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MUSLIMS DEPICTION IN HOLLYWOOD MOVIES: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The September 11 attacks have dramatically shifted the spotlight of mainstream media and Cinema to Muslims in covering their socio-cultural norms. The Cinema developed a new theme of War films that usually projects Muslims as adversaries. As a result, the negative sentiments regarding Muslims and Islam have risen significantly in the Western world. In this researcher, we analyzed Hollywood films released after 9/11 using standard content analysis. In this qualitative research, we explored several facets of Muslim identity, including those related to depictions of Muslims. The findings reveal that Hollywood movies mainly represented Muslims as antagonistic to Western values concerning women's rights, intolerance, and oppression. The research found that movies made in Hollywood perpetuate Islamophobic rhetoric. According to the projections seen in films, Hollywood helps fuel anti-Muslim prejudice, often known as Islamophobia. As a result, this study looked at Hollywood's involvement in sticking to socio-political reasons by looking into films that are capable of creating interest in and discussion about the largely unfavorable representation of Muslims. We recommend future research on the comparative analysis of Hollywood War films before the War on terror, during the War on Terror, and the process of induction to Islamophobic discourse.

INTRODUCTION

Motion pictures hold immense importance in offering entertainment, aided with the creation of opinion and instruction. They are the cheapest means of entertainment, cultural projection, and socialization. Whatever the purpose they serve, they rate high in human interest and originality. The role of movies and their potential to lead the roads is inevitable (Safdar et al., 2018; Winn, 2001). Movies leave great impressions on viewers' minds. The films shown have specific imprints on the viewers' minds. They create images and thus lend a hand in demolishing a picture and movies used for public interest and propaganda (Eliashberg et al., 2005). However, it is notable that Muslims and Islam's portrayals in Hollywood movies are highly problematic. Hollywood movies interpret Muslims according to their attire, attitude, dialogues, behavior, and actions. Muslims and Islam frequently have stereotypes; most films contain Arab and Muslim bombing sequences (Rehman & Qamar, 2017; Ridouani, 2011). The media creates images of Islam and Muslims as "Other." They are described as extremely violent, sexist, militant, and undemocratic (Alghamdi, 2015). However, from 9/11 to 2018, two different political setups have taken over during this long term. It is to examine how this has affected the representation of Muslims in Hollywood. In this regard, Hollywood has contributed immensely to the institutionalization of prejudice against Muslims before 9/11. This prejudice and attack gave rise to Muslims' vile and inhuman treatment, mainly in Islamic countries. After the unfortunate event of 9/11, it seems that all fields of areas have marginalized Muslims and have drawn a fine line to segment them (REZAEI et al., 2020; Youssef, 2020).

Notably, the standardized characterization of Arabs as fundamentalists, their women as submissive is just as offensive racial stereotypes as Black criminals or greedy Jews (Burney, 2012; Joseph, 1980). Today's biggest challenge is how Cinema deals with Islamophobia. Instead, it elevates the fear and aggression towards the East and particularly Muslims. Media (Sutkutė, 2019) observed that the American-led War on terror has led to Islamophobia. Media reflected Islamophobia on all the platforms and stereotyped Muslim characters. People's perceptions are shaped by perpetuating stereotypical images. Muslims are depicted as individuals whose ethics and ethos do not resonate with the rest of the people. The stereotyping in US media, including films, TV shows, news, and cartoons, mainly shapes people's perceptions of Islam and Muslims. Generally, 'strange other' is a portrait of Muslims. This misrepresentation links to the development of 'racism,' namely Islamophobia, rooted in cultural representations of the 'other' (Elareshi et al., 2021; A. Saeed, 2007).

However, there have so far been no studies on how images of Muslims and battle circumstances throughout the fight on terror have evolved. However, no research has been conducted to date how representations of Muslims and combat situations have developed over terror. This article examined how Muslims and Islam were portrayed during the "War on Terror." In this regard, the sub-objectives of this study involve: **(i)** analyzing the representation of Muslims and Arabs in Hollywood films during the War on terror, and **(ii)** examining the role of American Cinema-Hollywood in decreasing or elevating Islamophobia. Hence the main research questions include:

RQ1: How Muslims and Arabs represented in Hollywood films during the War on terror?

RQ2: What is the role of American Cinema- 'Hollywood' in decreasing or elevating Islamophobia?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Importance of Motion Pictures:

Films are a powerful tool for shaping and reshaping, constructing, reconstructing, structuring, and restructuring concepts. A film does not happen as an accident, and it requires an ample amount of work done at the back end. The role of media in describing and creating realities indicates that the production of the content may have several influences (Alford, 2009).

