

MUSLIM IN MOVIES: THE HOLLYWOOD CONSTRUCTION

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Abstract

The pages of history communicate that the conflict and military confrontation between Islam and West traces back to era of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in the seventh century and run through the Byzantine Empire, the Crusades, the Spanish re-conquest, the fall of Constantinople, the era of colonial and national independence, cold war era, post-cold war era and above all after the incident of 9/11. There is a general perception as it is claimed that mainstream media of west and US have been disseminating false information about Islamic world since several decades. It is said this anti-Islamic campaign has reached to enormous proportion with the demise of communism. As Trinko James has mentioned in her article that analysts, in Islamic world believe that negative image of Islamic world is primarily a conspiracy of American foreign office to invent a new bogey and enemy to fill vacuum created by the collapse of Soviet Union and worldwide dissipation of communism, particularly after demise of communism in former USSR. Apart from the role played by mainstream print or electronic media in cultivating negative political indoctrination into minds of common man, the big silver screen of cinema powered by Hollywood movies have been projecting misrepresentation of Muslims. Islam and Muslim world as it has been substantively endorsed by several researchers especially after 9/11. Consequently, due to distorted images, developed and manipulated by the mainstream mass media with the help of different genres including Hollywood Movies which projected anti Islam narratives by utilizing numerous technique of propaganda, Islam is the name of negativity in the west. This research is carried out at showing

how Hollywood is constructing Muslims and Islam in movies. To analyze whether the Muslims are constructed in a binary fashion under the orientalist perspective. The aspect of their portrayal i.e. social, cultural and political. What moral, social and human values that are associated with Muslims as individual and Islam as religion. The research was carried out through content analysis. Quantitative technique and purposive sampling was selected by selecting six Hollywood movies of 2012-2014 in which Muslim and Islam image was spoiled.

Keywords: *Muslims; Islam; Media; 9/11; Movies; Hollywood*

1.1. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Age of mass communication has a long history. During Hellenistic era, autocratic edicts were imposed over the subject through general dissemination of news by individuals (Fleming, 2013). These individuals used to carry official decrees and held mass gatherings to make people aware of the will and whims of the lordship. This was indeed the budding stage of mass communication and its potentials. Sifting through three thousand years, it can be seen that this phenomenon of communication multiplied from the caprice of an individual to vested interest groups. These groups developed into clique of stooges of some ideologies or civilizations. They either form monoliths like ‘moving-picture-producers’ or form obedient proponents for a specific political, cultural, religious and economic regime (Wood, 1994).

Islam has been under fire since the theocratic era of 10th and 11th century. It was not until the formation of Fatimid Empire, after breaking away from Bagdad based Abbasids (Armstrong, 2008), that Europe formally interacted with Muslims. The formation of Government in Cairo and forced conversions of Berbers of Africa, mass destruction of Christian assets in old Byzantine was reported to the Pope Urban II. This in his fiery speeches was lamented and

cursed to cajole and summon a vast army in 1099 AD for expedition in Levant. The sole purpose of this campaign was to punish Muslims rather the Fatimid who were the real culprits. It was indeed a botched up justification (Wills, 2007) of the so called Just War. The Crusading forces were indeed unaware of what Islam and who Islam was there as responsible. The criminal intent of fratricidal wars among dynasties inside Islamic World plagued the region and brought in sheer violation of International Islamic Law which was sincerely propounded by Imam Shafī and later by Ibn-e-Tamiyyah. A movie, film or action picture is a narrative with moving images. It represents culture, explain traditions and assess way of life. It takes its substance out of real events and fantasies as well. This changes the society. In present era film creation has transformed into a business. This glamorous world attracts all.

