

Harem Girls and Terrorist Men: Media Misrepresentations of Middle Eastern Cultures

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Abstract

Previous literature has deliberated on the political intentions behind the stereotypical images of Middle Eastern cultures in Hollywood and the American mainstream media. Through exposure to Hollywoodian and other Western media stereotypes, the general public assumes the same biases. Hollywood tends to present Middle Eastern men either as terrorists or billionaires (Arti, 2007) and women as belly dancers or else as oppressed with a desperate need for American liberation (Mishra, 2007). This critical study mainly attempts to understand three issues. First of all, the essay questions the reasons behind framing the Middle East in such a negative way in the U.S. mainstream media. Secondly, it discusses Muslim women's liberation. Finally, it redefines the "other's" culture and recommends some alternative techniques other than the U.S. mainstream media to better understand and interact with Middle Eastern cultures. The main importance of this research is to resolve cross-cultural misunderstandings so that people can communicate effectively with one another. Also, this study provides an opportunity to embrace a new perception other than what is implied by the American mainstream media. In short, this work is an attempt to bridge the gap between the West and the East.

Introduction

According to media and cultural studies researchers, typical representations of Arabs and Muslims by Hollywood are used to justify the existence of American armies in the Middle East, American interference in Middle Eastern policies, and to rationalize U.S. support for Israel's interests (Alsultany, 2012). While the Middle East is portrayed as restricting, male dominating, inferior, and repressive, Western hegemonic ideologies are rarely or never questioned. This article responds to certain misrepresentations in movies like *Sex and the City 2* (King, 2010) and *The Dictator* (Charles, 2012) as well as in newspaper articles like *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* from an insider standpoint.

Using critical analysis as a methodology and Orientalism as a theoretical framework, I investigate three main questions. Accordingly, the article is divided to three sections. First of all, I explore why the American media misrepresents the Middle East. This section highlights three factors that lead to misinterpreting the Middle East: judging based on Hollywood's stereotypical images; observing Middle Eastern cultures from a Western lens; and interpreting Middle Eastern culture according to a theoretical framework.

The second section questions what Middle Eastern women's culture is like and do the women need to be saved. I will address here four issues, which are in the spotlight of the Western media regarding the culture of Middle Eastern women. Those issues include: the misrepresentation of the veil or the *hijab*; the men's right to get married to four wives; the division in society based on gender; and saving Middle Eastern women from their oppressing culture.

The final section questions who the "other" are and how could they be seen differently. I will briefly define the mysterious "other"—the term Said used to refer to the Oriental culture—and provide alternative lenses through which to see Middle Eastern cultures instead of Hollywood's distorted lens and that of the biased media that saturates American society.

Method

Using critical analysis, I will respond to some recent snapshots of Orientals by Western media including facts about *The Dictator*, a scene about the veil from *Sex and the City 2*, representations of Muslim women in the *New York Times* (Greenberg and Miazhevich, 2012), and representations of Saudi women in the *Washington Post* (Mishra, 2007). Those snapshots in particular include topics, which are continuously emerging in the media, like women's freedom, Muslim women's oppression, the practice of veiling, and the barbaric Eastern society.

Since the way Americans see Arabs and Muslims is very problematic and controversial because of media misrepresentations, critical analysis is an appropriate method for the addressed topic for the following reasons. First, this method challenges the public to question and investigate future representations of Orientals in the U.S. popular media with an open mind. Additionally, a critical perspective is a useful tool for uncovering oppressive power and reading beyond media discourse or/and image (Miller, 2005). Additionally, as I am a Middle Eastern female researcher who lives in the United States, I will apply a self-reflective rationale as well. This will allow me to critique misrepresentations based on my actual experiences in the Middle East in contrast to my daily exposure to the American mainstream media.

Theoretical Framework

As a theoretical framework I will address the media misrepresentation of the Middle East through the lenses of Edward Said's Orientalism and Griffin's Agenda Setting Theory. According to Littlejohn (2010), Edward Said's study on "otherness" is considered to be a branch of postcolonial theory, which critiques colonialism. The term "Orientalism" can indicate both the Orient and the East. In particular, Orientalism refers to cultures that exist in the Middle East or North Africa. In the 18th century, "Orientalist" was a traditional term for researchers specializing in Oriental Studies. More importantly, Said redefined the term when he published his book *Orientalism* in 1978; here Said used the term "Orientalism" to specify the misrepresentations of the Eastern cultures by Western scholars, writers, and artists (Said, 1978).

