

# Beauty and the (B) East: A Postcolonial Reading of Disney's Arab Woman

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**Abstract** - This paper draws on gender as a fundamental cultural mechanism of Disney animated film, *Aladdin* (1993). Adopting a cultural(ist) and postcolonial theory, the aim of this study is to investigate Disney's representation(s) of the Arab woman. It shall argue that the production of such representations streams from colonial principles and serve imperialist intentions.. Part of the concerns of this work is to briefly tackle the portraying of man and space in Disney's *Aladdin*. In this vein, the present article provides a scrutiny of how Disney as a culture machine represents the Arab world in general but focuses mainly on the image of Arab women in one of the most popular Disney animated films which are generally labeled as innocent, fun and entertaining.

**Index Terms**— *Aladdin* , Arab Women, Cultural Studies, Disney, Gender, Postcolonialism .

## I. INTRODUCTION

I think of a child mind as a blank book. During the first years of his life, much will be written on the pages. The quality of that writing will affect his life profoundly.<sup>1</sup>

The term "Disney" connotes entertainment, humor and endless pleasure. In effect, Disney Company has been part and partial of the diction of childhood and continues to occupy a special place in the life of adults. For most of us, Disney means innocence and Disney World is probably the happiest place on earth. However, it is also an industry which main goal is profit making. As Disney produces films based on tales from all over the world and represents different ethnicities and peoples, the objectivity of this company need to be questioned. The present paper proposes a postcolonial reading of one of Disney's most popular animations, *Aladdin*. It problematizes the representation of Arab women, men, and the Arab World in *Aladdin*. Broadly speaking, this essay brings to the fore the issue of Disney's representation of Arabhood, especially the orientalizing of the Arab women according to Disney's construction of beauty in relation to the Middle East.

Disney Corporation has developed a tradition in animation making. It has become a generator of visual/popular culture. Its magical success went beyond the confines of United States to attain various peoples and to integrate different cultures. Disney has become an icon for family entertainment, which benefits from the latest technological achievements in the domain of animation. Making use of the latest and most

innovative technology, Disney Corporation has the capability to sway the tastes of its audiences and gain their favor<sup>2</sup>.

Along with technology, Disney's animated movies rely heavily on a carefully constructed narrative, mostly foregrounding a romance. Thus, emotions of love and compassion between the hero and the heroine are set against a colorful and pleasant background. Those relations, however, are not free from patriarchal premises and gender biases. Disney movies not only accentuate the necessity of gendered relationships for young girls and boys but more importantly provide idols and standards for children. Disney animated movies also dictate steps to follow for "happy-ending" relationships. This is the case of most of Disney's animated films including *Aladdin*.

This Disney's 1992 animated feature film is based on an Arabian fictional story also called *Aladdin* and referred to as علاء الدين in Arabic. As he is introduced in Disney's film, the 18- years old protagonist was born to a poor family, received no formal education, and survived by stealing. With the help of the supernatural Genie, *Aladdin* became a prince and won Jasmine's heart. Providing a romantic and adventurous story, Disney seems to seize the opportunity of adapting *Aladdin* to draw an orientalist portrayal of Arab people. As the storyline develops, we learn that Arabs are merely stupid people. The Sultan is powerless and easily manipulated by his wicked, "most trusted," vizier and the palace's guards are foolish. The sultan is even presented as childish as he spends most of his time playing with toys and seems to have no other business except Jasmine's marriage. In fact, the only one who seems clever in this film is *Aladdin*. This, however, is not a triumphing way to picture *Aladdin* since he is nearly de-humanized- being referred to as street-rat. In this sense, Arabs are depicted not only as barbaric but they are actually dehumanized to become animal-like.

*Aladdin* forwards Said's notion of Orientalism<sup>3</sup>, which is first and foremost a way of Western dominance, and provides falsified depictions of Arabs to the Western audiences. In effect, depicting other races and ethnic groups is one way of exerting power or authority over those subjects. It is also a

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Bell et al. *From Mouse to Mermaid: the Politics of Film, Gender, and Culture*. (Indiana Press University:1995), p.33

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that Said's orientalism is a line of thought uses to criticize the study and representation of the Orient by the West. Arguing that the Orient as is a fabricated construct, Said touches upon the historical, political, and cultural premises of the very description of the Middle East, Near and Far East as the Orient. The necessity of studying the Orient is implemented by the West; who claim they superiority before "the others", as the best way to rule these others. Eventually, Said rejects the colonialist view of studying the Orient by Western and particularly European scholars, painters, travelers... who simply claim that the Orient is but a virgin land whose barbaric peoples required domination and control.

