

Hollywood's reel Arab women

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As motion pictures are one of the most powerful teaching tools ever created, this article will examine how image makers have presented the Arab woman. History reveals that since the beginning of cinema, in fact for more than a century, Hollywood's movies have humiliated, demonized, and eroticized Arab women. Obviously, film makers did not create these images but inherited and embellished Europe's pre-existing Arab stereotypes. In the 18th and 19th centuries European artists and writers offered fictional renditions of women as bathed and submissive exotic 'objects'. The stereotype came to be accepted as valid, becoming an indelible part of European popular culture.

'There exists today no means of influencing the masses more potent than the media.'

'Pope Pius XI

'The cinema must and shall become the foremost cultural weapon of the proletariat.'

'Nikolai Lenin

The research process into Hollywood's Arab woman began in 1960. By locating, viewing and studying 60-plus movies, I discovered many portraits are dangerous and detestable and should be taken seriously, while others are less offensive. In films ranging from yesteryear's foreign legion thrillers up to and including contemporary political dramas, producers associate the Arab woman with violence, sex, and oppression. Locked into a cycle of predictable character-types, she has appeared in every sort of film imaginable: sword-and-sandal soaps, musical comedies, magic carpet fantasies, historical tales, movie serials, and terrorist shoot-em-ups. Taken together in most movies, stereotypical idiosyncrasies abound, linking her to several rigid and repetitive 'B' images.

1. It all began with two silent, black and white shorts - one censored, the other uncensored - Fatima (1897) and Fatima's Dance (1907). Both feature Fatima, the star of Chicago's 1896 World's Fair, as a veiled Bosomy Belly dancer. To see Arab belly dancers appearing in early films is not surprising. At the turn of the century, in vaudeville and burlesque circles, the dancers were familiar fare. Hollywood simply emulated this image.

In Arabian Nights fantasies such as The Sheik (1921), Slave Girl (1947), and John Goldfarb, Please Come Home (1964), Arab women appear as leering out from diaphanous veils, or as unsatisfied, disposable 'knick-knacks' lounging on ornate cushions, scantily-clad harem maidens with bare midriffs, closeted in the palace's women's quarters and/or on display in slave markets.

The phantasm of the harem persists. In Disney's remake of Around the World In Eighty Days (2004), for example, Governor/Actor Arnold Schwarzenegger portrays Prince Hapi, a Mideast sheikh with 'one hundred or so wives.' Writes William Zinsser, Hollywood's Arabia 'is a place where young slave girls lie about on soft couches, stretching their slender legs, ready to do a good turn for any handsome stranger who stumbles into the room... This is [reel]history at its best.'

2. Lurking in the background in films such as My Favorite Spy (1959), Shark (1969), and Deception (1992) are unattractive, covetous Beasts of Burden. Some carry jugs on their heads; others lie as they rob Westerners. Still others are 'so fat, no one would touch them.'

3. In films such as Protocol (1984) and The Sheltering Sky (1990) producers selectively frame

them as a cackling horde of crows, and as shapeless Bundles in Black, a homogeneous sea of covered, ululating women, trekking behind their unshaven mates.

4. The image of Arab women as Black magic vamps began in 1917, with Fox's silent *Cleopatra*, starring Theda Bara. Studios promoted them as "serpents" and "vampires." As a result, the word "vamp," was added to English dictionaries. Movies such as *Saadia* (1953) and *Beast of Morocco* (1966) display the Arab women as Black magic vamps, and as enchantresses in cahoots with and "possessed of devils."

Perhaps the most overlooked portrait of the Arab woman is the bomber image, which is the primary focus of this essay. The Arab woman as bomber began with Republic's movie serial, *Federal Agents vs the Underworld Inc* (1948). Since then, Hollywood has released six feature films showing Palestinians, Moroccans, and other Arab women not as exotic, bumbling and subservient maidens, but as terrorists invading the US, and killing American civilians.

Federal Agents vs the Underworld displays Nila, Hollywood's first-ever Arab terrorist. Described as an "alien threat," this Egyptian "female fanatic" and her Arab cohorts move to bring down US federal agents. Nila tries to eradicate the agents by administering a deadly "rare oriental herb," firing a pistol, and tossing a bomb at the American "infidels." But, she's no match for the Western protagonists. In the end, a huge statue crushes her. Nila gasps her last as the hero quips, "Seeking to destroy others, Nila succeeded in destroying herself."

Decades past until *Black Sunday* (1977) surfaced; here, Hollywood aggressively exhibited another Arab terrorist. Like books, movies last forever. Due to network and cable systems, at least once a year, usually days before the annual Super Bowl game, *Black Sunday* is seen by at least 20-25 million viewers. For 30 consecutive years, generations of viewers have witnessed Dahlia, a Palestinian, trying to blow up the Super Bowl, and everyone in it.

In *Black Sunday* Dahlia arrives in the US, acquires a bomb, then seduces a former Vietnam POW and enlists his aid. She proceeds to help gun down American citizens "where it hurts: Los Angeles, Washington D.C., and Miami. Final frames show Dahlia and the veteran steering a blimp over Miami's Super Bowl stadium. Their intent: To detonate a cluster bomb, massacring 80 thousand spectators, including the American president.

