

A Comparative Analysis of the Orientalist Tropes Found in Aladdin Versions 1992 And 2019

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Abstract: *Orientalism is an essential discourse that aids to understand how West depicts eastern ideas and concepts. According to one definition of Orientalism by Said, it is also used to dominate and reconstruct the ideas of Orient. This dominant attitude gives the Western people authority over the East. There have been many aspects of the Orient that were represented in a way that would benefit the West. An example of such representation is found in Aladdin, which has more than one version. All these versions repeat the same oriental view with minor changes. But these changes do not amount to any proper or adequate representations as they give away the same idea. Walt Disney is one of the most successful providers of entertainment that often enforces racial and gender stereotypes through their movies. This enforcement shapes the thought of the audience, which eventually results in misconception. This paper will look at the Orientalist tropes present in two versions of Aladdin, one released in 1992 and another in 2019. The paper will have two parts. The first part will be a comparison, and the second will be analysis. Using the theory of Orientalism by Edward Said, the paper will discuss the reason for the continued stereotypical representation of the Middle East and Disney's contribution to it.*

Key Words: *Orientalism, Aladdin, West and East, representation and Disney.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

In the history of Disney cinema, there exist different versions of *Aladdin* from 1990's to the present. The famous story of Aladdin and princess Jasmin has not failed to entertain people till now. When children watch these movies, they will thoroughly enjoy it. Not only children, even adults will watch them for entertainment but it is essential to look at the faults in the movie that might offend certain group of people. Being one of the top entertaining industry, Disney cannot afford to make mistakes that will offend a group of people while entertaining another group. Thus, the representations they make in their movies should be accurate and acceptable by the people who are represented. In this regard, Disney has very much failed in representing the people of Middle East in their different versions of *Aladdin*. Arabs are represented as savage and barbaric people in many films that came before and after *Aladdin*. Even in this particular movie, they are represented in the same way. In 27 years, Disney has realized their fault and tried to correct their mistakes, although the ideology did not vanish completely. The first version of *Aladdin*, which was released in 1992, was retaken in 2019 with many changes to it. However, the question of representation remains the same. There has been many studies regarding these representations and theories have developed to study them. Orientalism is one such theory that talks about the representation of the East by the West and its power dynamics. The paper will deal with the movies mentioned above through the lens of Orientalism proposed by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

The existing articles and researches on different versions of *Aladdin* talk about the orientalism elements found in any one of the particular movies. They are included in the literature review section to find out the research gap for the paper and the relevance of the study. Orientalism termed by Edward Said got its attention through these representations; thus, the theory will be used in the study. Orientalism is a vital discourse that gives us an idea of how Eastern ideas and thoughts are depicted in Western Society. (Said 10) By this definition and many other definitions given by Said, *Aladdin* has been studied over the years. "Orientalism in Western Media" is a research article written by Abdelatif Errady where the author discusses how the Eastern countries are represented savagely. The paper looks at the problem of location and studies whether location plays a role in this type of representation. Through movies like Beirut and other forms of media, the author studies Orientalism. The author says that "The East is always represented in Westerner media as a different entity regarding the way of thinking and behaving... These distinctions are based on false knowledge, and they are made for separating the East, especially the Middle East, from the rest of world." This article helps in understanding the background of such stereotypical representations.(Errady 8) Another article, "The Orientalist Discourse in Thousand and One Nights 1945 and Aladdin 1992" by Amina Kader discusses the power and politics of

media and Hollywood's contribution in misrepresenting the orient. Kader points out that the politics and power of media plays a role in the kind of representation they make. The paper aids in understanding Hollywood's contribution to Orientalism. (Kader) "Arabs in Hollywood: Orientalism in films" by Najat Z Dajani is a scholarly article where the paper brings out the negative representations of Arab in movies such as Sheik and Son of the Sheik. The article studies Hollywood's role in influencing the politics of the day. (Dajani) Even though the dynamics of the media has changed to a certain level, it is still not aware of the representations it gives to the people. Even though the recent *Aladdin* movie was taken with such careful preparations to avoid backlashes, it only received more. Thus, to understand what went wrong in the representation, it is crucial to study these topics now more than ever in order to avoid mistakes in the future. No research article compares *Aladdin* 1992 and 2019. There are no scholarly research articles on the latest version of *Aladdin* concerning Orientalism. There are research articles on *Aladdin* 1992, but it has not been compared with the version released in 2019. Thus, the paper takes up both movies as primary text and analysis it.

3. OBJECTIVE:

The objective of the paper will be to compare and analyze the two versions of *Aladdin* and find out the change in representation. The paper will ask two critical questions and will conclude by answering them.