Said (1978) introduces the concept "Orientalism" to illustrate the process by which Western scholars generally attempt to know and represent the Orient. He argues that its ultimate goal is to represent and/or reconstruct the Orient as the Western eye wants to see it. Since Orientalism is ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promotes the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, "us") and the strange (the Orient, the East, "them"), the result is usually to polarize the distinction—the Orient becomes more Oriental, the Western more Western—and to limit a human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies (p. 46). He also argues that Western scholars create the Orient by means of their dominating position over the Orient. He demonstrates how Orientalism homogenizes everything in the Orient so much so that certain things, certain types of statements, certain types of works have seemed for the Orientalists correct (p. 202). Since the Orient is considered to be fraught with decrepitude and political impotency, "the European Orientalist found it his duty to rescue some portion of a lost, past classical grandeur in order to 'facilitate amelioration' in the present Orient" (p. 79). In so doing, the Orientalists created generalizations about the Orient, its peoples, its cultures, and so forth.

Said shows that the Orient is constructed and represented as consistently in need of corrections and helps from somewhere else and by virtue of being superior. In terms of civilization, culture, and race, the West qualifies for that role. And since the Orient is unable to rely on itself, to speak of itself, to make necessary refinement for itself, it has become an imperative for the West to aid the Orient. This, Said argues, is how Orientalism provides the logical foundation for why the Orient should remain under Western imperialism.

In line with Said's perspective on Orientalism, Griffin (2010) elaborates his conception of Agenda Setting Theory, which explains how the selectivity of the media is the result of corporate interest. He demonstrates that the media tends to spotlight particular behaviors of Islamic individuals and then advance the claim that all Muslims have the same attributes that are characteristically negative. By the concept of selective exposure, he means that the mass media exposes only certain images while ignoring others that do not fit with the political agenda (Griffin, 2010 p. 378). For instance, the media tend to focus on tragic events related to Muslims and Arabs while rarely highlighting the achievements of Muslim or Arab students in the United States. Griffin recognizes another successful media strategy that takes imagery out of its original context and then displays it in a negative way. Thus, he illustrates the mechanism through which the media distorts public opinion by serving up only a partial picture of the original reality.

Why are Middle Eastern Cultures Misinterpreted?

Based on Said's Orientalism and on typical imagery of the media and movies, one may conclude that there are three problems in the Western understanding of Eastern cultures. First, the Western view of the East is greatly influenced by the stereotypical negative images that Hollywood films consistently present (Arti, 2007). Such a false portrayal prevents the West from knowing the reality of Middle Eastern cultures.

Secondly, Western scholars' observations of Middle Eastern cultures are evaluated and interpreted through the perspective of Western values. This usually leads to misinterpretation of that which has been observed. Thirdly, certain Western scholars have based their assumptions only on academic knowledge without ever having visited a Middle Eastern culture. Hence, their conclusions often tend to be partial, misleading, and deceptive. The following section will address each of these issues in detail.

Middle Eastern Cultures Based on the Stereotypes of Hollywood

Hollywood mostly tends to represent Arabian and Islamic culture in a negative way. Muslims and Arabs are often portrayed as billionaires, bombers, and belly dancers (Kozlovic, 2007). Hollywood's and the general Western media's misinterpretations of Arabian and Islamic cultures fulfill political intentions (Arti, 2007). Through living in the United States I have come to understand why people hold stereotypical negative assumptions about those of us who identify as Muslims and/or Middle Eastern. The selective, one-sided media in the United

States is a major proponent of the false representation of Muslim culture. Having lived most of my life in an Islamic culture has given me the opportunity to distinguish between the actual merciful principles of Islam versus the Western media's distortion of Islam. The Western media typically represents the Muslim woman as one of three stereotypes. She is either a belly dancer or an oppressed housewife who has no identity or voice, and lately, the terrorist woman has been added as a new cipher to entertain the audience.

