.[7]" The academic field of Orientalism, which informed and influenced a diverse array of poets, novelists, political theorists, and imperial administrators, sharpened the distinction between the Orient and the Occident[8]

Said's iconoclastic critique of Orientalism draws on Michel Foucault's theories about discourse, as detailed in *The Archeology of Knowledge* (1969) and *Discipline and Punish* (1975). The French philosopher, Michel Foucault, was among the first scholars to explore the relationship between power and knowledge. Foucault's interest in the history of knowledge has been well established in many of his writings well before shifting focus to questions about power.[9] During the 1970s, his writings, most notably *Discipline and Punish* (1975) and *The History of Sexuality* (1976), postulated that the reconstruction of knowledge was intimately tied to forms of power and domination.[10] Foucault's interest, it should be noted, was not simply to investigate how different branches of knowledge were compiled during different periods of time, but rather to delve into the epistemic and social contexts which conferred legitimacy on them, thereby rendering them intelligible and authoritative.[11] Based on Foucault's archeological study

[4] See Alsultany, E. (2012). *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11*. New York: New York University Press.
[5] Burney, S. (2012). CHAPTER ONE: Orientalism: The Making of the Other. *Counterpoints*, 417, 23-39. p. 23.
[6] Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Random House. p: 1
[7] Ibid, p.2
[8] Ibid, pp: 2-3
[9]See Gutting, G. (2006). *The Cambridge Companion to: Foucault*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid.

of knowledge and its relation to power, Said argues that "knowledge of subject races or Orientals is what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires knowledge and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control.[12]" Foucault's theory that discourse constructs "truth," produces systems of representations and regulates social practices underscores the inextricable relationship and interdependency between knowledge and power. It is within this Foucauldian framework that Said seeks to deconstruct Orientalism. "My contention," he writes, "is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient.[13]"

The rivalry between France and Britain reached its zenith in the nineteenth century, as the two empires competed to widen their spheres of influence and expand their territorial control, especially in the Near East, where Islam was predominant. It was during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Said maintains, that Orientalism metamorphosed from a body of literary and scholarly texts into an imperialist institution.[14] This metamorphosis was enabled and accelerated by an inexorable European expansion. The French and British imperial powers, however, suffered a precipitous decline following World War II. As they no longer commanded the awesome military might and enormous political influence they once exerted, the United States emerged as a new military and economic superpower, replacing the crumbling empires and inheriting "a vast web of interests … [a] massive, quasi-material knowledge stored in the annals of modern European Orientalism.[15]" Following in the footsteps of their European predecessors, representations of Arabs borrowed heavily from a rich, familiar reservoir. American literature and media reduced the Islamic Orient to "a camel-riding nomad … an accepted caricature as the embodiment of incompetence and easy defeat.[16]"

Said suggests that following the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, slander and ridicule of Arabs appeared to pervade American media. Cartoons consistently portrayed Arabs as mustachioed, hook-nosed sheiks lurking behind gasoline pumps.[17] Their leer and malice were especially accentuated to indicate that the vicissitudes of oil markets and acute gas shortages, which impacted the US economy in the 1970s, were to blame entirely on Arabs. Their moral corruption rendered their access to the enormous reserves of oil illegitimate and unjust. The wealth Arabs accrued seemed even more obscene and undeserving after they appeared to have joined forces to strain the US economy. "The question most often asked," Said recalls, "is why such people as the Arabs are entitled to keep the developed (free, democratic, moral) world threatened.[18]" In addition to cartoons, Said argues— albeit in passing—that films perpetuate the same reductive generalizations and clichés about Arabs and Muslims:

> In the films and television the Arab is associated either with lechery or bloodthirsty dishonesty. He appears as an oversexed degenerate, capable, it is true, of cleverly devious intrigues, but essentially sadistic treacherous, low, slave trader, camel driver, moneychanger, colorful scoundrel: these are some traditional Arab roles in the cinema. The Arab leader (of marauders, pirates, "native" insurgents) can often be seen snarling as the captured Western hero and the blond girl (both of them steeped in wholesomeness). "My men are going to kill you, but –they like to amuse themselves before." He leers suggestively as he speaks. …the Arab is always shown in large numbers. No individuality, no personal characteristics or experiences. Most of the pictures represent mass rage and misery, or irrational (hence hopelessly eccentric) gestures. Lurking behind all these images is the menace of Jihad. Consequence: a fear that the Muslims (or Arabs) will take over the world.[19]

[12] Said, E. W. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Random House. p.36.
[13] Ibid. p.3.
[14] Ibid, p. 95.
[15] Ibid, p. 285
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid, p.285-286
[18] Ibid 286
[19] Ibid, p. 286-287.

