

# **The Representation of Arabs in Hollywood’s War and Action Movie “Rules of Engagement”**

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## **Abstract:**

This research aims to shed some light on how the Arabs are being presented in Hollywood through examination of the war and action movie Rules of Engagement (2000), which according to Jack Shaheen (2008) is the most stereotypical movie of all time. The main objective of this research is to identify the image and the messages the producer of this film tried to send to the audience. The method used in this study was the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Horkheimer, 1972). The results revealed that the producer of Rules of Engagement made an extensive use of the perplexing power of the semantic components of the language in arguing for or against an ideology.

**Keywords:** Stereotype, Representation of Arabs, Influence, Image of Arabs, Hollywood.

## **1. Introduction:**

The role of the media, particularly movies, is of seminal importance in creating images by using the language, images and symbols as powerful tools in a sociocultural and communication context.

The increasing number of Hollywood movies presented the Arabs negatively in the past years (Slama , 2017). In addition, the increasing demand among the Arabian people to watch American movies has established the importance and the need to study the image of Arabs and how they are being represented in Hollywood films.

When we think about the Arab representation in Hollywood movies, we see that there is not much research done using critical movie discourse in Arab countries, in addition to the increasing anti-Arabian movies being produced in the two decades (Slama , 2017; Shaheen, 2006).

Thus, in this research the Hollywood film, *Rules of Engagement* (2000), has been critically analyzed using critical discourse analysis (CDA). That is why, Van Dijk's framework (2004) was referenced to show and reveal the misrepresentation and the ideological manipulations of this film.

### **2.1. Research Objectives:**

- To understand how the Arabs are being presented in Hollywood movies by reviewing the *Rules of Engagement* (2000).
- To identify the image and the messages the producer of this film is sending to the audience.

## **3. Literature review:**

Jack Shaheen in *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001), after reviewing over a thousand films, talks about how much Arabs face challenges and manipulations in Hollywood. Shaheen also talks about how frustrating these views are, those of which are carried by the Western civilization and he refers to them as our civilization, admitting that these views directly attack the humanity of Arabs. Shaheen also mentions how the same image can take shape in different topics to feed the same substance that is continuously showing

Arabs committing evil deeds. Therefore, the image was repeated over and over and was drawn in scenes in many films that strongly abuse and attack the Arabs' behaviors and morals. So, the conclusion of Shaheen's research commentary, after watching over 1,000 films, is that Arabs have been the group that was spoken about most in the history of the cinema. Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001) is the only significant published investigation regarding this subject. He also made sure to add evidence by the authors of related articles in news publications and scholarly journals (Shaheen, 2006).

In the same context, Jack Shaheen (2008) confirms, in his book *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11*, that "Filmmaking is political," and Dehumanizing stereotypes emerging from the cinema, TV, and other media help support governmental policies, enabling producers to more easily advance and solidify propaganda. In this context Nashref (2011) argues, in *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11*, Shaheen added a new aspect of Hollywood's misrepresentation of Muslim Americans and Arabs living among the citizens. Before 9/11—as far as Hollywood was concerned, they were invisible (Shaheen, 2008), but now they are portrayed in movies and TV programs as members of sleeper cells, waiting to get the call to become active terrorists and harm their neighbors. Since 9/11, Shaheen found way more prime time TV dramas including the theme of out-of-control Arab and Muslim terrorists (Shaheen, 2008).

Daniel Mandel in his study *Muslims on Silver Screens*, (2001: 19) argues that:

"A lot of writers and movie production companies think so. They assert that racial and ethnic stereotyping that has been otherwise abandoned by the cinema continues to apply to these groups". Mandel (2001) asks the question: when was the last time you saw an Arab character in a movie that was anything but one of the three Bs (billionaire, bomber, belly dancer)?