A concept or idea is turned into a story and is executed accordingly. Thus, a film is attributed to determine when and how they build and implement a vision. This relies on how the conversation is structured with symbolic representation (positive and negative). For example, the Muslim fundamentalist is a stereotyped term to convey a negative meaning (Ali et al., 2020; Borah, 2016).

According to Borah, (2016), framing research determines that the citizens adopt the reality according to the frames built on media. They interpret the designed reality when they do not observe actual events. The framing helps in the formation of opinions regarding an idea, theme, and group. People's opinion on significant issues is thus created the way the events are projected on the screen. One of the media's roles is the ideological construction of race (Kahlström & Norin, 2012).

Hollywood has the most significant market; its representation of East and Muslims has always been despicable. Muslims are rarely articulated in a binary fashion. There are usually negative associations, where Islam is shown as monolithic and Muslims as fundamentalists. (Eijaz, 2018). Likewise, Alalawi, (2015) stipulates that images of the East are represented in a darker shade throughout the history of Hollywood. They are signified as the social, political, and economic apprehension of capitalism. Extensive rise in Islamophobia must be devoted to media for reflecting such images.

It is also understood that Muslims and Islam are usually stereotyped. Most of these movies include bombing scenes by Arabs and Muslims. It is claimed that the media reproduces the images of Muslims and Islam as "Other." However, from 9/11 to 2018, two different political setups have taken over during this long term. It is to examine how this has affected the representation of Muslims in Hollywood. (Fawa, 2013; Youssef, 2020).

Hollywood has contributed immensely to the institutionalization of prejudice against Muslims before 9/11. These discrimination and attacks gave rise to inhuman and vile treatment to

Muslims, especially those from Islamic countries. After the 32 unfortunate events of 9/11, it is witnessed that all fields of areas have marginalized Muslims and have drawn a fine line to segment them (Abdullah, 2015; Noureen & Paracha, 2018).

Orientalism and Muslims:

The concept of Orientalism by E. Saeed (2003) provides a discourse model for studying the power relations of East and West. It probes into the concepts which are projected in the minds of Western minds throughout history. These concepts rationalize imperialism based on the notion of Western superiority. E. Saeed, (2003) argues that the 'West' concept achieved distinction only when it confronted the 'East'. Here E. Saeed, (2003) represents three significant assertions. Number one, he defines Orientalism as a purpose, attaining which will serve political goals. For example, it provides an ideological explanation for Orientalist scholars to justify European charge over Oriental lands. The second claim he makes is that these tactics help Europe shape its image, ideal, and set opposites. It is how Europe was crowned intellectual and cultural superiority over the East, precisely, the Islamic culture. Said's point is that Orientalism has not just built its identity. It has created an incorrect picture of Islamic culture and its people and its essential ideas and ideals (Scott, 2008).

The Framing theory emerged in the 1970s, in the age of mass media. Media analysis established the concept of unidirectional media impacts, such as the hypodermic needle, and media effects became the primary focus. The research aimed to study the role of media in designing and formulating political issues within the public. According to Entman (2007), individuals' awareness and judgment about public affairs are greatly influenced by how information is selected and presented. A considerable number of psychology researchers used systematic changes in preferences when a subject matter was presented under diverse frames (Dietram A. Scheufele, 2009).

The theory of Islamophobia was developed in the early 21st century by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), political activists, and international organizations and forums to highlight the harmful actions against Islam and Muslims in Western liberal democracies (Bleich, 2011). Moreover, Edvardsson (2008) emphasizes that Islamophobia is the denial of Muslims and Islam based on stereotypes. It may have emotional elements, cognitive elements, evaluative, and action-oriented elements like violence and discrimination.

RESEARCH METHODS:

We utilized qualitative Conventional content analysis approach in this study as it avoids preconceived categories and lets the types flow from data, providing new insights into data (Ali, 2018; Habes et al., 2020). The conventional content analysis approach starts with going through the data, which can be words, images, or audios. It is to read the data repeatedly to understand the real meaning that they convey. From the data, codes are developed, categorized, and organized into accurate categories (Daniel, 2016). Moreover,

for the data analysis process, we operationalized the constructs and converted them into comprehensive variables. We analyzed the content and codes directly from the text data of movies. **Table 2** below shows the coding unit and rule designated for the data analysis:

Table 2: Coding Unit & Operationalization of Concepts

Variables	Indicators
Ant-West	Hate and aggression towards Western people, <u>their</u> language, and their lifestyle.
Anti-Women rights	Imposing men's superiority, Suppressing women's voice, barring females from education. Violating the right to freedom and life.
Intolerant	Aggressive, violent.
Progressive	Open minded, proponent of equality.
Tyrant	Oppressor, Persecutor, and Dictator.
Innocent	Simple, Modest, Humble, Guiltless.

