# Mad Otherness and Condensed Misrepresentation of Islam in American Cinema: Selected Scenes from Black Panther and Iron Man

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**Abstract:**

This article tackled the issue of the misrepresentation of Islam in American cinema since the 9/11 events. The attacks intensified otherness and Orientalism, therefore values of Islam and the image of veiled Muslim women were disfigured in some American films. The Consumers of these cinematic contents are exposed to misrepresentation, misjudgment, and a confined image of the Hijab and Islam. Thus, the purposes of this paper were to review, analyze, and interpret how some scenes display falsified images of Islam, and to propose actions to oppose cinematic Orientalism. Employing a shot analysis approach, the study investigated two selected movies, 'Iron Man' and 'Black Panther.' The findings revealed that both films leaked condensed action scenes that promote stereotypical and biased depiction of Islam. By portraying Muslim men as violent savages menacing people, and veiled women as oppressed and weak, the movies presented a speech that the paper called to contest.

**Keywords:** Cinematic Misrepresentation; American cinema; Otherness; Orientalism; Islam.

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## . INTRDUCTION

Movies and series, whether based on scenarios, books, or comics, have the power to shape beliefs, attitudes, and political doctrines. When producers invest in cinematic projects, they often incorporate their subjective beliefs or aspects they want the world to adopt. It is from this perspective that a production depicting Islam in a grotesque manner becomes a personification of ideologies. Thus, the presence of otherness and Orientalism on American screens reveals viewpoints and emotions like fear, hatred, stereotypes, and racism. The screen becomes the medium through which these elements are molded together. This misrepresentation, ignited by historical events such as the 9/11 attacks, has paved the way for media and entertainment shows to play a prominent role in amplifying negative perceptions, often portraying Muslims as violent and backward. These portrayals were quickly judged by Americans, leading to Islam being viewed as a terror religion. Every violent practice associated with the Islamic faith was generalized and attributed to the entire Muslim community, particularly in America. The problem intensified as media and movies established a strong correlation between terrorism and Islam. Consequently, any aspect of the Islamic religion, whether it is a practice or an item, was portrayed as malicious. To avoid being labeled entirely Islamophobic, producers in cinema employ a tactic of incorporating a few condensed scenes with multiple anti-Islamic images rather than dedicating an entire movie to the theme. These condensed scenes implicitly remind viewers that Muslims are the source of violence in America and elsewhere. In some instances, the entire scenario revolves around American heroes combating terrorists of Islamic background. Consequently, discrimination and harassment have become common, leading to a sense of fear among Muslims. One of the targeted aspects in American cinema is the Hijab of the Muslim women; another target is Islamic peaceful core. Therefore, this paper aims to address the issue of the repeated leaked distortion of Hijab and Islamic values. To achieve this, the research sets several objectives.

Firstly, it seeks to review and analyze selected American films to identify scenes that depict Islam in a falsified and biased manner. Secondly, it aims to interpret the underlying ideologies and beliefs conveyed through these scenes. Then, the research aims to propose actionable measures and strategies to counter the perpetuation of cinematic Orientalism. Based on the identified problem and objectives, this study puts forth two hypotheses. It is hypothesized that the selected American films have indeed misrepresented Islam. Another hypothesis suggests that the misrepresentation of Islam in American cinema is influenced by cautious intentional otherness and Orientalism. To accomplish these objectives and test the hypotheses, a shot analysis approach will be employed, examining specific scenes within the movies "Iron Man" and "Black Panther." In brief, this investigation delves into the misrepresentation of Islam in specific scenes on the American screen, shaped by otherness and Orientalism.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

## 2.1 Otherness

Numerous theories are used to explain the reasons behind stereotypes, prejudices, misrepresentations, and racism against Islam. The ones this paper adopts as lenses are otherness and Orientalism since they describe the devaluation and the estrangement of Islam and Muslim-veiled women that serve the political agendas. In general, and in the present context, the term strange Other can depict Muslims. This misrepresentation is linked to the development of "racism" and Islamophobia, rooted in the cultural representations of the Other (Uzma, Ayesha, Adnan, & Youssef Mohamme Youssef, 2021, p. 1126).