Indeed, as Said points out in the final section of his critique, Orientalism has considerable and far-reaching implications for the Arab world. The US engagement with the Middle East elevated experts, like Bernard Lewis, whose rhetoric on the Muslim world has been consistently imbued with Orientalist assumptions[20].

2. Chomsky: *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*

Noam Chomsky's book *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda* (1991) examines the impact propaganda has on public perception, especially during times of political upheaval and national discord. Chomsky maintains that the prevailing and operative framework for democracy dictates that the flow of information be rigidly regulated and strictly controlled.[21] Furthermore, he contends that the political establishment consistently employs scaremongering tactics and fronts public relations campaigns to tamp down dissent and prompt public support for military action. "To whip them up," he writes, "you have to frighten them.[22]" The Vietnam War, for instance, illustrates the serious and far-reaching effects of state-sponsored propaganda. In an effort to suppress political dissidence and respond to the mounting public criticism of the U.S. military intervention in Vietnam in the second half of the twentieth century, national media sought to discredit peace movements and disparage activists who questioned the legitimacy of the war.

One of the extraordinary achievements of state propaganda is that it prompts individuals to question their own judgement. If appropriately utilized, propaganda can rein in public skepticism and dissuade people from sharing their views, which they erroneously perceive as unorthodox and unpopular, thus unlikely to have any real, meaningful impact.[23] Indeed, as evidenced by the Vietnam War, the media has repeatedly demonstrated its unique ability to manufacture political attitudes and work in lockstep with war hawks to ensure that any potential opposition is kept at bay. In times of turmoil, fealty to the government is often regarded, indeed framed, as an affirmation of one's patriotism. Chomsky's work shines a light on the long-standing relationship between media and politics. This article draws upon his contention that propaganda plays a fundamental role in cultivating uniformity of thought and quelling public skepticism. His critical analysis of media provides revealing insights into Hollywood's anti- Muslim discourse, especially in the wake of 9/11, a turbulent period that saw an outbreak of racial animus and a spike in hate crimes. Indeed, his analysis of the media's coverage of the Vietnam War reveals striking parallels to the alarmist rhetoric that Hollywood deployed in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

Literature Review:

Influenced by Edward Said's 1978 critique of Orientalism, Jack Shaheen published a compendium of more than a thousand American films that mischaracterized Arabs and Muslims from 1896 to 2000. Shaheen's work, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, posits that misrepresentations of Arabs date back to the early days of silent films. For more than a century, cinematic portrayals of Arabs did very little to dispel the cultural misconceptions that persisted in Orientalist writings. In fact, Hollywood continued to perpetuate damaging stereotypes and reinforce familiar myths about Arabs and their cultures well into the 21st century. Shaheen's critical examination revealed that the great majority of films featuring Arabs demonstrated a strong, systematic bias,

[20] Ibid, 321.
[21] Chomsky, N. (2002, 2nd edition). *Media Control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*. New York: Seven Stories. P. 10
[22] Ibid, p. 30
[23]Ibid, pp. 58-59
24Ibid, p. 60

confirming ingrained prejudices and promoting cliché-ridden narratives that have gone unchallenged for centuries. In his lengthy, comprehensive review of American cinema, Shaheen attempts to explore the underlying reasons behind the cultural and racial stereotypes that have been affixed to Arabs on screen for several decades. His work also draws attention to Hollywood's profound impact on shaping narratives and distorting perceptions of the "Other."

Shaheen's study covers hundreds of motion pictures. The feature-length films he probes mostly portray Arabs as the embodiment of evil, making no distinction between men, women, and children. The daunting, large-scale project Shaheen undertook was intended to "expose an injustice: cinema's systematic, pervasive, and unapologetic degradation and dehumanization of a people.[25]" To this end, the author surveys virtually every motion picture featuring Arabs from Hollywood's inception to 2000. Throughout its history, Hollywood's one-dimensional, stereotypical representation of Arabs has been too entrenched to allow for nuanced, complex portrayals. Despite the great historical events that unfolded throughout the 20th century, the myths surrounding Arabs only gained in strength and popularity. Shaheen writes:

> Much has happened since 1896 –women's suffrage, the Great Depression, the civil rights movements, two world wars, the Korean, Vietnam, and Gulf wars, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. Throughout it all, Hollywood's caricature of the Arab has prowled the silver screen. He is there to this day –repulsive and unrepresentative as ever. … Arabs are brute murderers, sleazy rapists, religious fanatics, oil-rich dimwits, and abusers of women. "They [the Arabs] all look alike to me," quips the American heroin in the movie *The Sheik Steps Out* (1937). "All Arabs look alike to me," admits the protagonist in *Commando* (1968). Decades later, nothing has changed. Quips the US Ambassador in *Hostage* (1986), "I can't tell one [Arab] from another. Wrapped in those bed sheets they all look the same to me." In Hollywood's films, they certainly do.[26]