<sup>1</sup> Henry, A. Giroux. *The Mouse that Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence* (Lanhan:Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), p.1

way of making audiences acquainted with ideas of the colonialist premises. That is, Disney uses its means of producing animated movies to enact its ideological agendas. Constituting biased prejudices about Arabs is then a method of distinguishing the Arab subject from the West and introducing it to the Western audience as its "Other". It is, indeed, possible to argue that Orientalism is a myth by virtue of the fact that it does not represent the real Orient, but generates a set of imperatives and perspectives and ideological biases that Disney pronounces upon some ethnic groups such as Arabs.



Fig 1: Disney's depiction of Arab men (01:54/ 03:18/46:07)

Regarding its legitimacy in representing others, Disney's animation remains one of the most powerful authorities which strengthen such construct. Exemplifying space, it is perpetuated throughout Aladdin that all Arabs live in the "Sahara" and that all Arabic countries are desert lands where the heat is unbearable. This may connote that the Oriental subject cannot survive outside the Sahara. Space Figs a whole set of biased representations. It is also subject to Orientalist mapping: "The Orient that appears in Orientalism, then, is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire."<sup>4</sup>

As Said argues, Orientalism is but a system of representations which ultimate aim is to bring about falsified ideas to the Western minds and eventually facilitates the claiming of Arab lands and legitimizes Western empire. The drawings of women in Aladdin follow the same regulations and abide by Orientalist rules. Arab women are Orientalized to a large extent. Over and above, they are divided into two categories: slim seductive concubines or fat unattractive housewives. Further, Jasmine's marriage is another way of

degrading the Arab culture. Her being forced to marry a prince ironically connotes the backwardness of Arabic laws by which women are forced into marriage with no consideration of their feelings.

Disney aspires to make its audience take its fabricated and imaginative events and characters for factual assumptions. Moreover, it attributes magic and superstition to Arab people as it repeatedly shows the intimate relation between the Arabic culture with magic and sorcery. It can be argued that Disney's inauguration of superstition embodies another Fig of Arabs' backwardness. Images of Jafar as an evil sorcerer along with the Genie from the lamp and all the magic he evokes are constant reminders of the lack of reason and intelligence in the Arab world and the dominance of magic and superstition. It is another statement fabricated by Disney and suited to the Orient to conclude that Arabs lack of civilization and sophistication before the West cultural supremacy.

To account for its originality and credibility, Aladdin's colonial discourse is characterized by the use of some Arabic words like salaam, hummus, and genie to make the movie authentically fit the Arabian nights' realm. We learn from the animated film that Aladdin is an Arab street-rat. In fact, the whole movie is set in an Arab country whereas in the original tale is set in China. Disney suggests an Arabian Sahara for a setting, shaping the minds of youngsters to a glamorous exotic Middle Eastern imaginative geography called "Agrabah". Thus, inviting children to discover the Middle East, *Aladdin* provides an orientalized story which promotes the other-ing of Arabic people, culture and religion.

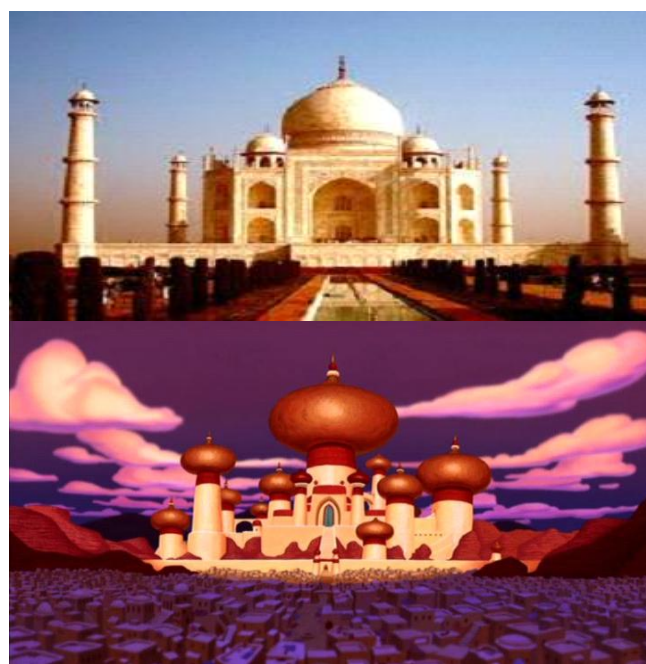


Fig 2: Agrabah palace and TajMahal (12:22)