Establishing the line that separates self and Other is a product of historical circumstances. To approve this, the West, mainly America, views Arabs, the Middle East, and Muslims as second-degree humans after the white, superior, developed, educated, productive, and creative people in Europe, America, and elsewhere. Such attributes grant them power and authority to classify or re-classify societies and promote or put down ideologies (Maissuwong, 2012, pp. 01-06). The other is primitive, aggressive by nature, and therefore a terrorist, oppressive, and

underdeveloped (Najib & Hopkins, 2019, pp. 107-116). Such classifications are indirectly expressed and intended to be realized and adapted by the audiences of the different movies and series launched across all platforms. Perceiving the Other with these racist notions makes its cultural and spiritual attributes prone to quick misjudgment and harassment. To put it differently, the Hijab or Burqa that Muslim women put on become symbols of terror and backwardness and are unconsciously linked to violence and subjugation. Anyone projecting the symbols of the different Other is, without fail, oppressive and underdeveloped (Semmerling, 2006). Arriving at this state, people who were involved in assaults and actions of aggression, such as the 9/11 attacks, along with all men and women who have an affiliation to Islam, are abhorring, different, strange, and menacing Other. Another example of these preconceptions is viewing the American unveiled woman as more open-minded, cool, and peaceful than the covered woman, even if she is American. Practicing otherness can be turned automatically into violent racism and harassment because it is a practice of unjust, unfair generalization and stereotypes. Muslim women often face discrimination and anti-Muslim sentiments (Dana, Lajevardi, A. R. Oskooii, & L. Walker, 2018, pp. 629-677). To illustrate, various Muslim women reported being aggressively grabbed by their veils by random attackers, including a San Jose State University student who was choked when a man pulled her headscarf from behind in a parking garage (Manifestation of Islamophobia [Press release]. , 2017). The veil turned from a self-protection aid to a cause of harassment and attacks. By wearing the veil, the Muslim woman becomes an outsider to her hosting community, not belonging to it; she is the Other who is socially abandoned or hated. The practice of Othering against Muslims extended to marginalizing them in society, limiting their roles, or objectifying them. To elaborate, otherness defines Muslims as terrorists relating them, consciously or unconsciously, to images of terrorist figures, riffles, bombs, Bin Laden, or any tool of violence and destruction; an image that was gradually constructed over the years in the minds of the Western people, and remained correlated with whoever or whatever displays Islamic attributes. Contemporary otherness is

a product of recycled self-valuation, Muslims' devaluation, and Bin Laden's images.

## 2.2 Orientalism

Otherness goes hand in hand with Edward Said's concept of Orientalism which presents an interrelationship between the West and East. Otherness attunes to Orientalism since they are both based on historical factors, stereotypes, and prejudice. Besides, they both work by classifying the West as superior and the East as inferior. Edward Said argued that the "West" concept only achieves distinction when confronted by an inferior other (Said, 2003). With Orientalism, westerners designed an ideal image for themselves and an opposite image for Arabs and Muslims. Orientalism gave Muslims a primitive, strange, misogynist, aggressive, and exotic nature. Riding camels, wearing large dark-colored clothes, thick beards, covering and oppressing their women, and wielding any weapon are all familiar oriental images associated with Arabs and Muslims. Said pointed out that Orientalism has not just built its identity but also created an incorrect picture of Islamic people, their culture, and its essential ideas and ideals (Said, Covering Islam, 1997). It is a thesis promoted through the media, including movies and series. It started with colonial theories and evolved into a subfield of postcolonial studies, but it has continued expanding to involve other fields such as cinematography, art, and cultural studies. Even after centuries of decolonization, the practice is still ongoing and promoted. Although modern nations have moved beyond their colonial histories and communities are merging, Orientalism remains solid and prevalent. This is due to the fact that the West is producing more of it and spreading it to the world. This impact is vast and profound on account of the American propaganda machinery. Hollywood is widely recognized as the center of the American film industry, surpassing the rest of the world. Thus, its influence, popularity, and power are undeniable (Maisuwong, pp. 01-06). Bearing this in mind, the Western discourse reaches more people worldwide as if it adapts to globalization and technology. To exemplify, aggressive domination and patriarchy, stereotypical ideas about Oriental men, were excuses to colonize and "civilize" Arabs, and now they have