It is essential to underline the remarkable similarities between depictions of Arabs in Hollywood and Jews in German cinema, particularly during World War II. Because Arabs and Jews are Semites, it is hardly surprising that their characterization on screen followed strikingly familiar patterns. The Third Reich's ethnic cleansing campaign against the Jewry was accompanied by of a string of films that sought to justify the pogrom and lend a veneer of credibility to the state's anti-Semitic narrative. Shaheen cites films such as *Robert and Bertram* (1939), Die *Rothschilds Aktien von Waterloo* (1940), *Der Ewige* Jude (1940), and *Jud Süss* (1940)[27] as some of the most notable cinematic productions that reveal obvious parallels between Jewish and Arab characters. Lechery, depravity, and unbridled greed are among the defining features that distinguish the Semites. Shaheen states:

> Hollywood's image of hook-nosed, robed Arabs parallels the image of Jews in Nazi-inspired movies. … In the past, Jews [like Arabs] were projected as the "other –depraved and predatory money-grubbers who seek world domination, worship a different God, and kill innocents. Nazi propaganda also presented the lecherous Jew slinking in the shadows, scheming to snare the blond Aryan virgin. Yesterday's Shylocks resemble today's hook-nosed Sheikhs[28].

After World War II, anti-Semitic portrayals faded away from the silver screen, as it was no longer acceptable to dehumanize or disparage Jews. In the wake of the untold suffering that was inflicted on the Jewry in Nazi- occupied Europe, the West came to the sobering realization that tolerating any rhetoric that targets minorities can lead to catastrophic consequences. However, while Jews were largely spared negative portrayals on television post World War II, Arabs were afforded no such courtesy.

Shaheen stresses that it is not his intention to lobby for a sympathetic or flattering portrayal of all Arabs in American cinema. He recognizes that, like any other given group, Muslims and Arabs can, indeed have, committed

[25]Shaheen, J. G. (2015). Reel *bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. Northampton, Massachusetts: Interlink Publishing group. P. 7
[26] Ibid. p.8
[27] Ibid, p. 11
[28] Ibid. p. 11-12

horrific atrocities. Obviously, filmmakers are within their rights to explore and capture the sinister side of extreme, warped ideologies on screen. Cultures, practices, and peoples should not be immune to scrutiny or exempt from criticism. Ideally, filmmakers ought to be allowed to exercise their creative freedom without the constraints of censorship. However, the denigration and demonization of an entire religious, ethnic or national group is not only unjust, but also dangerous and insidious. Shaheen explains:

> I am not saying an Arab should never be portrayed as the villain. What I am saying is that almost all Hollywood depictions of Arabs are bad ones. This is a grave injustice. Repetitious and negative images of the reel Arab literally sustain adverse portraits across generations. The fact is that for more than a century produces have tarred an entire group of people with the same sinister brush. Hundreds of movies reveal Western protagonists spewing out unrelenting barrages of uncontested slurs, calling Arabs: "assholes," "bastards," camel-dicks," "pigs," "devil-worshippers," "jackals," "rats," "rag-heads," "towel-heads," "scum-buckets," "sons-of-dogs," "buzzards of the jungle," "sons-of-whores," "sons-of-unnamed goats," and "sons-of-she-camels. … other movies contain the word "Ayrab," a vulgar Hollywood epithet for Arab that is comparable to dago, greaser, kike, nigger, and gook.[29]

Jack Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs* was followed by another critique in 2008 entitled *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11.* The book examines roughly 100 films released after 9/11. As the title indicates, Shaheen concludes that the majority of films he reviewed condemned Arabs. Screen representations of Arabs post-9/11 undergirded the assumption that *they* are all guilty. However, it should be noted that Shaheen's survey also concludes that a total of 29 motion pictures cast Arabs and Arab Americans in refreshingly favorable terms[30]. Shaheen remarks that the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict and the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq brought about a representational transformation of Arabs in American cinema. The bumbling oil sheiks, and slave-owning, camel-riding nomads Hollywood often featured in its films were replaced by raving Islamic fundamentalists seeking to wreak havoc on the United States[31].