4. Research Questions and Method:

The research questions are, 1) Has the representation of Arabs changed in the latest version of *Aladdin*? 2) Are people still inclined to oriental thoughts about the Middle East? To resolve the questions, the study will compare the two movies *Aladdin* (1992), and *Aladdin* (2019) through oriental discourse. The movie is about Aladdin, a street urchin, who meets Princess Jasmine and tries to woo her with a magic lamp while he fights the wicked villain. Although the plot of the movie remains the same, certain things are changed according to the audience. However, there are instances where both movies exaggerate and distort Arab people and their way of life. The paper will look at some scenes, lyrics and instances where the movie stereotypically shows the Middle East. While comparing the films, the paper will also discuss how the 2019 film mix and matched the cultures of Arab, and India. The reason behind taking *Aladdin* as the primary text is the continuous stereotypical portrayal of Arab over the years in different versions and acceptance of the audience. The research brings to light those elements and tries to look at the reasons for such representation.

5. Orientalism in Western Media:

Visual fields like movies and advertisements play an essential role in passing ideologies and stereotypes about many things around the world. Hollywood made Eastern men wild, untidy and uncivilized while women were not more than an exotic material. "Orientalism produces the idea that the Orient is a perilous place that should be controlled and this is presented clearly in Hollywood movies, wherein, Arab associations continue to be a threat, not just for the West but also for the East itself" suggests Sulaiman Arti. (Arti 3) Orientalism is a vital discourse that gives us an idea of how Eastern ideas and thoughts are depicted in Western Society. By the definition of Orientalism by Edward Said, it is a style of ideas that are formed by the distinction between the orient and the occident. Through the theory of Orientalism put forth by Edward Said, the power dynamics between the dominant and minor culture is discussed. Orientalism is also used to dominate, reconstruct the ideas of the orient, thereby creating the authority over it. (Said 10-12) Said in his book also suggests that Orientalism played an essential role in defining the Western society. According to him, the orient has aided to represent the West as its contrasting image, experience (Said 9)

Starting from *Aladdin* to recent movies like *Extraction*, Hollywood has created an image of the East that only benefits them. This type of image leads to oriental stereotypes. Western people always looked at Egypt and other Arab countries as a place that needs to be civilized and rescued from the doom. This representation has not changed much even now. Western society established its power in these countries and considered themselves dominant through such repeated stereotypes. Hollywood's representation of these stereotypes was just like adding oil to the burning fire. It affected people's understanding of the East. Disney is no different. It also promotes various ideologies that affect kids right from an early age. Most of the Egyptian people were terrible, and even the good ones are shown in a full black outfit. Most of them were either low, dirty or evil. Yasmeen Elayan in an article state that "Many of the Arab/Arab-American male characters were depicted as insignificant workers, possessed and angry mobs, and as warriors who attacked other Arabs/Arab-Americans and Western adventurers" (Elayan 46) This is how Orientalism has spread around the world. Among many movies that stereotypically represent Middle East people, *Aladdin* can be taken as an example of the stereotypical ideology does not change even when representation change to a certain level. The movie that came in 2019 was taken with much care and effort with a caution not to jeopardize the production yet people are not satisfied. Even though there were changes in certain scenes and lyrics of the song, the stereotypical depiction still stayed.

Aladdin (1992) and Aladdin (2019):

The original movie which was released in 1992 was a hit despite the problems it had. When discussing Orientalism, the movie serves as a prime example. The representations of Middle Eastern people, mostly Arab, is a symbol of Orientalism that Edward Said talked about in his book. Orientalism shows how the people of the West see and understand the East with their stereotypical representations. *Aladdin (1992)* had various problems in terms of the representation of Arab. The evident problem is the savage representation of citizens. The Arab people shown in the movie are either cruel guards or rude shop owners. The citizens are seen in a setting where nothing is clean and neat. They are shabby and dirty. This enforces the idea that Arab people are not polished citizens or individuals. By depicting Arab people in this way, West is trying to subjugate them. This savage representation does not stop here. The song "Arabian Nights" is also problematic when it says, "Where they cut off your ear If they don't like your face, It's barbaric, but hey, it's home." These lines show that the people in Agrabah are very violent and barbaric. Though the place is an imaginative one, it represents the Arab people.

The faces of the soldiers, shop vendors are drawn as cruelly as possible, with a sharp eye and big blunt nose, but Aladdin's face does not have them. Aladdin is whitewashed when it comes to the terms of the looks. Aladdin and Jasmine looks are not the same when compared to the street merchants and Jafar. While the others look like a stereotypical Arab people, the protagonist is whitewashed. Even their accents are different from the other characters. The accents in the movie are very different from the real accent. This is due to the voice cast. The people who gave voice to the characters are white and not Arabs. The next element that was also problematic was the exotic and hyper-sexualized representation of Arab women. In almost every representation, the West sees Eastern women as a symbol of exoticism. Other examples of such representation would be *The Mummy* and many other movies. Eastern women are always related to being sensual and exotic. This notion made the creators represent most of the Arab women as belly dancers and gave them an exotic costume. The 1992 version, at many places, took the audience out of the Middle East in representation. Specific backgrounds and building resembled South Asian culture. Most importantly, Jasmine's tiger name was "Rajah" which is an Indian name. Thousands of audiences recognized these elements found in the movie, and the remake of the animation movie tried to avoid it at all costs.