become images to entertain people. The West did not update these conceptions for many centuries. After the 9/11 events, these images were heavily invested, then the public eventually emerged with chronic Islamophobia. Islamic issues became opulent material for public opinion, an item for malignant publicity, and a questionable heritage that goes from generation to generation. American TV and cinema are involved in a war against Islam, considering it as an inveterate enemy, or, at least, a questionable, debatable, doubted, and feared religion, a root of terrorism and dehumanization. (Khan & Umbreen, 2022, pp. 1-18).

Orientalism made the world appear white and black, out of color, and stained Muslims worldwide with a dark identity. In the past, when painting was the popular mean of the exhibition, Orientalism was displayed through Arab men with swords, horses, or camels in an oasis, and women bringing water from wells with their brown skins and messy hair, or belly dancing for men (Naqvi, 1973, pp. 259–272). Then, when the news became the medium of displaying and transmitting credible information, news about Muslims and Islam concerning rape, pedophilia, theft, hacking, and terrorism dominated news headlines. When series and movies became the muse of people, especially the youth, they were recruited to promote Orientalism and otherness. The correct Islamic teachings of peace, decency, and solemnity were consequently "Orientalised". One challenge of today's world is how cinema deals with ideologies in an age when young people have become easier to manipulate. Resembling an absorbing sponge, they can take in any idea without proper processing. The film industry awoke fear and aggression toward the East, particularly Muslims. On the American screen, Orientalism with otherness reinforced Islamophobia and false stereotypes.

## 3. The Real Image of Islam
### 3.1 Muslim Woman and her Veil in Islam

Otherness, and Orientalism were applied to explain the Western representation of Islam and to show the antagonism between Western beliefs and actual Muslim behaviors. In the West, for instance, women's cover or veil is an embodiment of backwardness and a sign of possible

threat, while for Muslims, it is a head and body cover that prevents the woman from being exposed to all men, taking into consideration the need to preserve modesty, and the humble image of the woman. That being the case, the veil does not entail any act of terrorism, and it should never be linked, in one way or another, to aggression or any suspicious behaviors, as the Western stereotypes suggest. The veil of women is not a mean of violence and subjugation. It does not render women to be passive objects; the idea of the veil is to protect her and to celebrate her identity. It also suggests that women should be judged by their character, not their physical appearance.

The ultimate role of the veil is mentioned in the Quran, the holy book that Muslims follow and apply in their lives, as shown in the following verse: "... and not display their beauty except what is apparent, and they should place their veils over their bosoms..." (Quran An-Nur 24:31). This verse elucidates (God's) Allah's order to Muslim women to cover their bodies, and it does not include anything about using it as camouflage to hide bombs, kill people, or cause harm. A Muslim woman puts the veil as a covering garment to preserve herself and her dignity so that she does not fall into traps that lustful aggressive men may set with their malicious intentions. When women's bodies are too exposed, men naturally become sexually provoked. By wearing the veil, Muslim women announce to the world that they glorify their religion and respect the orders of their God. In this vein, another verse from the Quran recites: "O Prophet! Ask your wives, daughters, and believing women to draw cloaks over their bodies. In this way, they will likely be recognized ˹as virtuous˺ and not be harassed. And Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful." (Quran Al Ahzab 33:59). This verse also does not express any Western images of the veil. God's order was meant to build a fortress in which the woman shelters away from harm and sins, an aspect that has been proved in the Muslim world. It is also a sign that Western beliefs that women are oppressed in Islam are deceitful and mistaken prejudices, for Islam is, without a doubt, protective towards women.