Further, *Aladdin* presents Orientalist snapshots which reinforces the stereotypes of the Orient being a land of mystery and fantasy where people are rich but dumb as it is the case of the Sultan. The landscapes are exotic and almost feminized gathering acrobats, merchants, concubines, and belly dancers. The Sultan's wealth is mostly conveyed by the luxurious palace which design resembles to a great extent Taj Mahal (see Fig 2), one of UNESCO's World Heritage Center

<sup>4</sup>Edward Said, *Orientalism*. (New York: Penguin, 1978), p. 203

located in Agra, India. Indeed, the Middle East has often been presented in Western writings and media as a place of exoticism and fantasy.

Following Western discourses about Eastern women, Disney perpetuates negative views of Arab women. Throughout *Aladdin*, Disney reactivates the rooted misconceptions about Middle Eastern female subjects as being merely sexual objects, entertaining men (see Fig 3). Thus, partial nudity has been a compulsory characteristic in the construction of the Arab women in Disney animations and the fact that Disney's representation of Arab beauty relies heavily on dancing is undeniable. In effect, most of the women introduced in *Aladdin* are dancing or singing. The Arab women are presented as belly dancers with clothes that accentuate their bare midriffs. Like Jasmine, Arab women are slim yet bustier than Jasmine, with distinct facial features such as wild black almond-shaped eyes and sharp/long noses. Provocative costumes reveal the bodies of these women, marking them as objects of desire whose main role is to satisfy men's wishes and fulfill their erotic desires.



Fig 3: Orientalizing Arab women (49:16 /57:45)

Disney's tale presents "Orientalized" Middle Eastern women par excellence. Throughout the movie these women are objectified, silenced and presented satisfied with their status and happy with their fate. Roughly speaking, for Disney's spectatorship - and especially children - Arab women are synonymous with backwardness and passivity. Also their voicelessness and lack of agency alludes to dictatorship and the lack of democracy of the Arab world as it has been argued by Edward Said:

There has been so massive and calculatedly aggressive an attack on the contemporary societies of the Arab and Muslim for their backwardness, lack of democracy, and abrogation of women's rights that we simply forget that such notions as modernity, enlightenment and democracy are by no means

simple and agreed-upon concepts that one either does or does not find, like Easter eggs in the living-room.<sup>5</sup>

In this quote Said foregrounds that through accusing Arabs of lack of democracy and abrogations of women's rights, the West overlooked the fact that democracy, just like modernity and enlightenment, are far from being simple and predefined notions and that they should and must mean the same thing to everyone. Said states that democracy is not something that one either finds or does not find. The Western criticism of Arabs and Islam remains unfounded since notions like democracy and women's rights are not a set of internationally agreed-upon rules that all societies should abide by.

Disney's criticism of Islam is one of the predominant images that the company thrives on. An illustration of this is when Jasmine is stopped by the merchant who wants to cut her hands after she gave an apple to a hungry child. The attitude of the merchant implies that all Arabs are vulgar. Moreover, this scene implies that Arab laws revolves around cutting hands, killing people and bloodshed in general; whereas the fact is this law is exclusive only to one Arab country. The generalization and unfounded assumptions that the company adapts vis à vis Arabs facilitates the implementation of stereotypes in the audience's minds, especially children who discover the world and learn about different cultures and peoples via animated films. Disney implements that even noble acts such as feeding the poor are to be punished in Islam. Indeed, Jasmine's scene in the market is both a misrepresentation of Islam and Arab women, since Jasmine is introduced as powerless and weak and should be punished by a man and in the name of religion.