Suliman Arti (2007) in his study: *The evolution of Hollywood's representation of Arabs before 9/11: the relationship between political events and the notion of 'Otherness'* emphasizes the political motivations behind the stereotypical image of Arabs in Hollywood in the period before

the events of 9/11. Hollywood, he argues, always played a "propagandist" role as well as a limitative role for the American project, especially, in the Middle East. The author confirms that the evolution of this image has been profoundly influenced by political events like the creation of Israel, the Iranian Islamic revolution and the demise of the Soviet Union (Arti, 2007: 1). Moreover, Suliman Arti (2007: 1- 2) confirms that Hollywood's presentation of Arabs through a special lens allows America, through Hollywood, to present the Middle East as an alien or a monster and so helps to give an excuse to exercise American power on foreign soil. The ways of Hollywood's representation of the Middle East people includes different, often conflicting, types of images. They also feature the intensification of the Arab stereotypical image over the last century from 'Comic villains' to 'foreign devils'.

Previous literature offers little insight on the portrayal of Arabs in war and action movies by diving into the CDA field. The present study will tackle a specific genre of films that is related to politics and that sends subliminal messages, as very little studies have been conducted on this genre of films or at least about the Arabs. This study will show the images and the results of the Arab portrayal in this genre of films before the attacks of September 11, 2001.

#### **4. Brief History of Arabs in Hollywood Movies:**

Hollywood could possibly be the origin of every new idea or image that was meant to be broadcasted to the world regardless of its impact whether it was good or bad. Also, it is the birth place of the most successful producer and film maker careers and it is where they began to make blockbusters movies that helped in a way change how and what people thought about a specific topic. That means Hollywood can heavily impact the audience's feelings and impact society in a negative way. Celebrities that appear in Hollywood movies also can heavily affect how some people live their lives because some people tend to follow the trends that are being shaped by the celebrities themselves. For example, if a certain body shape that was shown in the movies was muscular or skinny and not curvy some people might feel like they are not accepted and the other way around if the lead celebrity in the movie was shown with curves. This means that some people

may follow their celebrity on how they look, talk or do and that is a huge responsibility that celebrities should know they have (Rahimi, 2012).

The negative points mentioned above are only a fraction of the true impact of the movies on the real world. That is due to the dominance of Hollywood movie productions in the cinema among the Arab youth.

The history of Arabs in Hollywood was not flattering and that is because the Arab characters have been most of the time, if not always, portrayed as affluent individuals, barbarians and villains that exist in a place where women have no rights. In this context, Ivan Cliche (2004: 37) confirms that the Hollywood films about the Arabs influence the image of the Arab in the American public opinion, as a large percentage of the American that has not seen an Arab in their life, and, for Cliché, these Arab films usually portray the Arabs as evil and bad.

From the movie *The Sheik* (1921) which shows the Arabs as rapists and Arab women as belly dancers, to *Aladdin* 1992 which is a cartoon movie targeting a younger audience and showing the hero as a thief and women again as belly dancers. Even the song in this cartoon movie describes the Arab/Persian kingdom where it takes place as a bad place to visit, the song started the movie with these words: Oh, I come from a land, from a faraway *place*

Where the caravan camels roam

Where they cut off your ear

If they don't like your face

It's barbaric, but hey, it's home (*Arabian Nights*, *Aladdin* lyrics, Bruce Adler, 2019).

The examples keep piling throughout the years showing basically the same images but with different storylines, including *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Ali Baba: The Mad Dog of the Desert* (1940) which is another stereotypical cartoon made much earlier than the aforementioned *Aladdin* movie.

Pierre Slama (2017) confirms in "Hollywood: Représentation ou Dénaturation du Peuple Oriental" since the beginning of the twentieth century, movies have shown the Arabs in the ugliest images, including the movie of George Méliés *The Palace of Arabian Nights* (1905), in which the long-bearded Arab is depicted with dancers striking a servant. According to Pierre Slama, American cinema is a populist cinema and it seeks to attract audience at any cost, even if it is through negative and stereotypical images..