Islam did not come to oppress or disregard women's beauty by imposing a veil; rather, it came to ensure their welfare. Furthermore, the Quran includes several verses that grant women's rights and concentrate on men's duties towards them: "O mankind! From your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person, created his mate, and from this pair scattered (like seeds) countless men and women..." (Quran An-Nisa 4:1). Islam also advocated treating a woman with kindness and serving her needs, even if she has money. It is a religion of justice between men and women in all aspects of life. "They (your wives) are your garments, and you are a garment for them." (Quran Al Baqarah 2:187). This verse advocates partnership and love between man and woman. Islam honors women, guarantees them many rights, and forbids any violent or primitive behavior towards them that screens usually display and entail (Sakr, 2002, pp. 821-850).

## 3.2. Islam and Peace

The veil reminds women to be courteous and peaceful, inasmuch as all the teachings of Islam are practical training for people to be peaceful and respectful. These Islamic principles are social values, behaviors, worship, daily practices, and beliefs. It is worth mentioning that the Islamic greeting itself is "peace" to implement peace in the daily lives of Muslims. Islam prohibited violence, oppression, aggression, and terrorism. It promoted tolerance, equality, security, freedom, and rightfulness. In Islam, killing one person is perceived as killing all people. Islam recommends kindness even with enemies, if they ask for peace it should be granted to them. "And if they lean toward peace, so should you; and put your trust in God; He is the All-hearing, All-knowing." (Quran Al Anfal 8:61). Additionally, the Quran discloses that peace is one of the names of God himself: "He is God, other than whom there is no god, the King, the Holy, the Peace, the Defender, the Guardian, the Mighty, the Omnipotent, the Supreme." (Quran Al Hachr 59:23). This verse shows that peaceful practices are essential in Islam. No Islamic teaching dictates the simulated images of kidnapping planes or murdering hundreds of people. Correlating Islam with violence and

terrorism is a stereotype delineated in American minds and cinema (Abu Zaid, 2018, pp. 29-38).

**4. Islam and Muslims in the American Screen**.

Cinema creates an illusion of reality through its representational techniques. This illusion and decisiveness is a complex construction that involves the filmmaker's choices. Fans of Hollywood can be deceived about Islam. Despite the agreeable productions of Hollywood, and the breathtaking stories and effects, there is something to doubt and question behind every depiction of Muslims and Arabs (Yunis & Picherit-Duthler, 2011, pp. 31-51).

**4.1 Black Panther**

Black Panther is a movie released in 2018 from Marvel Studios about T'Challa's journey to be the Black Panther and the king of an African nation. In a scene, the film showed a group of veiled Muslim women as hostages inside a truck led by a group of Muslim men. The main shots from the selected scene are:

· Muslim men being rude and harsh with women.

· Men behaved suspiciously.

· Presenting a dark setting displaying an empty road among trees.

· A gloomy mood.

· Women looked weak and scared, as if they were subjugated, oppressed, and driven into the unknown.

· One escaped and appeared to be a strong heroine in the movie.

· She got off the truck, hit the men, and tried to liberate the hostages.

· One of the Arab masked men threatened one of the women by saying, "Wallahi, I'll shoot her." Putting in mind that the word "Wallahi" delivers the meaning of "I swear."

· The heroin could hit the dangerous man, and the veiled woman was liberated.

**4.2 Iron Man**

Iron Man is a 2008 Marvel film about Tony Stark who built a suit powered by a miniaturized reactor to fight evil and terrorism**.** The main aspects of the movie scene involving Islamic representations are:

· The appearance of veiled Muslim women in Iron Man was a twenty-second scene that condensed several images**.**

· Muslim men oppressed them and were about to be murdered.

· They live in a terrorist community.

· Violence and explosions were around.

· Their clothes and veils were worn out and dirty.

· All they did was scream and tremble in fear.

· Muslim men menaced women with guns.

· Iron Man, the American superhero, saved them in a second from the oppressing men (terrorists).

Evidentially, there are similarities between the scenes of the two movies, as they both include terrorist men and oppressed women with a solid apparent reference to Islam.