Many would claim that these Hollywood-fabricated stereotypical images are the result of the 9/11 attacks and 9/11's association with Muslim individuals. Ironically, such misrepresentations were generated for decades prior to the 9/11 attacks. Hollywood's stilted portrayals of Middle Eastern cultures serve two main purposes, one political and the other financial. Current political factors include protecting Israel from its surrounding Middle Eastern neighbor countries, the Iranian Islamic revolution, and the Soviet Union's demise (Arti, 2007). The Western media's stereotypes seem designed to justify an American military presence in Middle Eastern countries rich with mineral wealth and natural resources such as Iraq's oil. As the media was celebrating American troops' return from Iraq, the publicized heading was "mission successfully accomplished." As everyone was joyously celebrating, two questions crossed my mind. First, which mission was accomplished? Secondly, where are the "nuclear weapons of mass destruction" that were claimed to have existed? There was not even one image of such weapons; thus, the only mission that the United States accomplished was destroying Iraq and killing a massive number of unarmed citizens.

As long as Middle Eastern cultures are negatively represented as being in need of Western modernization, in need for American troops that offer peace through civil wars and in spite of dictators' powers, and in need of a Western value of feminist freedom, those representations will guarantee the acceptance of Western troops' presence in different Middle Eastern and/or Islamic cultures. Because of this, educated Middle Eastern women with effective roles in society are never seen in Hollywood movies.

As implied by Agenda Setting Theory, the media's negative and selective exposure is the result of the American political agenda (Griffin, 2010). For instance, the film *The Dictator* (Charles, 2012) aims to portray negative attitudes and domination of the Arab dictators. This comedy film totally ignores the many major positive reforms that followed the Arab Spring uprisings, and instead insists on highlighting the same old representations of Arabs as billionaires and barbaric.

Here, too, the financial factor comes into play, as stereotypical images of Middle Eastern cultures in a Hollywood film has in past guaranteed mega-ticket sales in excess of 415 million dollars at the box office, as was the case with *Sex and the City 2* (King, 2010). When this movie was critiqued as offensive to Middle Eastern values, the producer claimed that the movie had nothing to do with the Middle East (Murty, 2010). Ironically, the film evidenced that the opposite was true; there were many disparaging themes, including a particularly offensive scene in which the four American actresses mock a Middle Eastern woman who is wearing her veil. Many in the movie audience seemed to find the American characters' mockery entertaining, but I thought it was inappropriate. Wouldn't Westerners take offense at an Arabic film that ridiculed their behaviors and modes of dress?

Observing the East from a Western Lens

Scholars suggest that observation is a way of understanding a culture; however, things only become meaningful in relation to others (Jandt, 2001). People who come from different backgrounds tend to theorize and interpret phenomena incorrectly because they fail to grasp the bigger picture of indigenous societies. For instance, I was totally shocked while watching a YouTube video of a Western journalist filming in Saudi Arabia. She was filming in a well-known walking area in Jeddah near the sea. The journalist reported that Saudi women are not allowed to walk in the streets based on her observation. In truth, it is unlikely that either men or women would walk on the streets in the daytime. The immensely hot temperatures of around 40 °C (104 °F), in addition to the humidity, make it difficult for women with their hijab to walk outdoors during the day. Like other Saudi citizens, I have often walked outside one hour before sunset. This is the only time of day that people can tolerate the heat in my country. Thus, "Observations should not be treated as absolute" in referring to stereotype (Chen & Starosa, 1998, p. 227).

Interpreting the East Based on Theoretical Framework

In order to understand another dissimilar culture, a scholar must be engaged in that culture to a certain extent. Possession of a doctoral degree in international relations or intercultural communication is not enough to accord scholars illumination about the true nature of a culture. Direct interaction with the locals is key to intercultural understanding. A scholar must communicate with indigenous people to perceive their customs, values, and views. For example, the Irish scholar Halliday (1995) described the populations of Islamic countries

such as Saudi Arabia and Sudan as victims of their regimes. Moreover, he theorized that these regimes repress their populations in the name of Islam. As a Saudi woman who had lived most of my life in Saudi Arabia, I was perplexed by Halliday's claim. However, having now lived for a while in a Western society has allowed me to understand how Halliday could have arrived at such a faulty conclusion. Outsiders, and even scholars, will often shape their assumptions about others based on what they are not instead of who they are. Kenneth Burke referred to this idea as the negative, or the "Thou Shalt Not" (Griffin, 2011).