## **5. Theoretical Framework:**

The framework focuses on how social groups are being shown and represented in such movies with the aim of getting the audience used to what the producers are trying to show or say. By developing a critical view, the audience will then be aware enough of the misrepresentation being shown and can differentiate between the truths and the manipulation.

The three theories that should provide this research with perspective on the topic are: Critical theory, Orientalism and critical discourse analysis.

### **5.1. Critical Theory:**

Critical theory is a philosophic approach of thought that stresses the analysis of society across the social sciences and philosophy (Olli-Pekka, 2013). Critical theory aims at explaining and transforming the circumstances that enslave human beings, as Max Horkheimer (1972) defined the term in his article *Traditional and Critical Theory*. Olli-Pekka (2013) affirms that Critical theory has two elements: Firstly, it is held that empirical study and philosophical analysis should be brought together to form a detailed of a phenomenon under study. "Secondly, it is held that the normative basis for the critical research should be founded on the needs, longings, and moral demands of the people living under the conditions of the system or structure that are criticized" (Olli-Pekka, 2013).

### **5.2. Orientalism:**

Orientalism is a concept that appeared in the literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Western historical, religious and literary studies. Orientalism is related to eastern culture and people, and is currently a major

taught at many western universities. In fact, Orientalism focuses on the Arab and Islamic world and the relationship that links the western world with the eastern world.

Some researchers (Daud, 2020; Cliché, 2004; Said, 1979) considered Orientalism as the main source of information and knowledge related to the Arab and Islamic world. Therefore, the image of the Orient, its culture, customs and peculiarities come from the Orientalists wrote, photographed and painted. From this standpoint, it can be said that Orientalism has constituted an important source for artistic, literary, cinematographic, cartoons production that depicts and portrayed the Arab.

Among the most important books that are updated in a scientific and detailed manner on this topic, a book by Edward W. Said Orientalism (1979). Daud Bilquees (2020) affirms that Edward W. Said, in his book Orientalism, explains that: “the West gives the Middle East and Asia a view with prejudice and racism. They are backward and unaware of their own history and culture. The West has created a culture, history, and future promise for them” (Daud, 2020). “On this framework rests not only the study of the Orient, but also the political imperialism of Europe in the East” (Daud, 2020). Edward Said continues to explain Orientalism by saying that “It is a discourse that is by no means in direct corresponding relationship with political power in the raw, but rather produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power” (Said, 1979: 12)..

Arabs appear in western depictions mostly as barbaric and terrorists, savages with no civilization (Shaheen, 2001). In this Context Al Sulami (2016) argues that cultural differences sometimes create problems from country to another and in some ways making them think stereotypically towards the others.

### **5.3. Critical Discourse Analysis:**

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) “refers to the use of an ensemble of techniques for the study of textual practice and language use as social and cultural practices” (Fairclough, 1992a: 110-111).

There are three aspects for the social and cultural analysis: the analysis

of the text (written or visual image), discourse practice and social and cultural practices (Fairclough, 1995: 9). According to Daniel Kasomo (2011) the texts have a constructive function in forming up and shaping human identities and actions.

CDA also relies on discourse analysis because its purpose is to analyze the messages contained in the text, image and symbol (Lits, 2012: 41).

## **6. Research Problem:**

Hollywood movies can be the tool to shed light on cultural difference and present it in certain ways to create stereotype (Shaheen, 2001). The Arabs were on the spotlight for so many years in Hollywood movies (Slama, 2017), and that can trigger many questions like: How are the Arabs being presented in Hollywood by reviewing the war and action movie Rules of Engagement (2000)? Therefore, this movie will be analyzed to seek how the Arabs were portrayed.

## **7. Research Questions:**

Based on the literature review, a number of issues and questions related to the image of Arabs in the movie Rules of Engagement (2000) were identified:

Q1. How have Arabs been portrayed and depicted in this movie?

Q2. Which discursive structures and strategies have been utilized by the producers of this movie to construct and disseminate the anti-Arab sentiment?