Population & Sample:

The population for the research project is Hollywood movies based on the representation of the War on terror. The sample studied to achieve the objectives included films available that contain the setting of a Muslim war zone. More specifically, we used the purposive sampling technique. We selected two movies (Body of Lies, 12 Strong) to gather data and conduct the analysis (Gani et al., 2020).

ANALYSIS & FINDINGS:

Features of Muslim Characters of "Body of Lies" and "12 Strong":

Comparing the Muslim characters in both films, we find a few similar characters based on similar traits. There were few differences between the projections of characters.

Operationalization Of Critical Features of Muslim Characters Defined in The Films:

We need to define variables into measurable factors so that the characteristics of Muslim characters can be easily distinguished.

Anti-West:

Both films have many characters who hold Anti-West sentiments. In Body of Lies, Al-Saleem and his followers strongly opposed the West and its custom, which is why they devastated it with bomb blasts. This leads to the perception that an extremist Muslim is anti-west or a practicing Muslim. Omer Sidiki had

received several messages when the radicals thought that American property had been destroyed.

They write, "Congratulations, brother, in endeavors to destroy the great Satan. You have struck at the heart of their evil designs. God will reward you for what you have done", etc. This shows the image of America in the eyes of those Muslims.

Ayesha's sister, an image of a common Muslim, does not show much likeness towards the West or America. She seems upset with its engagement in the Middle East. In the film, she becomes intensely aggressive when Ferris tells her that he is a political advisor. He offers his suggestions to His majesty when required. In the movie *12 Strong*, Al-Qaeda is a strong opponent of the West.

Anti-Women Rights:

Body of Lies does not present any situation that shows women's suppression, which is otherwise a stereotype about Muslim culture. But it depicts a conservative social system for women. Ayesha could not shake her hand with Ferris and looks at the neighbors who were gazing in disapproval. *12 Strong* emphasizes the situation of Afghanistan regarding the treatment of women. The so-called Islamic guardians in Afghanistan kill the teacher. Forget about the secondary rights as education. In an Islamic society, the film displays how women's basic right to live is at stake and is in the hold of Islamic fundamentalists. The soldiers watch a clip where a woman is stoned to death for been pregnant out of wedlock. (Semali,2015) highlights that the films create an ideological difference between America and Muslim societies. This depicts America as a place of absolute freedom to give all rights to women and thus is superior to Arab countries. In *12 Strong*, an American woman is monitoring the military operation. On the contrary, Muslim women are deprived of fundamental rights.

Intolerant:

The depiction of extremist Muslims is intolerant in both films-Saleem, and Mullah Razan and his colleagues are intolerable. They are aggressive toward their opponents and are pretty violent. Not just the fanatics, but also Dostum and his comrades in *12 Strong*, are prone to intolerance. Their blood boils in a spur, and they suddenly point to heavy weapons, having blood running their eyes in aggression.

The Indicators of The Concept "Muslim":

The indicators of variables and their occurrence in the films have highlighted that a Muslim is the one who is anti-West, anti-women rights, intolerant, and tyrant. Those who have attributes of hating Western people, their language, and their lifestyle. Those who impose men's superiority suppress women's voices and bar females from education. Also, they are the ones who are aggressive, violent, oppressive, and persecutors.

Table 3: Physical Appearances of The Muslims Represented in the Selected Films

	White	Brown	Clean shaved	Beard	Turban	Jacket	Heavily weaponized	Kajal	Arabic speaking
Body of Lies		✓	✓				✓		✓
12 Strong		✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	

Table 4: Characters' Names with The Specified Features

MOVIE	PROGRESSIVE	TYRANT	INNOCENT
Body of Lies	Hani, Ayesha	Al-Saleem	Omer Sidiki
12 Strong	Dostum	Mullah Razan	Najeeb

12 Strong has projected Muslims as brown Arabs with long beards, wearing a turban, shalwar kameez, green jacket, and heavy weapons. On the other hand, Body of Lies has attempted to represent mixed characters where we see clean shaved Muslim men wearing jeans and pants rather than shalwar kameez., Furthermore, 12 strong represented the situation right after 9/11, and Body of Lies presented the problem later. Bush administration faced criticism about 9/11, and the people's faith in government fell to thirty (30) percent (According to Pew Research Centre 2014). Then films like Body of Lies were made in which we see an absence of a moral hero, who is somehow conflated with the villain (Semlali,2015). The Hero has a common framework. They venture forth from the real world into supernatural wonder, encounter difficulties, and achieve a decisive victory. (ibid p30). 12 Strong has illustrated a similar strong hero who ventures into a world of destruction and fixes it all. However, that of Body of Lies is different.