The harem is one of the tropes employed by Disney to represent the inferiority of the "Oriental" woman. As *Aladdin* escapes from the guards, he enters a harem where beautiful young women are singing and dancing. As the storyline advances, Jasmine also joins the harem of Jafar. The Oriental harem is indeed a degrading way to illustrate Arab women, claiming the inferiority of Oriental law and religion. Disney's use of the harem is marked by an eroticizing of women of the Orient and their subservience in a male dominated society. In this vein it is relevant to quote Amira Jarmakani as she states:

The predominant images of Arab women in U.S. popular culture lie at two opposite poles: Arab women are either represented as erotic, romanticized, magical, and sexualized, as with most images of belly dancers or harem girls, or they are portrayed as helpless, silent, and utterly dominated by an excessive Arab patriarchy, as in representations of the veiled woman or the harem slave.<sup>6</sup>

The notion of the veil is not recurrent in Disney's *Aladdin*. Jasmine appears to be the only main character wearing the veil as she goes out to the market for the first time. Jasmine succeeds in covering her princess identity as she covers herself with the veil. The fact is in most of Western writings about the East, the veil implies mystery and the Fig of the veiled woman suggests the need for Western unveiling for comprehension. This might signify also that the veil can be a means of self-relegation and self-effacement or simply a

<sup>5</sup>Edward Said, *Orientalism*. (New York: Penguin, 1978), p. xi

<sup>6</sup> Amira Jarmakani. *Imagining Arab Womanhood: the Cultural Mythology of Veil, Harem, and Belly Dancer in U.S.*( New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008),p.4.

limitation of women's freedom. By and large, the veil and the harem have often been exemplified in Orientalist representations as signs of Islamic oppression and lack of women's freedom.

Further, it can be maintained that Disney employs an Orientalized approach while dealing with Arab women. In addition to being racialized, Arab women are subjects of many stereotypical representations which demonize Islam and the Arab world as a whole. Through different portrayals as women of the harem, the veil, or the belly dancers, women of the Orient are objectified and depicted as oversexed, weak, backwards and inferior to Western women. Hence, the beauty of Arab woman is but a sign of her inferiority.

The veil, the harem, and oriental dance have been integrated as essential constituents of the Middle Eastern beauty canon. However, those features do not create an original catalogue of beauty for the Middle East; they rather account for the inferiority and backwardness of the Eastern model of beauty and relate it to sexual abuse and patriarchy.

Furthermore, women costumes in *Aladdin* seems to echo images of the wild and exotic. Jasmine is drawn with a light blue dress cut in the middle to separate two elements of the outfit: a bra, showing the princess' shoulders, and baggy "Arabic" pants (see Fig 4). Although this is not the only dress Jasmine wears, it is the princess' main dress. The overly sexualized dress is more connected to the notion of the harem than the notion of princess. Jasmine is actually dressed in a similar fashion to the other female characters in the movie, who are presented either as women of the harem or belly dancers.



Fig 4: the Different looks of Jasmine (17:57 /01:15:38)

The way women are presented and looked at in most Disney's animations is problematic, and *Aladdin* is no exception. The deprivation of women's agency and active roles is made possible through the means of looking. For Laura Mulvey, among the numerous pleasures cinema affords

is *scopophilia*<sup>7</sup>. This term, derived from Freud's *Three Essays on Sexuality*, can be translated as the pleasure of looking and being looked at. This can be noted in Disney films in the same manner, as the very fact of looking at female characters may provide pleasure for the audience as well as for the male characters in the animation. In this case, the female character becomes subject to different voyeuristic fantasies.

Woman in Disney films are not only the object of the audience's gaze, but she also becomes subjected to the gaze of her fellow cartoon/movie characters. In *Aladdin*, the male spectator joins the male character to act like secret agents spying on the female bodies. This is primarily showed in sequences which include the bellydancers (see Fig 5). Scopophilia, to use Mulvey's term, is another Fig of women's degradation in Disney's animated films and *Aladdin* is an example of the patriarchal discourse that the company adapts vis-à-vis women in general.



Fig 5: The audience gazing the belly dancers in *Aladdin* (48:51)

More importantly, through the identification with characters, Disney teaches youngsters about what their gender roles imply. Accordingly, children's perceptions of gender roles might be as follows: women should be passive spectacles and objects of desire for men, and men are the bearers of the look that develops their ego and narcissistic nature through looking at women in a degrading way. Simply put, the powerful nature of a male's ego is derived mainly from the powerless nature of the objectified female. Eventually, the function of the female in Disney animated films is built upon what she represents for men; the female protagonist has, in effect, no independent function. As Budd Boetticher puts it,