**4.3 Discussion**

In the light of the previous discussion and exposition of shots and after supplying the research paper with principles of the Quran, and explanatory theories**,** one may say that misrepresenting a particular religion, ideology, or people on screens cannot be prevented, as it is sometimes labeled as sarcasm, art or accidental behavior. However, it is the repeated and intense misrepresentation of a specific group more than another that may raise serious concerns (Rana, 2007, pp. 148-161). In the case of Arabs and Muslims, Jack Shaheen believes that the negative portrayals of Arab characters in media cannot be prevented. In fact negative depictions of Arabs can lead to unjust perceptions (2001). This confirms Hollywood's exaggeration of the mutilation of Muslims and Arabs. Withal, movies such as 'Black Panther' and 'Iron Man' prove the existence of stereotypical otherness and Orientalism in contemporary Western communities.

It is worth noting that the films' depiction of women being threatened and kidnapped can be interpreted as a symbol of the 9/11 hijacking, an accumulation of fear from Islam, and a reminder to the world that Muslims are more likely to be a threat. It is also a recycling of the idea that veils and men oppress Muslim women. To advocate this notion, in his book 'Reel Bad Arabs, Shaheen presumed that in numerous films, Arab women have

been subject to humiliation, demonization, and objectification for their sexuality (Shaheen, 2001). Both Black Panther and Iron Man promoted a stereotypical image of Muslim women as weak and oppressed.

By focusing on the targeted shots from the selected films, the scene of Black Panther manifested, as colonial studies expert Professor Sherene Razack asserted, the stereotypes of the barbaric Muslim man, the oppressed Muslim woman, and the imperiled non-Muslim. Sherene Razack is not the only scholar who discussed Black Panther's scene. Sami Aziz, the Muslim Chaplain at Wesleyan University, proclaimed that the movie 'Black Panther' holds a common trend in American films where Muslims are portrayed as violent, barbaric, and overly sexual. This perpetuates the typical Hollywood formula of using Muslims as the villains (Shahawy, 2018). The latter conclusion reinforces the idea that 'Black Panther' misrepresented Muslims. Presenting a man swearing by Allah while carrying a weapon and pointing it at the head of a weak, oppressed woman was not cast by chance. Why the Muslim is always cast to be an anti-hero? It is not accurate or fair to cast Islam as an anti-hero or to generalize all Muslims as villains repeatedly. As the West misrepresents Russians in their movies as long-lasting evil enemies due to historical political conflicts, it remains unfair to paint all Russians as enemies or villains. Similarly, it is unjust and inaccurate to portray all Muslims and Arabs as wicked.

'Iron Man' was not different from 'Black Panther'. In just twenty seconds, this film hits almost every stereotype and succeeded in constructing fear of Muslims. Muslim women were portrayed as victims, and were easily homogenized and oppressed (How Many Muslim Stereotypes Can Iron Man Cram Into 20 Seconds?, 2022). By considering the different condensed shots of the selected scene; the oppression of veiled Muslim women; their worn out, dirty, dark clothes and veils; their dark and messy hair; their weakness and submission to men; the appearance of aggressive men, it can be understood that producers want to correlate the Islamic environment by mess, backwardness, violence, and evil. The use of dark, harsh shots and the selection of women as victims provoke the emotions of hate and disgust against the falsified Islamic treatment of

women. This process ultimately constructs Islamophobia in the hearts and minds of people consuming these movies. Moreover, the arrival of Iron Man, the American superhero, to save the women is a connotation of Western ideals and superiority. Incorporating terrorism and inferiority to Islamic characters in these scenes is disturbing and admonishing.

Remarkably, the scenes are full of suspense and related to the rest of the film, despite being minor short shots. Being exposed to them, viewers wonder what the superheroes and the protagonists will do next and link events with excitement to the ongoing journey of the heroes. Being overwhelmed with suspense may cause people to overlook gender representation, religions, and ethnicities. The hero was presented as doing the ideal job of saving weak people and fighting bad guys. The hero and his deeds take over the show, especially in short, thrilling, condensed, and visually engaging scenes. In this regard, both movies were centered around the protagonist. Condensed misrepresentation is a cinematic technique to avoid criticism and to distract audiences by sliding anti-Islamic ideas into short scenes in a long-awaited film that promotes heroism and peace. By scrolling through social media or discussing both films with fans, even Muslim fans it can be observed that few people remember the embedded stereotypical scenes or give them an importance. At the same time, they express admiration for scenarios and heroes. The producers condensed everything into separate short flickers. It is undeniable that movies such as Black Panther and Iron Man are entertaining and appealing, yet one should consider the details that can be involved in separate short flickers, significantly if they are misrepresenting a religion.