Shaheen notes that the reassuring speeches President Bush had delivered after 9/11 were soon overshadowed by a rancorous narrative—advanced by well-known politicians such as Tom Tancredo, Virgil Goode, Peter T. King, Sam Brownback, and Donald Rumsfeld—that solidified outrageous "stereotypes that historically have damaged an entire people.[32]" The president's infamous comparison of the war on terror to the crusade conjured up memories of Christian armies invading the Holy Land in the High Middle Ages[33]. In addition to politicians, several religious leaders, authors, and journalists also adopted dog-whistle tactics to fan the flames of racial and religious resentment. Shaheen observes:

> Publishers released books such as *Antichrist: Islam's awaited Messiah, Terrorist, Allah's Torch, Allah's Scorpion, Allah's Bomb,* and *Allah's Sword.* Author Robert Spencer said Muslims were threatening Catholics … Syndicated columnist Mona Charen wrote: "Every Middle-Eastern looking truck driver should be pulled over and questioned wherever he may be in the United States… On Fox's *Beltway Boys*, Fred Barnes advocated profiling: "If people are of Middle Eastern extraction," he said, they "should be treated a little differently, just for the security of the United States. … On C-SPAN, Ann Coulter declared: "We need to invade their countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity. … Several Evangelical Christians labeled Islam as evil. … Jerry vines said the Prophet Mohammed was a "demon-possessed pedophile." …

29 Ibid, 17
30 Shaheen, J. G. (2008). *Guilty: Hollywood's verdict on Arabs after 9/11*. Northampton, Mass: Olive Branch Press. P. XV
31 Ibid, P,XV- XVI
32 Ibid, P. 4
33 Ibid.

> Reverend David Clippard said "The Muslims … are after your daughters… if you don't convert, your head comes off[34]"

In an effort to shed light on Hollywood's insidious narrative post-9/11, Shaheen examines the portrayal of Muslim clerics—or Imams— in the popular TV show *Criminal Minds* (2007). The show's attempt to paint Imams as preachers of hate and recruiters of terrorists stands in marked contrast to the commendable role Muslim-Americans play in combatting terrorism. Shaheen references Virginia's Imam Mohamed Magid, who led the funeral of two young Muslims who died in the 9/11 terrorist attacks. His words of comfort to the bereaved family challenge Hollywood's misrepresentation of Islam: "the terrorists who kill in the name of Islam," Imam Magid says solemnly, "claim they are the martyrs… But the victims are the martyrs… The terrorists are the murderous.[35]" Indeed, misrepresentations of Muslims in Hollywood fuel Islamophobia and feed religious animosity. The perception that mosques are breeding grounds for terrorism has led to numerous acts of wanton vandalism. Across the United States and Europe, evening prayers have been interrupted, racist graffiti and Nazi swastikas have been scribbled over the walls of several mosques, and even more disturbingly, a frozen pig's head was thrown inside a mosque in Portland, Maine[36]. These egregious acts are the direct result of a noxious rhetoric that pits the East against the West, Islam against Christianity.

Evelyn Alsultany's 2012 book, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media*, argues that U.S television saw a proliferation of flattering depictions of Arabs and Muslims after 9/11[37]. In a stark departure from Hollywood's stereotypical representations, television series such as *The Practice, Boston Public, Law & Order SVU, NYPD Blue,* and *The Guardian* portrayed Arab and Muslim Americans as hardworking patriots[38]. This shift was accompanied by a flurry of speeches—extemporaneous and scripted alike—then-President Bush delivered in the wake of 9/11, which assured Muslims in the United States and around the world that the government intended to target only those responsible for the terrorist attacks. Bush stressed that the radical Muslims who carried out the attacks were a fringe group that did not represent the Islamic faith. By and large, the administration's preliminary response took great pains to assuage fears of a backlash against Muslims and diffuse the racial and religious tensions that threatened to fray the fabric of American communities. The government and media appeared cautious not to create a narrative that projected Islam as a threat to national security.

The surprisingly positive representations of Muslims and Arabs in American media in the days and months following 9/11 appeared to herald a new era of multicultural sensitivity and racial progress. However, "such optimism," Alsutany argues, "was quickly tempered … workplace discrimination, bias incidents, and airline discrimination targeting Arab and Muslim Americans increased exponentially.[39]" The harsh measures the U.S. government introduced in the turbulent aftermath of 9/11 exacted an enormous toll on innocent Arab and Muslim Americans who were forced to grapple with grim new realities. Alsultany maintains that fear, exclusion, self-censorship, psychological distress, social anxiety, and self-deportation are some of the post-9/11 effects reported by Arab and Muslim Americans.[40] The measures and policies put in place by the Bush administration quickly gave way to a climate of paranoia, suspicion, and rancor.