Most Western commentators perceive the Saudi culture as oppressive, male-dominated, and religious to the point of fanaticism. However, they fail to recognize that the above attributes do not reflect the actual culture at large. Certain cultural mores have contributed to the Western misperception of Islamic cultures such as that of Saudi Arabia. For instance, non-Muslims view the Islamic cultures' bans on alcohol, drugs, and premarital sex as evidence of suppression, but in fact, the majority of Saudis view these prohibitions in a different light. The laws stem from our faith; thus they seem very normal. In fact, if the government were to refrain from punishing those who violate Islamic principles, the society would almost certainly experience discomfort at that. The popular judgment of a society where 97% of its population believes in Islam according to Western standards is inadequate.

Muslim Female Culture Between Reality and Entertainment

The misrepresentation of Muslim women by the West has been endless. Muslim women are typically portrayed in the American media as backward, uneducated, oppressed, voiceless, not modern, submissive, and victimized. As a university lecturer "in the female section" who has dealt with three hundred students each semester in a conservative Islamic society, the above characteristics are the exact opposite of what I have experienced. A great percentage of my students are highly educated, good debaters, goal-oriented, and elegant.

According to Greenberg and Miazhevich's (2012) research, which traced the representation of British Muslim women over a 12-year span in the American media, the *New York Times* consistently represents Muslim women through a hegemonic ideology. Moreover, the American press never portrays positive and actual images of Muslim women's lives. For instance, the Saudi visiting female medical scholar at the department of biotechnology and chemistry at Harvard University, who invented a machine combining the effects of light and

ultrasound for use in biotechnology, is not a topic of interest. Also, statistics showing that 48% of Saudi women are teachers, 40% are doctors, and 62% of Saudi students enrolled in higher education are women are not significant for the U.S. media. With such failures and omissions of the Western media in mind, the cliché stating that Saudi women are victims of their repressive regime seems rather questionable. The following section will discuss four main issues: the myth of the veil; the myth of the four wives; gender-separated societies; and the myth that Muslim women ought to be “saved” from their misery.

The Myth of the Veil

I still remember the day I took off my scarf, my *hijab*, in a ladies restroom and heard the two women saying, “Oh, it turns out she has hair, I thought she was bald.” The *hijab* has continuously been viewed as a sign of enslavement by a number of Western cultures. When a Western society such as France, which purports to believe in freedom of religion, bans Muslim women from wearing their headscarves, then those women are oppressed by the West and not by their religion. It is a human right that people should be able to enjoy freedom of peaceful religious expression. Considered from a historical perspective, it could be said that there are two standards of freedom of religious expression: one for Muslims and one for non-Muslims.

Not only has the *hijab* been associated with repression and enslavement in the West, but many Westerners also believe that not wearing the *hijab* will result in being punished. After I finished a presentation about Islamic culture in one of my college classes and asked the audience if they had any questions, I was asked two strange questions. First, a female student asked me if it was true that my father would hit me if I removed my scarf. Next, another male student asked if I had to wear the veil all the time including during my sleep! Such comments illustrate how Western media misinterpret the veil practices and rules. Many assume that in Muslim communities, both the family and the culture impose the *hijab* or headscarf upon women. Generally, that is not the case, especially for Muslim women who live in the West. The truth is that I wear my *hijab* because it is a right given to me by my creator. Also, I feel that by dressing in such a way, I will not be judged by my appearance. People will instead evaluate my personality, mentality, and morals. If a Muslim female chooses not wear the *hijab*, then she is considered a sinner. Yet, that gives no rights to any human being to punish her.

There are many misconceptions related to the *hijab*. The idea that the veil is an obstacle in a woman’s professional, political, and social life is one of the

common assumptions. I sometimes wonder why nuns are perceived as modest when they are covered up, whereas Muslim women are looked upon as they were from outer space and oppressed because of their *hijab*. What a contradiction! As Darraj (2002) stated, “media coverage would make everyone think that every Middle Eastern woman saw the world from between the peepholes of her burqa’s face netting (p. 303).”

In her series *Killing Us Softly* (Jhally, 2010), Jean Kilbourne, a former model who analyzed the representation of women in advertisements over a period of forty years, concluded that the American media has consistently depicted the female as a sex object. Further, she pointed out that women’s bodies and sexuality are the most successful marketing tools for the advertising business. Because it regards the female body as precious, Islam requires its followers to dress modestly. The Western claim that Islam represses its own people reflects a lack of understanding of Islam. In fact, Islamic traditions allow women the freedom from becoming materialized and humiliated.