What counts is what the heroine provokes, or rather what she represents. She is the one, or rather the love or fear she inspires in the hero, or else the concern he feels for her, who makes him act the way he does. In herself the woman has not the slightest importance.<sup>8</sup>

Hence, Boetticher summarizes the status of women by arguing that the image of woman in itself has absolutely no importance; what matters is what this heroine represents for her male counterparts. The hero and the heroine in this case have unequal roles and values; thus it can be argued that as an icon, Jasmine's role in the movie is based on her relationship with Aladdin and other male characters. Eventually, Disney's

<sup>7</sup> Laura Mulvey. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". *Screen*. (1975). P.65

<sup>8</sup> Laura Mulvey. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". *Screen*. (1975). P, 62

heroine role is reduced to an item of decoration that adds beauty to the overall image of movie and defines her male fellows.

As Boetticher states that what is important is not the female character status and agency but rather what she evokes, Spivak tackles the issue of female agency and relates it with colonialism. In her essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", she argues that the situation of the colonized woman is worse since she is both oppressed by the colonizer and her fellow colonized male. The Indian theorist contends that although all colonized subjects suffer from oppression, the colonized female is a double-edged one. In the sense that, "as an object of historiography and as subjects of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow."<sup>9</sup>

The patriarchal norms of society keeps the woman in a dark position and make her the subject of oppression of the male colonized and the colonizer. This patriarchal discrimination is much voiced in *Aladdin* where Jasmine as a heroine has little or no voice and cannot make her own decisions. In addition to making the heroine and other female characters simply subalterns and followers of the men's needs, desires and decisions, the patriarchal discourse of Disney has elevated the association of female heroines with domestic life to the point that the whole storylines are built upon a patriarchal scenario. In *Aladdin* for instance, Princess Jasmine is depicted as living in a backward society as she can not go out of the palace, and it not only belittles the Arab subjects, but it also implies that the Arab world is a male-dominated space. That is, Jasmine is introduced as a princess who cannot see the outer world simply because she is a princess. Further, she is forced to marry a prince whom she might not like, whereas her feelings for Aladdin are repudiated because he is not a prince. Indeed, arranged marriages and archaic laws connote the patriarchal world Disney Arab princesses lives in.

As Disney reconstructs beauty norms and provides a beauty canon, this industry acts as an ideological state apparatus<sup>10</sup>, controlling and conditioning desires. In effect, the beauty of female characters renders them into objects for the male gaze and the female princesses of the corpus become commercialized products. Hence, because Disney Corporation accentuates the beauty of its female characters and includes nudity as a fundamental characteristic in the construction of female characters of color, it can be argued that the company's aim is to set objects of desire for male gaze(s), and this implement that female nudity in animation, like in films, thrives as a source for commercial success.

<sup>9</sup> Gayatri C Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory. Eds. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman. (New York: Columbia U P, 1992), 83-3.

<sup>10</sup> The power of ideology was at the core of interest of the French Louis Althusser. He contends that ideology is a colonizing force. Althusser shifted the discussion of "Ideology" to focus on everyday practices and rituals organized via social institutions; he called as "Ideological State Apparatuses" like school, religion, the family, and the media. It is through these state apparatuses, he argues, that individuals are trapped into a dominant social order. His most known essay, *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* outlines basic assumption that experience, consciousness, and subjectivity itself are effects of an imaginary relationship between individuals and their real conditions of existence.

## CONCLUSION

By a means of conclusion, it can be stated that Disney's Orientalist representation of Arabs is a strategy of implementing its cultural imperialism and colonial legacy. *Aladdin* in this case might be a rich source of information about Arabs. However, the fun and knowledge children grasp from this movie is intentionally falsified and bristled with various stereotypes and misjudgments. It is a knowledge that serves Disney's hegemonic cultural institution. This work account for the multitude of fictitious realities Disney transmits to children and adults alike. In effect, the very presentation of Arab women as inferior to men is problematic in the sense that it teaches children that the subjection of women is 'normal'. This essay has tried to show that Disney's use of technology, along with its global reputation as a producer of 'innocent' entertainment, has positioned the company as major transmitter of gender and race stereotypes. The fact is Disney's animated films, which are generally labeled as innocent, fun and entertaining, transmit a multitude of fictitious realities. *Aladdin* is one of Disney's successful animated films that restore the current/ deep-rooted misconceptions and the falsified images that the world has vis-à-vis the Arab countries in general and towards the Arab women in particular.

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