Television series like *24* and *Sleeper Cell* employed various strategies to create the impression that the US is no longer beset by racial discord. Alsultany refers to these laudatory portrayals as simplified complex representations. She argues that although they are positive, such representations have no meaningful impact on the

[34] Ibid, P. 5-6
[35] Ibid, P.9
[36] Ibid, P. 10
[37] Alsultany, E. (2012). *Arabs and Muslims in the media: Race and Representation after 9/11*. New York: New York University Press. P.1
[38] Ibid, P.3
[39]Ibid, P.4
[40]Ibid, P.5
[41]Ibid, Pp. 7-12

prevailing discourse about Arabs and Muslims[42]. Some of the representational strategies television screenwriters employ—in an effort to construct narratives that highlight racial diversity—include showing sympathy for the plight of Arabs and Muslim Americans, featuring characters that exhibit acts of patriotism, and fictionalizing the names of countries that support or breed terrorism[43]. "[These] strategies," the author suggests, "… are akin to a Band-Aid over a still-festering wound. They give the impression of comfort, perhaps even of cure, but the fundamental problem remains.[44]"

Part Two: Representations of the Iraq War in *American Sniper*

In *American Sniper*, a historical war drama film directed by Clint Eastwood, Chris Kyle is extolled as the deadliest sniper in the history of U.S. military, boasting a record-breaking number of 160 confirmed kills in Iraq. He is portrayed as eerily unflappable, methodical, and intent on warding off the never-ending attacks Iraqi insurgents launch against the Marines he is entrusted to protect. The motion picture is loosely based on Chris Kyle's memoir, which chronicles his four combat tours in Operation Iraqi Freedom. His surgical marksmanship and notable military successes earned him a revered, unrivaled reputation and catapulted him to an almost mythical, folk-hero stature.

The opening sequence of the film carries obvious political and religious overtones. As the logo of the studio company—Warner Bros. Picture—is plastered on screen at the beginning of the motion picture, the Islamic call to prayer, also known as adhan, can be heard in the distance. From the outset, the audience is advised that the events about to unfold take place in a Muslim country. When the call to prayer dies down, a military convoy lumbers along a bumpy, ravaged road, and the camera shifts to show an uninviting, war-stricken terrain. The choice to display dozens of U.S. troops marching alongside tanks and Humvees immediately after the Islamic call to prayer is meant to highlight the raging military conflict and serve to presage the violence and chaos we later see engulfing the country.

As Kyle scopes out the neighborhood, his sniper rifle rests upon a military-aged man watching the convoy and speaking to an unidentified person on the phone. Kyle's commanding officer advises him to neutralize the man if he suspects that he is reporting troop movement. Suddenly, the man flees the house, and the camera shifts to show a black-clad woman emerging from a house and marching in lockstep with her child towards the military convoy. The woman proceeds to hand an RKG-3 anti-tank grenade, which she was hiding beneath her flowing cloak, to her child, who grabs it and runs towards the military convoy. Abruptly, the film cuts to a flashback of a young Kyle. The flashback scenes highlight the enormous impact Kyle's formative years of childhood had on his moral precept and life's trajectory.

Later, the film cuts back to the opening sequence, showing the child carrying the grenade and sprinting towards the marine convoy. Before he could reach his target, Kyle kills him. Seeing her child's lifeless body on the ground, the mother scrambles to pick up the bomb and wildly runs towards the marines. Again, Kyle swiftly—and almost mechanically—shoots her dead. This scene is particularly interesting in that it focuses solely on the moral dilemma Kyle faces as he is forced to execute the mother and her child before they can harm his fellow service members. After the threat is eliminated, the film does not venture to explain why the mother sacrificed her own child. This scene suggests that any endeavor to explore the root of terrorism is an exercise in futility since all Muslims are capable of such depraved acts. The absence of ordinary, peaceful Muslims in the film implies that the mother's character is an archetype, not an aberration. "The reason for these [terrorist] attempts," Alsultany writes, "are never fully explained… we don't need a reason—isn't terrorism what Arabs and/or Muslims do, after all? [45]" Evidently, there is no moral, political or religious justification for terrorism. Any ideology that thrives on religious intolerance and promotes indiscriminate violence is dangerous and must be vehemently confronted. However, Hollywood's systematic misrepresentation of Muslims—*all Muslims*—reinforces the fallacious narrative that Islam advocates terrorism. This pernicious vilification stokes enmity and fuels gratuitous military conflicts.

[42]Ibid, P. 21
[43]Ibid, P. 21-26
[44]Ibid, P. 28
[45] Alsultany, E. (2012). *Arabs and Muslims in the media: Race and Representation after 9/11.* New York: New York University Press. P.3

The film's negative portrayal of Arab children is meant to underscore the mounting danger that Arabs poses to the values and ideals of the West. The deep and implacable enmity that Arabs harbor towards the United States, the film inaccurately suggests, permeates their societies regardless of age or gender. This misrepresentation lends credence to a fear-mongering discourse that frames the Arab as an ever-present threat to American national security. They are to be regarded with distrust and wariness. Throughout the film, almost every single Iraqi is perceived as a conniving, calculating enemy, constantly lurking around in the shadows in anticipation for a chance to harm American soldiers. Indeed, the Arab is so dwarfed that even though the events mostly take place in Iraq, rarely are the locals allowed to voice their concerns. Their plight is peripheral, their perspective is eclipsed, and their aspirations are dismissed.