## **8. Method:**

In this research the movie discourse (Van Dijk, 2004) was examined to help show what the power of words, language and symbols can mean, affect or do. Shaheen (2003) argues that the Arabs have been the group that was the most spoken about in the history of cinema and seems like that didn't change yet because of the sheer volume of movies being produced which tries to present a stereotypical image of Arabs as terrorists or the bad guys who just want to make the world a bad place without freedom



(Shaheen, 2003). Therefore, by reviewing the movie Rules of Engagement, this research will show how Arabs are being presented to the world by shedding light on some of the main scenes of the movie and showing what is the intended subliminal message. Also, this research will talk about and show how some politicians can mix their political point of view within the movie discourse and how it can affect what the people see and what they will think.

To examine and investigate the representation of Arabs in Hollywood movies, the framework of Van Dijk's (2004) was utilized. He elaborated on 27 ideological strategies and this research used two of them which are dichotomy of 'euphemism' and 'derogation'. This dichotomy will make it clear and help show how the producers of the movie played the game of 'positive self-representation' and 'negative other-representation' in the movie discourse. The first term is used to show that the 'U.S.' is better, greater and the heroes that always saved the day at the end; while the second 'Them' shows that they are the weakest link in the story.

TeunVan Dijk (2003) argues in his article "From Grammar to Critical Discourse Analysis", that "a positive self-representation or in-group favoritism is a semantic macro-strategy used for the purpose of 'face keeping' or 'impression management', negative other representation is another macro-strategy which is used to categorize people into 'in-groups and out-groups'".

## **9. Research Design:**

The reason why the movie Rules of Engagement was chosen is because we can apply CDA framework to it. Also, the discourse in this movie is full of stereotypes and has a lot of political points of view in it. So, the applied strategy was that of Van Dijk, which involves the dichotomy of 'euphemism' and 'derogation'. It can help differentiate the 'positive self-representation' and the 'negative other-representation', the 'U.S.' and 'Them'.

## **10. Data Analysis: Rules of Engagement:**

The Rules of Engagement was one of the movies Jack Shaheen reviewed when he was looking into the images of Arabs in Hollywood movies. Not

only that, he also categorized this film as one of the most stereotypical and racist films when it comes to showing a bad representation of the Arab people or faking facts about them. His work also previously demonstrated that politicians and politics can sometimes play a role in sending a specific image to the audience. Well, this movie was made by the former Assistant Secretary of Defense, Secretary of the Navy, and journalist Jim Webb and by thinking about the fact that not only a politician but also a military personnel made and wrote the script of this film makes us feel and see the propaganda in the plot.

Jack Shaheen (2003) argues that Hollywood repeatedly uses politics and shows the Arabs repeatedly as killers thus perpetuating the idea of "its okay to kill Arabs randomly". This film was just one of the hundred films Shaheen watched to build this conclusion on how politics can manipulate the element of stereotype and make it work to affect audiences.

The key points or the messages that this film is trying to send take place in the court martial of Colonel Terry Childers.

As an officer in Marine Expeditionary Unit, the colonel was sent there to help evacuate the U.S. Ambassador to Yemen because there were some people demonstrating against the U.S. and their policies near the embassy.

It was clear that they were all grouped without any firearms and the angrier they got the more intense their attacks and rock throwing became against the building. Noteworthy, too, is that there was a sniper situated on a roof who shot and killed three U.S. marines as a response to that the Colonel Terry Childers gave a command (saying a bad word) (Rules of Engagement 00:28:50-58). Disregarding the fact that the three marines were killed by snipers on a roof and not by the civilians assailing the embassy he gave the order to start "open fire" and the result was injuring more than one hundred people and killing 83 civilians, including; elderly people, children and women. As a result of that command, the colonel was charged of breaking the rules of engagement. The name of this movie stands for the principles that should be followed when they are performing an operation. These rules say that they can open fire and start shooting when the other side is armed. Later in the movie, the cameras of the embassy show that some members of the mob were indeed armed.