Hollywood is the term used to name the film industry of the United States of America. It takes its name after a small town in California where the majority of the movies making organizations are found. Hollywood is the leading big screen manufacturers on the globe with the large number of followers. It came to limelight in the beginning of the 20th century but it was the classic “*Birth of the Nation*” in 1915 which changed the face of the industry, after which Hollywood has been the leading entertainment industry across the world where all have wished to excel.¹ Hollywood has the largest followership. English being the popular language of the World, Hollywood films are released and watched across the globe. Some Hollywood films have generated a business of more than a billion dollar which reflects the level of its magnetism. *Gone with the wind* a classic of 1939 broke all records with 3.3 billion dollars

¹ Retrieved on December 10, 2014, from http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0004972/?ref_=nv_sr_1

business (in today's worth).² Likewise *Avatar's* production of 2.8 billion dollars by itself is an obvious demonstration of the pecuniary strength of the movie industry.³

After the cold war era, USA emerged as the sole super power of the world; however, the uneasy harmony was short lived. Then came the horrific month of September 11, 2001, USA came under a terrorist attack, an event which altered the path of history. After 9/11, Al Qaeda, a terrorist group was held responsible and consequently Afghanistan and Iraq was attacked by US led NATO forces.⁴ Stereotyping and radicalizing of any set of individuals is a negative process. Thus, the main objective of this research is to contest stereotyping Muslims and an attempt to prove them otherwise. This study aims to incite opinions and responses which will ultimately bring about variations (Obeida, 2011).

1.1.1. Vilification Campaign and its Present Condition

The western onslaught was not rational and therefore ignominious which called for Europe's shrinking in their ideologies and conduct. The innocent were punished for the crimes of others. The fire blazed even more simmering which ensued an era of Islam's recoil towards the western mentality. These times, under Seljuk ruler before 1250 AD, tore apart any hope of reconciliation. Such a propagandized and malicious history later formed the basis for Europe's literature, culture and civilization.

The debate of just war was supported by media campaigns under the rightist regimes. Movies and other art attempts were indeed epic in telling their part of story. The splendor of Muslim

² Retrieved on December 10, 2014, from <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0031381/>

³ Retrieved on December 10, 2014, from http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0499549/?ref_=nv_sr_1

⁴ NATO: North Atlantic Treaty Organization

courts of Baghdad has been the dark chapter of ascetic Islamic thought of conduct in life. This was aggrandized and exaggerated to form a flawed picture of Muslim elite in Europe literature. Later the militarization of Islamic world after 1258 AD under Mongols was the main source of confusion in West. The Yasa Versus Sharia debate resided among ulema of the east yet Europe exploited Muslim dismay and sense of insecurity to propagandize the social and cultural construct of Islamic world (Chan, 1987).

1.1.2. View from Samuel P. Huntington's Clash of Civilization

Huntington in, 'why civilizations will clash?' has opined that the cultural and religious forces are the main dividing lines that will form a front between nations and ethnicities. He further opined that if Africa is considered as a new civilization then there are eight main civilizations that will form boundaries on the bigger picture. Islam has already formed a monolith against most of the civilization. Although co-existence is scanty yet it is present in the east. The main clash due to ideological differences will be the conspicuous in next decade. This opinion of Huntington is enough to form the rationale of present diatribe from the west on Islam. It is evident in mass communication and is shown in Movies. As Hollywood carries a status of opinion leader, most of the film directors and playwrights opine that it has been simple and catchy for the audience to hear anti-Islam scripts and screenplays.

1.1.3. Reference to Previous Research

Relatively a new dimension of scrutiny and an attempt to address misinterpretation and wrong conception shown by Hollywood, this research has little to embrace from previous work done. However it will be an excellent opportunity to seek better understanding of the area of research. Jack Shaheen has opined that stereotype is a field that should be contested. His research work

sprawls over 30 years which started off from a debate over Arab TV (Shaheen, 1995). The first face of the debate commences with the events of 1985 when a US plane was hijacked. The context of slogans of Ayatollah Khomeini and other revolutionaries mainly focuses US. Slogans like 'Great Satan' and 'Death to America' further aggravated the situation. The people were telecasted these live feeds and there was no other explanation to what led what. The Iranian revolution was the tipping point for Muslim world as more than a theocratic regime. It was recoil to a dictator's polity that oppressed basic human rights on the aegis of USA and rest of the West. Though intense, the lawlessness was exploited to fixate western mind with mass killings in Iran (Ahmad, 2006).