As the film progresses, the audience is introduced to a notorious terrorist, a rival sniper named Mustafa. He is a Syrian Olympic gold medalist, an insurgent sharpshooter infamous for making nearly impossible long-range shots. The film takes the liberty to exaggerate the role of the Syrian sniper in the Iraq war. While Kyle's memoir makes fleeting reference to Mustafa, he appears, time and again, in the film as a villain that stands in sharp contrast to Kyle. In his memoir[46], Kyle writes only one paragraph about the Iraqi sniper, asserting that he has never crossed paths with him, much less killed him, as the film inaccurately claims. Everything we come to learn about Mustafa is concocted to create a charged atmosphere that adds to the intensity of the film. It is interesting to note that while the memoir's brief account of Mustafa refers to him as an Iraqi, the film portrays him as a Syrian Olympic gold medalist. This misrepresentation serves to blur the lines of nationality and geographical boundaries. Indeed, it does not make much of a difference if you are an Iraqi child, a woman, or a Syrian professional athlete; simply being Arab carries a presumption of guilt.

In addition to Mustafa, two other villains appear in the film: Sheikh Al-Obodi, and the Butcher. It is important to examine the significance of the names assigned to the two villains. The word Sheikh, it should be noted, is an honorific title that indicates nobility and is usually reserved for senior knowledgeable Muslim clerics. The choice to attach this noble title to an Iraqi villain, whose greed foils the capture of one of the most notorious terrorists, shows that even the social and religious elite are not above suspicion. Sheikh Al-Obodi desecrates his honorific title when he blackmails the marines who are dispatched to put an end to the suffering the Butcher inflicts on his fellow Iraqis. This scene highlights the onerous task placed on the shoulders of American troops who strive to liberate the country from the tightening vise of terrorism, but are faced with ungrateful, self-serving natives who frustrate their efforts and make their mission all the more dangerous.

While the name "Sheikh Al-Obodi" is assigned to a character who brings disgrace to the noble title bestowed upon him, the sobriquet "the Butcher" is meant to reflect the escalating, senseless violence the country is caught in. The Butcher earned notoriety for meting out gruesome punishment against locals who are suspected of cooperating with the Americans. The brutal methods he employs to keep the locals in check culminate in his use of a power drill to savagely torture and eventually kill Sheikh Al-Obodi's young son after he discovers that he has been cooperating with the marines. While the viewer might sympathize with the child's slow and agonizing death, the unflattering depiction of Sheikh Al-Obodi, who also meets his demise violently at the hands of the Butcher, does not allow for much commiseration.

It is interesting to note that films such as *American Sniper* contribute to inflaming nationalistic passions and fueling an outpouring of blind jingoistic fervor, which consequently leads to the suppression of unorthodox views and stigmatization of unconventional thinking. Following the release of *American Sniper*, certain media outlets capitalized on Kyle's black-and-white account to reinforce the narrative that the wars the US engages in, however morally ambiguous or rudderless they may appear, are key to safeguarding national security. The American writer Lindy West maintains that "much of the US right wing appears to have seized upon American Sniper with similarly shallow comprehension—treating it with the same unconsidered, rah-rah reverence that they would the national anthem or the flag itself."[47] The film, which was released a decade after the military invasion of Iraq, does not fault

[46] See Kyle, C (2012). *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in US Military History*. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.

[47] Lindy West. (Jan 6, 2015). "The real American Sniper was a hate-filled killer. Why are simplistic patriots treating him as a hero?"*The Guardian.*

the Bush administration for its ill-informed decision to go to war with a country that had no connection with the tragic events of 9/11. American film critic David Edelstein maintains that *American Sniper* makes "no indication that the two events—9/11 and the Iraq invasion—have been yoked together by unscrupulous politicians who don't have a clue what lies in store for American soldiers.[48]" Furthermore, the film makes no mention of the baseless claim that Iraq possessed and refused to relinquish weapons of mass destruction. Also conveniently left out is the unprecedented number of warring factions that the conflict unleashed, and the meteoric rise of terrorist organizations which continue to convulse the country.

The film's depiction of Kyle's childhood is especially revealing. His frequent interactions with his father serve as a model for other parents to emulate. The film underscores the profound and indelible impact religion had on Kyle and his brother. Their father impressed upon them, from an early age, to hold "God, country and family" in the highest regard. The film portrays the Kyles as punctilious and devout. Their relationship with the Church is unbreakable. As a child, Kyle never shied away from defending his brother from bullies. His upstanding character and fiercely protective nature are particularly highlighted when he is deployed to Iraq. The film's affectionate portrayal of Kyle's childhood stands in striking contrast to that of Iraqis. While the menacingly veiled, deranged mother thrusts her child to his tragic, untimely death, Chris' father inculcates a sense of duty and patriotism into his sons.