It also showed in this movie that the protesters were a mix of different ages and the snipers on the roof were the ones who did the shooting not the civilians on the ground. This film tried also to show that the children and elderly people held guns and started shooting at the marines on the roof. So the messages and the images in this part of the movie are trying to show and send to the audience is that Arab children are being taught from childhood how to use weapons and how to kill and that they should hate the people from the west. To prove this idea, there was another scene which showed that the Hodges, the attorney of the colonel, visited some of the injured people in the hospital and there was a child who pointed his fingers at him gesturing a gun. This, in turn, implies that the intended message is that the children are also killers.

Another trick this movie used to play with the audience's feelings and try to control what the audience should think about the Arab children was what is considered a second major scene, which showed the Hodges (the attorney) meeting a little girl who lost one leg because of these events. When the audience watches a scene like this, the first feeling will be sympathy. However, this feeling of sympathy did not last that long because later in the movie this girl is armed and turns out to be one of the fighters. When the audience sees something like this, the feeling of sympathy will turn to hatred and that even a little girl deserves not only to lose one leg but also deserves to die (Alsulami, 2016: 60). According to Jack Estes (2008: 407) "The message is clear: If even this innocent and sweet young child is a killer, then who could blame the Americans for massacring the entire lot of them". Shaheen (2008) also argued that it promotes an idea of: "we're now on his side. Why does this matter? In the end, the massacre of even women and children has been justified and applauded (Shaheen, 2001). It's a slaughter, yes, but it is a righteous slaughter". If even a small girl can have weapons and shoot at the US soldiers, then the Arab civilians do not deserve any sympathy from the audience armed protesters.

Another message or image this movie showed was when the colonel explained his actions when he gave the order to open fire regardless of the fact that one of his subordinates told him that "I have women and children in my line" (Rules of Engagement 00:28:40-45). He explained his actions

saying that "If I'm guilty of this, I'm guilty of everything I've done in combat for the last years" (Rules of Engagement 00:54:33-40). And that gives a message that it is okay to kill 83 civilian people full of elderly, children and women, but he will not see another marine die (Alsulami, 2016: 63).

This shows that no matter how many Arabian people are killed, it is worthless because at the end they are "terrorists" compared to the U.S. marines.

The end of this movie was by showing that the colonel is not guilty and being shown as the hero who saved his team regardless of the women, children and elderly who got killed because he made the right call to kill him and that was the film's message.

## **11. Discussion:**

By using one of the 27 ideological strategies of Van Dijk (2004) framework, namely the dichotomy of 'euphemism' and 'derogation', we make it clear how the producers of the movie played the game of 'positive self-representation' and 'negative other-representation' in the movie which was shown clearly while presenting the U.S. soldiers as heroes and the protesters as "barbarians" and "terrorists".

Now when students watch a movie full of hidden messages and presenting images like the one shown in this movie (that can impact their way of thinking), it can create in their minds an idea that they are the heroes that, like Shaheen (2008) said once in his study, will show up and save the day at the end. This can also generate hatred towards their own people.

### **11.1. Response to the First Research Question:**

By analyzing the Arabs in Rules of Engagement (2000) and showing how their image did not really change before or even after the events of September 11. The Arabs were being portrayed like usual as the "villains" and "terrorists" who want to kill and destroy everything. This research used the CDA framework (Van Dijk, 2004) and with this framework it gave a focused look at the negative other representation which the producers and

makers of this movie used it as an advantage and to show the positive self-representation as the superior.

This movie showed the Arab kids, women and elderly as killers with no worth to their lives. It showed that it is permissible to start shooting at many without thinking and because they are worthless compared to few lives of the U.S. soldiers. When Jack Shaheen (2008) rated this movie as one of the most stereotypical movies of all time it was because the messages and the images that this movie sent to the world can destroy the reputation of the Arabs by affecting what people should think about the Arab countries and if it is safe to go and visit one day or not and if how are they going to be treated there, are they going to be treated like enemies? Thus, the judgment will be negative.