In both films, Muslim women are depicted as oppressed and in need of rescue, perpetuating stereotypes of Muslim women as victims of their religion. Furthermore, both movies associate Muslim men with terrorism. However, there are differences in how they present this distortion. In "Black Panther," one of the veiled women escapes, and helps another woman. On the other hand, in "Iron Man," the American superhero saves the veiled Muslim women, reinforcing the narrative of the West as the savior of Muslims. These similarities and differences highlight how both

films contribute to the misrepresentation of Islam while incorporating distinct narratives and contexts, and the madness of otherness and Orientalism lies in the cautious ability to condense all these stenotypes in one thrilling scene.

## 5. Suggestions

To develop a constructive and an accepting attitude towards religions and ideologies, it is vital for individuals to maintain an open-minded perspective about what they watch. People should not be tolerant of every source of information. Ultimately, the objective of cinema should be to promote mutual respect and peaceful coexistence among people of various backgrounds and beliefs. Evil attacks and deeds are performed by people of all backgrounds and not only by ones from a specific origin or religion. In light of what has been discussed so far, the paper can be regarded as follows:

· A call for Muslim immigrants to display an embellished image of Islam: If Muslim immigrants follow the teachings of Islam, if Muslim men treat their women kindly and avoid violence, and if Muslim women behave humbly and nicely, the stereotypes will be challenged.

· A call for all Muslim actors and producers in America to interfere by writing scenarios and producing movies and series that do not display negative images of Islam. That is to say, self-representation in Hollywood is similar to political activism.

· A call to question and criticize the deceptive representations of Islam. Scholars, researchers, and all reasonable actors and producers are invited to speak out and criticize the repeated misrepresentations of Muslims.

· A call to Muslim critics to scrutinize any art made in Western countries. Muslims should have their eyes open to every detail.

· A call to add veiled female characters without stereotypes and Oriental views. Muslim characters can be ordinary workers, friendly neighbors, good advisors, best friends, honest employees, and strong women rather than suspicious villains.

· A call for producers in America to create a Muslim couple living in harmony and love like any other Western couple within any Hollywood or Netflix project.

· A call to make Muslim men and women as main characters, as Hollywood and many other entertainment platforms plan to include more women and black people as protagonists, such as the black Little Mermaid and She-Hulk.

· Lastly and most importantly, this paper is a diffusion of awareness among young audiences about the misrepresentation of Islam. Most American works are directed at young people. Therefore, it is necessary to convince young audiences that what they see is not necessarily true and that most Muslims are absolved from the 9/11 attacks.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Various American films offended the Muslim community by misrepresenting Islam and its symbols. Reasons behind this falsification are the belief in the superiority of the West, the incorporation of the principles of otherness on Muslims, inventing ill and mad stereotypes about Muslim women, and correlating any act of violence and terrorism with Islam. Such false considerations were further intensified following the event of 9/11. The aftermath of the attack was recycled ideologically and contradicted the Islamic ideals that most Muslims practice. Through movies such as 'Black Panther' and 'Iron Man' Islamophobia was encouraged and put Muslims on the spot of the violent Other, exhibiting stereotypical Oriental images of Muslim men beating their submissive women. This study has pointed out the condensed scenes that served as a technique to make people overlook these misrepresentations. Thus, it is recommended to take action by calling on producers in America and elsewhere to reconsider the false representation of Islam in movies and to create ideal, peaceful Muslim characters or even superheroes who can save people from all over the world, including America. Towards this end, the article contributes to the

literature concerned with the misrepresentation of Islam in contemporary media.

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