In time, an Israeli officer, not an American agent, terminates them. Interestingly, New York Times critic Vincent Canby found fault with the actress (Marthe Keller) portraying Dahlia. Ms Keller did not fit Canby's preconceived image of how a Palestinian woman should look. He writes: "Miss Keller has some difficulty playing a Palestinian terrorist, looking as she does, as beautiful and healthy... as a California surfer." (1 April 1977).

Four years later Shakka, a dangerous Moroccan terrorist surfaced in the 1981 drama, *Nighthawks*. Aware Shakka is in New York City, the city's security chief warns his colleagues to be wary of her: She was "born in Tangiers, of wealthy parents; a spoiled broad who kills without provocation." Unfortunately, his profile is correct "moments later Shakka shoots him dead. In the end, Shakka and her cohort, a German assassin named Wulfgar, hold families of UN officials hostage in a dangling cable car 250 feet above the East River. Here, again, the Western protagonists save the day; the terrorists are shot dead.

Wrong Is Right (1982) reveals hateful Arab students as terrorists. Clad in robes and checkered kuffiyehs the students march on Times Square and tussle with New York policemen, shouting, "Death to the Jews?"; "Death to America?". One young woman implants a plastic bomb into her body, blowing up herself and injuring onlookers.

In the 007 thriller, *Never Say Never Again* (1983), Fatima, a nuclear terrorist working with SPECTRE, attempts to detonate two nuclear bombs in the West. She fails; James Bond terminates her.

The greater Los Angeles area is the setting for *Wanted: Dead or Alive* (1987). Here, Palestinian and home-grown Arab Americans go on a killing spree, blowing up more than 200 men, women, even children. Just outside the city, the camera reveals an Arab-American terrorist factory. Inside the plant are 50-plus chemical weapons; the weapons are about to be released into the atmosphere, killing millions. When Malak, the primary villain, and Jamilla, his loyal sidekick, find out the powerful explosions could also kill them as well as their fellow conspirators, Malak cancels the mission. The angry Jamilla protests. Determined to launch the weapons, she is willing to die for the cause. Malak shoots her dead.

True Lies (1994), presents Juno, a Palestinian terrorist. She and her fellow Palestinians, members of the "Crimson Jihad," move to launch nuclear missiles over American cities. Final frames show the movie's hero and the Marines kicking Arab ass.

The message contained in all seven films, six which show the "alien" Arab woman being shot dead, and four that portray her as a nuclear terrorist, is this: Rid the United States of Arabs and we will all be safe, at last.

Conclusion.

To their credit, producers of post-9/11 films have not advanced the Arab woman-as-terrorist image. Instead, reel Arab women remain mostly invisible on silver screens, surfacing in just several films. To name a few: In *Pretty Persuasion* (2005), a shy Palestinian Muslim teenager, Randa, is continuously humiliated by the film's protagonist who attacks her and all things Arab. She points to Randa's hijab and quips: "What's that thing on your head? You haven't tried to bomb anybody, have you?"

Kimberly goes on to berate "the Arab terrorist chick," declaring: "There are too many worthless people on this planet, [and] when it comes to ranking races my very last choice would be an Arab." In the end, the abused Randa pulls a gun and commits suicide. As Randa is projected as a disposable object, a reel non-entity, her death is meaningless.

White-hat versus black-hat desert dramas such as *Secondhand Lions* (2003) and *Hidalgo* (2004), project Arab Princesses the same as pre-9/11 scenarios; they reject buffoonish Arab potentates, preferring to befriend and/or marry civilized Western heroes. *Hidalgo's* princess, for example, places a knife to her throat "she would rather die than wed the slippery sheikh."

When contemplating Hollywood's reel Arab women we should remember that only a handful of old-fashioned, out-of-date movies "The Return of Chandu" (1934), *Princess Tam Tam*, (1935), *Baghdad*, (1949), *Flame of Araby* (1951), and *Princess of the Nile* (1954) "present the heroine as a reel, decent human being, as one who is characterized by intelligence, courage, and beauty. For example, admirable Egyptian queens appear in the 1934 and 1963 versions of *Cleopatra* and in *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1946). On rare occasions, the dark-complexioned, heroic Arab woman tries to woo a Western protagonist, but, she is almost always disappointed. Films, such as *Outpost in Morocco* (1949) posit that an Arab woman in love with the American protagonist must die.

Finally, taken together Hollywood's stereotypical "B" portraits project a warped, false reality. Reel Arab women are seldom projected to look and behave like us. Producers never show them at home with family, or in the work place, functioning as doctors, computer specialists, school teachers, print and broadcast journalists, or as successful well rounded electric or domestic engineers. Instead of revealing a common humanity, the films contend women under Islam are in a pathetic state, thus helping alienate the Arab woman from her international sisters, and vice versa.

Xenophobia and prejudice are the flip sides of harmony and togetherness. Future image makers should keep in mind the sins of omission and commission. To dispel stale portraits, they should display Arab women as they project other women, no better no worse. Such fresh images would

help shatter stale myths as well as advance tolerance and unify people.

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