The Myth of the Four Wives

Another misinterpretation is the Westerners’ claim that Islam is a sexist religion. Many non-Muslims attack Islam for allowing men the legal right to marry up to four wives without fully understanding the situation. It is essential here to address three related issues. First, women and men have different responsibilities and social expectations in the Islamic cultures. This is not to say that men’s roles are superior to women’s in the Islamic perspective. In fact, Islam equally values both sexes. Allah says in the Qu’ran:

O mankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honourable of you with Allâh is that (believer) who has At- Taqwa. (Al Nesaa Chapter)

While Islam perceives men and women as being of different natures and having different social roles, it nonetheless accords each gender an equal esteem. Gender roles in Islam differ from gender roles in Western societies. For instance, it is the man’s duty in Islam to provide shelter, guardianship, and be the caregiver. In Islam, men are responsible for all financial obligations, even if the wife is rich and the husband poor, while women are not required to contribute financially to the relationship unless they want to. These financial traditions of Islam explain why it is possible for men to have more than one wife

while it is not appropriate for women to get married to more than one husband. According to Sayyid Qutb's analysis, "The Qur'an gives the man the right of 'guardianship' or 'superiority' over the family structure in order to prevent dissension and friction between the spouses. The equity of this system lies in the fact that God both favored the man with the necessary qualities and skills for the 'guardianship' and also charged him with the duty to provide for the structure's upkeep" (Haddad, 1998, pp. 37-38).

Secondly, God created Islamic laws based on his evaluation of human beings' nature and social need. According to Islam, because God created humans, He is knowledgeable about their future actions and the laws that harmonize best with humans' psychology. In order to prevent men's infidelity to women, which could result in the collapse of the family, Islam offers men the opportunity to be with more than one woman in an arranged marriage. This custom allowing a husband more than one marriage preserves the wives' and future children's rights. Moreover, Islam requires a man to carefully consider his actions before engaging in a relationship. By giving men the right to marry to more than one wife while disallowing the woman to marry more than one husband, Islam prevents potentially difficult situations such as that of the single mother, children born out of wedlock, and/or children whose paternity cannot be determined. According to Mazrui (2001), in the West it is legal for a man to have a one wife and a couple of mistresses while it is illegal for him to get married to more than one wife. Unlike in Islam, the Western custom of having "unofficial" multiple relationships denies the legal and property rights of the mistresses and their children.

Thirdly, getting married to another wife is not always an opportunity for every man in Islam. The Qur'an specifies rules for polygamy, such as the rule that a husband must be fair to all wives. Moreover, a wife has the right to divorce her husband if she no longer wishes to live with him because of his decision to marry another wife. Finally, polygamy exists within Amish communities in the United States and people respect their way of life.

Gender-Separated Societies

In many Middle Eastern cultures, and especially in the more conservative societies such as that of Saudi Arabia, society's lifestyles are gender-based. Because of this, Westerners assume that women have no significant roles and are not allowed to enjoy any type of entertainment. Interestingly, Muslim women's interpretation of entertainment is quite different than that of non-Muslim women. For instance, at occasions like weddings and engagement

parties, Muslim women dress up, dance, and celebrate, but in an environment that includes women only. Such occasions are considered private since there, women will often wear revealing clothes; thus it is inappropriate to film or videotape such celebrations. As Westerners are not privy to these views of Muslim women's culture, they assume that the women are entertainment-deprived.

Westerners perceive the gender separation in Islamic society as problematic. Interestingly, there are sixty women's colleges in the United States, one of which is Wellesley College from which Hillary Clinton graduated. Further, the idea of a divided gym with separate women's and men's sections such as is typical of Islamic culture might seem extreme to Westerners. However, single gender-oriented gyms such as Total Women's Gym in the United States are completely normal. So why is gender separation considered a violation of women's rights in Islamic culture when it is taken as a normal phenomenon in Western societies? Clearly, there is a double standard here.

A feminist scholarly perspective could be applied to categories of sub-cultural differences within a culture (Moon, 2008). Most importantly, indigenous feminists or feminists who have lived in the Middle East must conduct similar studies. Such studies could offer Westerners new perspectives on Islam's gender separation mores as seen through the eyes of Middle Eastern feminist evaluators.