Kyle's determination to put the country before his familial obligations is a testament to his unyielding patriotism. Every time he wishes to return to the battlefield, his wife opposes him. "I have to serve my country," he protests when his wife, Taya, reminds him that their family ought to take precedence over his other commitments. Kyle makes it clear that his absolute allegiance is to the country he pledged to protect. This sentiment is reinforced later in the film when he runs into his younger brother, Jeff, on an Iraqi tarmac. Combat-fatigued and anxious to return home, Jeff mutters, "fuck this place." Upon hearing his brother's resigned, defeatist attitude towards the war, Kyle recoils in disbelief. The very thought that Jeff, who is a U.S. marine, would shy away from his duty to fight for his country fills Kyle with shock and horror.

It is important to examine the backlash the film generated upon its release. Interestingly, critics, who dared undermine the pro-war narrative the film propagates, have been framed as anti-American. To legitimize the war-mongering discourse the film promotes, prominent talk show hosts and veteran politicians lambasted critics who used Kyle's account to take aim at U.S. foreign military adventures. Former Alaska governor and Republican vice-presidential nominee Sarah Palin, for instance, issued a statement that harshly condemned Kyle's critics:

> God bless our troops, especially our snipers. Hollywood leftists: while caressing shiny plastic trophies you exchange among one another while spitting on the graves of freedom fighters who allow you to do what you do, just realize the rest of America knows you're not fit to shine Chris Kyle's combat boots.[49]

In addition to Sarah Palin's blistering criticism of the left's objections to the film's glorification of the war, the Parents Television Council, whose professed mission is to protect children and families from graphic violence in the media, cast aspersions on the film's critics. The advocacy group's communication director Dan Isett chastised the entertainment industry for their "callous hypocrisy[50]." Hollywood, he asserts, is "intellectually dishonest to decry the impact of one film for its violence and 'glorification of a killer' while streaming enormous amounts of violent content into every living room in the country.[51]"

The media's reaction to blockbuster films set in the Middle East is indeed revealing. Seemingly, not only do pro-war media outlets validate the stereotypes Hollywood thrusts upon Arabs, but they also dismiss any views that may challenge their hawkish rhetoric as unpatriotic. Indeed, the role that mass media—in most of its forms—plays in driving interventionist narratives is indispensable. Rallying the public behind military action or eliciting support for unpopular policies often warrant considerable convincing. Ultimately, whether or not the public stands behind their government—especially in matters that may venture into morally dubious territory—is largely contingent upon how far the media succeeds in crafting narratives that are potent and compelling.

Conclusion:

More than twenty years have passed since the United States came under attack from a group of radical extremists. The misconceptions that hounded mainstream Muslims in the wake of 9/11, however, still endure to this day. One of the most injurious stereotypes that has been associated with Arabs and Muslims on screen is terrorism. To overcome this malicious and damaging charge, Muslims must speak out more forcefully against any acts of terror perpetrated in their name. The development of a counter-narrative is also pivotal to subverting Hollywood's denigration of Muslims. Like Black and Native American filmmakers who were able to challenge Hollywood's unjust portrayals, Muslim directors, producers, scriptwriters and actors have a responsibility to pursue film projects that foster pride in their heritage and celebrate their cultures. Hollywood's relentless vilification of Muslims can only be curtailed if filmmakers recognize the great damage that negative stereotypes cause and venture to craft stories that provide nuanced, humane and sympathetic portraits.

Critics also have an obligation to call out films that caricature Muslims and their traditions. With the rise of political correctness in the United States, studio companies are taking great pains to make films that elevate minorities rather than alienate or offend their sensibilities. Fears of public backlash—or worse boycott—have forced the American film industry to tone down its rhetoric. With the exception of Muslims, films that disparage religious, ethnic, racial and sexual minorities are no longer tolerated. Regrettably, while Hollywood rectified its injustices against other groups, it continues to evade scrutiny for its negative portrayals of Muslims.

To break out of Hollywood's reductive stereotypes, Muslims around the world ought to be more outspoken in their demands for fair and balanced depictions on screen. The United States is home to millions of Muslims[53]—some of whom are elected officials, accomplished entrepreneurs, and even NASA astronauts. Their stories are seldom told, their achievements rarely highlighted. Hollywood's Muslims are mostly projected as sadistic rapists or violent extremists. Considering the essential role Hollywood plays in promoting xenophobic tropes, it is incumbent upon Muslims—especially Muslim Americans—to be more critical of films that demonize their religion and belittle their cultures.

It is worth noting that Hollywood's depiction of Muslims as stock terrorists alienates moderate Muslims—who categorically reject the terrorists' perverted ideology—and takes away from the indispensable role they play in promoting peace and advocating religious tolerance. Regrettably, the vast majority of Muslims who denounce terrorism and reject extremism are sorely underrepresented—if represented at all—on screen. Hollywood's determined attempts to project all Muslins as a danger to US national security reinforce already sharp divisions and foster a climate of distrust and intolerance.