The recent version of *Aladdin* stood apart from the older versions for many things. The creators took an effort to avoid mistakes that would offend the people of the represented culture, but it still received severe backlashes. In the 1992 version, as stated above, we could see a savage and barbaric representation of Arab people. This existed in the latest version also, but it is not worse like the older version. The lyrics of the Arabian Nights was also changed considering the backlash and hate it received. The original lyrics were replaced with "Where the caravan camels roam Where you wander among every culture and tongue It's chaotic, but, hey, it's home" (*Aladdin* 1:47-1:58) The lyrics were changed and the word 'barbaric' was replaced with 'chaotic'. The next thing that was taken into consideration was the inclusive characters. The voice cast of the 1992 version was all white.

The latest version tried to include more Middle East characters, but it ended up in the way it was not expected. Some of the main leads and the supporting characters that are seen in the movie may seem Arab, but they are not. The creators tried so hard to make them Arab. Naomi Scott played Jasmine, and the actress is of British Indian background, but again it was justified. Navid Negahban played Jasmine's handmaiden, and she is an Iranian-American actor. Aladdin was played by Mena Massoud, who is an Egyptian-Canadian. Numan Acar, a Turkish born actor, played the guard. In the process of having an inclusive cast member, the creators conducted auditions and chose people who are not Arab and made them into Arab.

Although it was not whitewashing, the western media is still indifferent to certain cultural representations. The problem lies in the thought that the East are interchangeable within itself. They did not find any problem in interchanging another origin actor to an Arabian one. The next element that was fixed in the latest version is that the mix and match of cultures in Jasmine's costumes were justified in this movie. In the original version, we did not know anything about Jasmine's mother, but in this version, she was given a story. Jasmine's mother came from South Asian culture, which justified South Asian elements in the movie, including the tiger's name and Jasmine's cast. Jasmine was also given authority and independence in the movie, which was already present in the older version. Nevertheless, the exotic representation, however, did not change.



(Fig1:"Aladdin 2019 Cast Compared to the Original Animation", Screenrant,2019, <https://screenrant.com/aladdin-2019-cast-animated-movie-1992-comparison/>)

After comparing the two versions of *Aladdin*, it can be said that the representation has changed, but the things that were misrepresented was given many justifications. The mix and match of cultures were given a storyline of the Queen having a South Asian origin. While *Aladdin* (1992) was full of stereotypes and racism in terms of portrayal, the latest version was still a representation of Western people's opinion on the East. The costumes, the genie, the songs and scenes had a hip-hop element to it which is absent in the original version. The songs had Bollywood touch too, but the creators justified it through Jasmine's mother. Disney had created *Aladdin* again with Oriental representation with changes in it. Colourism was also a problem that the audience could see in the movie. In the original version, Jafar, rude street vendors were shown in a dark complexion which was problematic then. However, in this version, everyone was seemingly fair. Either they present brown people in a negative way or they completely delete their existence. This is the problem with Hollywood. Considering Hollywood's contribution to these stereotypes, it is found that people are not intentionally racist or ignorant. They have been practicing this process for a long time which is normalized now. It can also be said that Hollywood uses these elements for their profit. These representations in the movies benefit only them and no other.

Moreover, it shapes the minds of the audience according to the media's wish. In this way, people may misunderstand a culture. Thus, the link between media and culture is also essential to understand. The relationship between media and culture are often interconnected, and thus, they tend to influence each other. "Media and culture are interconnected; levels of understanding various cultures influence media contents; meanwhile media platforms and contents impact cultural and day-to-day practices" (Dakrouy, 2014) This suggests that media has a certain amount of effect on culture and people who follow them. *Aladdin* is a well-recognized tale that people love to watch. The live-action was taken keeping this factor in mind, and they have included elements to make it a hit. When these representations continue in media to make it hit, it reiterates the image of Orientalism to the audience which they continue to believe. For people who have never visited the East, these media products are their source of information. Thus, the media is responsible for giving an accurate image of the world. *Aladdin*, even though tried to get a positive review from the audience, which it did, it did not completely get rid of oriental elements in it. People's mind is inclined with these stereotypes as they consider media to be an essential source of information. They believe what they see but it must change.

6. CONCLUSION:

It is evident from the examples mentioned above that the Western world has embedded these stereotypes about East in media for many years. *Aladdin* (1992) is inherently orientalist because Western interactions with the Middle East have been based on imperialism and colonialism. *Aladdin* (2019) also is orientalist to some extent as the movie continued to portray Arab as stereotypical Middle Eastern country. East is being exoticized, vilified for many years in the western media industry. This practice and portrayal will cease to exist only when people truly understand other cultures. Theories like Orientalism help people to understand what goes wrong in the representation and aid them in understanding the problems of such representations. The paper is concluded by stating that the representations in *Aladdin* versions are oriental, and it has not changed enough to eradicate the existing stereotypes in the minds of the audience.

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