Saving Muslim Women from their Misery

In prior history, while pagan Arabs would bury their girls alive, while Christians questioned whether women had a soul, and while Jews were cursing women and blaming them for "original sin," Islam freed women from all forms of domination, repression, and humiliation. Islam respected the female body by requiring the hijab, the female mind by encouraging women's education, and female humanity by allowing women the right to choose her husband while assigning the burden of the role of financial provider to men. Not only does the American press often use an offensive tone when describing Muslim women, but also some scholarly works tend to do the same. For instance, a reporter who categorizes herself as an Arab feminist has used the term "the extremely rare creature" in referring to Saudi Muslim Women (Burleigh, 2012). Such a sarcastic description would offend any human being regardless of his/her ethnicity or religious background. Interestingly, the noble mission of modernizing Middle Eastern women and making them reject their original culture is a common form of propaganda employed to justify American

domination in the Middle East (Ahmed, 1992).

Also, the American mainstream media claims that women are mistreated in the Middle East while they are well treated in Western societies. According to Mishra's (2007) study, the *Washington Post* consistently portrays Saudi Muslim women as repressed victims who need Western liberation. Conversely, the *Arab News* has described the liberation enjoyed by American women as shallow (p. 259). Furthermore, Kelly (2008) pointed out that U.S. cultural hegemony imposes its way of thinking on Asian cultures (p. 269). The comparison between the representations of Saudi Muslim in the American press and the representation of American women in the Arab press implies that Western society imposes its lifestyle values on Middle Eastern cultures for political reasons whereas the Arab media does not impose Islamic morality on Western women (Mishra, 2007).

Middle Eastern Muslim women do not need any Western saving, liberation, or modernization as assumed by the U.S. media (Abu-Lughod, 2002). Instead, they require to be respected for who they are. Also, the American media should consider the aspect of cultural sensitivity when representing the "other."

Who is the "Other" and How Could They be Seen Differently?

Since all Middle Eastern countries are perceived as being similar by the U.S. media, I will first illustrate some of the major distinctions between Middle Eastern countries. I will then propose some alternative ways to understand the "other."

We Are Not All the Same

As Smith asserted, definition is the first step of self-encoding (Jandt, 2001, p. 130). Further, she declared that Western-based researchers have a rigid concept of the "other." In demonstration of this, when I fill out university applications or official documents in the United States I am supposed to fit myself in one of the listed categories: White, Black American, Hispanic, or Asian. Interestingly, there are fifty-two countries in Asia, which are extremely diverse; Asia is the most populated continent in the world. Many of my American friends in my intercultural class were surprised when I mentioned that all of the Chinese, Thai, Armenian, Persian, Arab, Russian, and Bengali students in that class are simply categorized as Asian. Some students said, "How come? But you are from the Middle East?" Another said, "That's right, we have never thought about it that way." In many people's minds, the term "Asian" refers to those who identify as Thai, Korean, Japanese, or Chinese. To say that everyone is simply Asian

without further distinction indicates that certain cultures have been deemed superior and others as inferior cultures.

According to Said, Western poets and scholars like Gerard de Nerval and Edward Lane claim that the Orientals are all the same (Said, 1978, p. 325). This common misrepresentation, which categorizes many diverse groups as one group, is very distant from reality. Even more, this idea leads to the Western assumption that all Arabs and Muslims come from same background, speak the same language, and share the same traditions and values. However, this is not the case. Just as in many Western societies, there is considerable diversity within the Middle Eastern cultures. In fact, regional differences exist within the same Middle Eastern culture. Also, there are differences in the language, traditions, application of Islam, and lifestyle. Not every Islamic culture is an Arabic culture, and not all Arabs are Muslims. For instance, countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Pakistan, and Iran are Islamic countries but they do not identify themselves as Arabs. In these countries, the Arabic language is taught in schools so that people would be able to read the holy *Qu'ran*. However, the first language is the citizens' native language. In sum, most Muslim individuals use Arabic as a religious practice but each Islamic country has its own unique language that is used officially and in daily life.

In addition to the diversity of language, each Islamic Arab country in the Middle East and North Africa has a different Arabic accent. Among these nations are Egypt, Morocco, Syria, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. In fact, the accent differs within the same country according to the region. For example, in the Western region in Saudi Arabia, people speak with a Hijazi accent, whereas people use Najdi accent in the central region. The same applies to Bangladesh. Although the Bengali language is widely spoken across the country, Bangladeshis speak other languages such as Hindi, Urdu and others according to the region.