Thus, Islamophobia is the fearful and prejudiced opinion of Islam, Muslims, and everything related. Islamophobia is not a natural phenomenon. It has emerged and nurtured with time because of social discrepancies, prejudices, and narcissist beliefs. Media, be it news or entertainment media, have contributed vastly to the inflation of this prejudicial ideology. The image of Muslims and Islam is projected to incite hatred and abhorrence towards them (Alford, 2009).

The analysis of appearance, behavior, and dialogues of Muslim characters must find how "fear" is projected in the films, which is the prerequisite for Islamophobia. Shalwar kameez, turban, jacket, beard, and kajal are attributes of a terrorist presented in films. Generally, most Muslims wear shalwar kameez and keep long beards, but people even fear ordinary people due to such projections. Thus, these attributes, in general, are responsible for inciting

fear. When the *Body of Lies* was released, President Bush was in his second term of Presidentship. President Bush did not explicitly state personal hate for Islam and Muslims. Instead, he diplomatically reached out to convince for War on terror. When we understand how much American political setup influences Hollywood, it seems that it arbitrarily does. Some of President Bush's remarks post 9/11 exactly go according to the concept of Islam and Muslims, represented in the movie *Body of Lies*.

The movie *12 Strong* is an effort to refresh the incident of 9/11 and raise patriotism. This attempt and its relevance to the American administrative body governed by a racist head are directly proportional. President Trump and his hate for Islam are not veiled. On January 20, 2017, Donald Trump succeeded President Barack Obama as the 45th president of the United States of America.

CONCLUSION:

Films are now one of the most powerful mediums, influencing people's perceptions, ideas, attitudes, behaviors, and actions. The image of Muslims and Islam is usually stereotyped in negative ways. The depiction of Islamic society as uncivilized, Muslims as conservative, intolerant, and Muslim women as suppressed and attractive is common. After 9/11, it is observed that the films have increased the sympathetic portrayal of Muslims. Even if a movie bases on Islamic terrorism, other positive Muslim characters are added to offset the negative depiction.

Nevertheless, it must be remembered that these positive characters are projected through a Euro-Centric perspective to idealize the Western system and policy. Hollywood significantly plays its role in elevating Islamophobia via the salient negative representation of Islam and Muslims. The brutal actions and intimidating behaviour are associated with physical attributes, i.e. brown skin, shalwar kameez, beard, and turban. People are made to associate these physical attributes with Islamic fundamentalism. That is why people display prejudiced behaviour and attitude towards Muslims with these physical traits. However, the film industries are independent entities. However, there seems to be an influence by analyzing Hollywood and the political setup. The content somehow seems to resonate with political motives rather than obligating to moral and ethical duties. The films persist in defining why America's involvement in the countries is justified and are focused on American heroism.

Study Contributions:

The study's findings will redound to the society to understand what they watch for mere entertainment designs their concepts at the backend. It is significant to thoroughly probe the discourse to surface key motives behind creating specific content. The findings of the research will support understanding and contextualize the image of Muslims and Arabs. It will also help understand and address how film industries perpetuate stereotypical images of Islam and Muslim societies in general. The research holds significance in terms of enhancing the literature. This research can be helpful in the curriculum of "cinema and society." This study will also help future filmmakers ponder these

aspects for the obstruction of stereotypes in the future. The research will also be significant to inform social policy and support in holding media accountable.

Limitations

The study employs certain limitations. Due to constrained time, the researcher could not take a large sample for the analysis. Only limited movies made it to sample for the research. Thus, the model does not contain films released before 9/11, along with that released aftermath, for a thorough comparison. Furthermore, this research could be vast by drawing a comparison and contrast between the portrayal of Muslims in Bollywood and Hollywood.

Some data were inaccessible on the internet and permitted paid access, such as research articles and movies. Due to financial constraints, the researcher has avoided drawing data from such platforms. Also, the researcher initially aimed to derive quantitative results by evaluating the responses of Muslims to such films. However, this motive was shunned due to the Pandemic.

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