### **11.2. Response to the Second Research Question:**

To help clear the picture and show the discursive structures and strategies that was utilized by the producer, within the framework of (Van Dijk, 2004), it showed that the producer divided the characters into two groups which are (U.S.) and (Them). The producer played with the words to build a specific image of the Arab world. The fact that the person who wrote this movie script is a politician that reflects the main intentions and the mixed hate feelings towards the Arabs.

The manipulation of words and language helped shape the characters like how the people that were standing outside of the U.S. Embassy were shaped as killers and savages, and the soldiers on the rooftops as the heroes and the defenders who want to protect.

Another comparison was how they showed the Arab kids as cruel killers that do not deserve any empathy towards them. They showed the child as a villain to send a message to the audience that even the Arab kids deserve to die. This kind of generalization that the producer of this movie used is negative.

## **Conclusion:**

This research focused on one of the many movies that Jack Shaheen (2008) reviewed, and from the Rules of Engagement we saw what the power of language can do. This movie included most of the negative messages related to the Arabs. Some of the producers try to show the Arabs as "villains" or "terrorists". The events of 9/11 shows that it really did not make that change, because Hollywood was already showing and sending false representations and images to the world. The events of 9/11 were just another excuse to portray Arabs as the "villains" in the upcoming years.

Going back to the fact that a politician and ex-military personnel wrote the script of this movie shows that there was a political influence, and the findings revealed that the producer of the Rules of Engagement, made a semantic language in the script to support a political engagement. According to Rahimi and Sahragard (2006), the audience gets affected by the meanings of a word regardless of whether it is positive or negative which will make an impact or a change.

The CDA analysis used in this research helped seeing and detecting the hidden ideologies that the producer of this movie used in the discourse and revealing the manipulation of words and language as well as the misleading of facts, because there is no historical background that showed or proved that there was a violent attack against the U.S. Embassy in Yemen in the first place, so that makes it just a false and fake portrayal against the Arabs.

The power of words, images and symbols in this movie manipulated the feelings of the audience and played with their emotions especially with the little girl scene when they first felt the empathy towards her when they saw her with one leg and then the feeling changed to hatred when they saw her armed. The CDA in this research just cleared to the naked eyes that the main objective of the producer is to add the ideological attitudes and opinions into the audience's knowledge.

## **Limitation of the Study**

This study was carried out by reviewing only one movie that included all the ideas and results of Jack Shaheen's study (2001) when he reviewed 1000 movies. There are no new references that talk about the Arab representation in Hollywood.

Future studies might take a look, review new movies after 2018 and see if the image of Arabs being shown to the audience is the same or not and if the audience with the easy access to information on social media will question what are they watching, or will just believe it and build a hasty conclusion about the Arabs.

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## تمثيل العرب في هوليوود في فيلم الحرب والأكشن «قواعد الاشتباك»

شادي عبدالله رزق

خالد زعموم

كلية الاتصال - جامعة الشارقة

الشارقة - دولة الإمارات العربية المتحدة

### ملخص البحث:

يهدف هذا البحث إلى إلقاء الضوء على كيفية تصوير العرب في أفلام هوليوود، وذلك من خلال دراسة فيلم «رولز أوف إنجاءمنت» (Rules of Engagement (2000)، حيث يصنفه جاك شاهين الفيلم الأكثر عنصرية على الإطلاق (Shaheen, 2008). الهدف الرئيس من هذا البحث هو تحديد الصورة والرسائل التي حاول منتج هذا الفيلم إرسالها إلى الجمهور. المنهج المستخدم في هذا البحث هو تحليل الخطاب النقدي The Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). (Horkheimer, 1972) وقد كشفت النتائج أن منتج هذا الفيلم قد استخدم بشكل واسع قوة المعاني واللغة من أجل دعم أو رفض أيديولوجية معينة.

**الكلمات الدالة:** الصورة النمطية، تمثيل العرب، تأثير، صورة العرب، هوليوود.