According to Kelly (2008), the power to define the reality of others is a form of domination. Respecting another's culture is a fundamental aspect of effective intercultural communication. Treating Middle Eastern and North African countries as counterparts or one body result in cultural misrepresentations and misunderstanding of the "other." *Sex and the City 2* had to be filmed in Morocco since the United Arab Emirates' authorities refused it clearance for filming in the United Arab Emirates because the title and content of the movie did not fit Islamic values. The shocking part of this is that the movie claims to represent the UAE culture, but the UAE has since sued the studio that produced the film on the grounds of cultural violation. Such

Hollywood depictions insult Islamic cultural values while diminishing the distinction between two diverse cultures.

Seeing The Other Through an Alternative Lens

Western intellectual imperialism tends to neglect the indigenous perspective in cultural inquiries. According to Asante, Miike, and Lin (1998), Western cultures approach non-Western cultures from a teacher's standpoint. Much of intercultural communication research aims to interpret, analyze, and critique other cultures so as to deem them "inferior." Further, Said (1978) addressed the difference between the intentions of knowing the "other" for the purpose of coexistence versus the purpose of controlling. With this in mind, I would like to propose a few useful methods to learn about the Orientals other than Hollywood's sardonic representations.

First, one could manage intercultural miscommunication through learning about the "other" from the other's perspective. In most cases, watching documentary videos is considered one of the best ways to learn about the "other." The film *Arabia* (MacGillivray, 2011) is one of the few documentaries which reflects Middle Eastern individuals in their daily interactions.

Cross-indigenous studies and ethnographic studies offer other means of understanding Middle Eastern Islamic cultures. The *Being There: The Fieldwork Encounter and The Making of Truth* project (Borneman & Hammoudi, 2009) is an example of a collaborative work produced by a Western and a non-Western scholar. Such works created by scholars who had a dynamic relationship through an exchange of cultural perspectives are more likely to offer an accurate portrayal of Middle Eastern cultures. Above all, Borneman and Hammoudi's use of ethnographic fieldwork in the Middle East captures actual snapshots from the original culture. Also, Attending conventions, festivals, and events at Muslim embassies and mosques can provide an opportunity for a direct interaction and a reflective observation.

Viewing the "other" through the lens of similarity and communality rather than through the lens of differences could provide a more accurate understanding of the "other" in place of media fabrications. For instance, an increasing number of Muslims share the same social values as Republicans in the United States. Among these are opposition to easy abortion, non-support of homosexual permissiveness, an emphasis on family values and stable marriages, and favoring prayer at school (Mazrui, 2001). Additionally, the roots and the original principles of Islam and Christianity are the same. Both religions share much in common as the roots of each can be traced back to Abraham.

Interviewing Westerners who live in the Middle East is another way to learn about Oriental cultures.

Moreover, learning about the “other” through Middle Easterners’ published works and voices can provide an insider perspective. An increasing number of works in the *Journal of Muslim Minority* reflect insiders’ perspectives. Muslim feminist works sweep aside the common stereotypes and shed light on women’s real life experiences. Said’s *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World* (1997) and *Orientalism* (1978) are two popular works in this area. Also, Professor Akbar Ahmed, Chair of Islamic Studies at American University, explained Islamic culture through his book *Islam Today: A Short Introduction to the Muslim World* (1999). Further, Abu-Lughod (2002) is an excellent model for scholars and feminists who are interested in the Middle East. Finally, *Iqraa TV* is a popular channel that offers live streaming on the internet and free application for iPhone users in English.

Conclusion

This essay mainly addressed three fundamental issues. First, it highlighted an overview of the reasons for the misinterpretation of Middle Eastern cultures by the West. Secondly, it explored Muslim Feminist culture. Finally, it suggested alternative means of understanding Middle Eastern cultures other than through the stereotypical media.

Nowadays, the phenomenon of Islamic feminism is increasingly growing through various new avenues in the Arab culture. This growth mirrors the current social reality in the Middle East. The possibility that media will continue to misrepresent Middle Eastern cultures is expected, especially in light of the recent US-Iranian political tensions and the fact that the media is controlled according to a political agenda. Yet many Orientals, including myself, believe in Muhammad Ali’s philosophy as follows: “I know where I’m going and I know the truth, and I don’t have to be what you want me to be. I’m free to be what I want.”

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