To some degree, Black and Indigenous Americans—two of the most vilified ethnic minorities on screen—have been able to push Hollywood to alter its demeaning representations. Their gains—albeit modest—can serve as a blueprint to dismantling Hollywood's stereotypical portrayals of Muslims. Indeed, in today's environment, filmmakers cannot afford to make films that are racist—unless they are aimed at Muslims. The 1939 epic film*, Gone With the Wind*, for instance, has been recently removed from streaming services because of its romanticization of slavery and glorification of the Lost Cause of the Confederacy. HBO Max, an American streaming service owned by Warner Bros. Discovery, for instance, was compelled to remove the Oscar-winning film in response to protests from

[52] See Hannity's January 23, 2015 Fox News interview "Patriotism under Attack" with retired U.S. Army Ranger Sean Parnell and retired U.S. Navy SEAL Jason Redman.

[53] According to the Religion Consensus, some 4.45 million Muslims live in the United States as of 2020. See their 2020 press release.

the African American community.[54] As evidenced by the past few years, only persistent and vociferous demands for change can jolt Hollywood into action.

It is important to emphasize that the responsibility of challenging Hollywood's Islamophobic narrative does not only rest with Arabs and Muslims, but also extends to anyone with an unwavering moral compass. When the celebrated American actor, Marlin Brando, was nominated for an Oscar in 1973 for his role in *The Godfather* (1972), he sent Sacheen Littlefeather—the Native American civil rights activist—to represent him. In a jarring and impassioned speech[55] that the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences endeavored to suppress, Littlefeather declined the Oscar on Brando's behalf, relaying his strong objections to Hollywood's misrepresentations of Native Americans. On a night that was slated to celebrate the American film industry, Brando did not only turn down one of the most coveted and prestigious awards, but also used their platform to call attention to Hollywood's injustice against Native Americans.

For far too long, Hollywood has enjoyed immunity for its vilification of Muslims. Pressing the film industry to correct its bias against Muslims is by no means an easy undertaking. Indeed, the long-standing tradition of prevalent stereotypes, which have gone unaddressed for many decades, cannot be easily overturned. However, it is important to reiterate that allowing Hollywood free rein in its mistreatment of Muslims is far too dangerous. If history offers any lessons, it is that the dangers of hateful speech and incendiary rhetoric are too dire to be ignored. The time is long overdue for Muslims to lobby for an end to Hollywood's sweeping, insidious misrepresentations.

[54] See Victor, D (2020, June 10). HBO Max Pulls 'Gone with the Wind,' Citing Racist Depictions. *The New York Times*. See also Gone with the Wind Removed from HBO Max (2020, June 10). *BBC.*

[55] See Sacheen Littlefeather's speech at the 45th Academy Awards ceremony, which was held on March 27, 1973.

Works Cited:-

1. Alsultany, E. (2012). *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11*. New York: New York University Press.
2. Burney, S. (2012). CHAPTER ONE: Orientalism: The Making of the Other. *Counterpoints*, 417, 23-39.
3. Bush G. W. (2010). *Decision Points* (1st ed.). Crown Publishers.
4. Chomsky, N. (2002, 2nd edition). *Media control: The Spectacular Achievements of Propaganda*. New York: Seven Stories.
5. David, E. (December 29, 2014). "Clint Eastwood Turns *American Sniper* into a Republican Platform Movie.". *Issue of New York Magazine.*
6. Gutting, G. (2006). *The Cambridge companion to Foucault.* Cambridge: Cambridge university press.
7. Keith Bernstein (January 1, 2015) "Parents Television Council Slams Hollywood Critics of 'American Sniper' for "Callous Hypocrisy."" *Hollywood Reporter*. Retrieved January 15, 2019.
8. Kyle, C (2012). *American Sniper: The Autobiography of the Most Lethal Sniper in US Military History.* New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
9. Lindy West. (Jan 6, 2015). "The real American Sniper was a hate-filled killer. Why are simplistic patriots treating him as a hero?" *The Guardian*.
10. Said, E. W. (1979). Orientalism. New York: Random House.
11. Shaheen, J. G. (2008). *Guilty: Hollywood's verdict on Arabs after 9/11.* Northampton, Mass: Olive Branch Press.
12. Shaheen, J. G. (2015). *Reel bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. Northampton, Massachusetts: Interlink Publishing group.
13. Tony Lee (January 19, 2015) "Sarah Palin: "Hollywood Leftists 'Not Fit to Shine Chris Kyle's Combat Boots'" *Breitbart*. Retrieved December24, 2019.