1.2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to change the concept that the people have in their minds about Muslims. It aims at re-constructing the image of Muslim among the people around the world.

1. To see how Hollywood movies construct Muslims and Islam.
2. To analyze whether the Muslims are constructed in a binary fashion under the orientalist perspective in the Hollywood movies.
3. To study the aspects of their portrayal; i.e. social, political or cultural, are the Muslims constructed as Orientalist.
4. To find out what moral, social and human values are associated with Muslim as individuals and Islam as a religion.

1.3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Though multifaceted questions have been viewed and evaluated; however, following research questions have been considered salient to study the problem under investigation:

1. RQ1: How do Hollywood movies construct Muslims and Islam?

2. RQ2: Whether the Muslims are constructed in a binary fashion under the orientalist perspective in the Hollywood movies?
3. RQ3: In what aspects of their portrayal; i.e. social, political or cultural, are the Muslims constructed as Orientalist?
4. RQ4: What moral, social and human values are associated with Muslim as individuals and Islam as a religion?

1.4. LITERATURE REVIEW

Jack Shaheen opined that only 12% of the Muslims are Arabs yet as shown in TV and Movies the case seems to be different. They have frequently shown that Arabs are the only edifice of Islam and there is no reason to get into the details of happenings in their region. The political face of Islam was indeed retaliation to what has been happening all over the world. The role of print and broadcast news was indeed bigoted yet Arabs and Muslims in movies were depicted in way to propagate them as backward looking, violent and barbaric people. The ethnocentrism which is inherent to Arab society was labeled as medieval thinking, while Muslims as people with nostalgic and golden age mentality. The spheres where Muslims lagged behind especially economy and politics were the main source of inspiration to ridicule them. The stereotype was not limited to movies with sex and violence topics but also to the cartoon movies with Sindbad and desert forming the concept of Arabs (Alsultany, 2012).

Now, the stress of the Hollywood movies is on making of imageries as a substitute of creating truths or evidence (Gamson, 1992). The descriptions produce a good image in the mind of the spectators but their relationship with details is unreliable. Pictures are imitations of the truths but they have an additional connotation as well; a conceptual image of an object that is not present or say actual. Baudrillard (1988) is of the opinion that the advancement in the expertise of producing movies have led to the disintegration of realism and depiction. Media

communications are educators of beliefs, principles and ideals and offer clarification to the masses with or without the awareness of their creators.

1.5. METHODOLOGY

1.5.1. Research Design

The research technique used in this study is Quantitative. To carry out the study 6 Hollywood movies, specifically in which the portrayal of Muslims are constructed, has been analyzed with the help of purposive sampling and framing technique.

1.5.2. Implications of Research

This study will prove to be a milestone towards a new era of understanding what Muslims really are in core, apart from the social construction offered by the Hollywood screens.

1.5.3. Categories

Character analysis is conducted in this research basing on how Muslim characters are constructed in Hollywood films. The study is based on binary fashion analysis and has four major categories which are further divided into sub-categories.

- Construction of Muslims in Hollywood
- Construction in Binary Fashion
- Muslim as Individuals
- Islam as Religion

1.5.4. Construction of Muslims

Hollywood is an opinion changing film industry which has filmed many issue of the world. The construction of Muslims in Hollywood kept on changing time to time. Recent drift in Muslim construction are the outcome of Sep 9/11 attacks which brought a major change. On a broader perspective Muslim construction in Hollywood is based on multiple dimensions. However, here following two major variables will be discussed for analysis;

- Terrorists
- Violent

1.5.5. Construction in Binary Fashion

Hollywood not only tarnishes image of Muslims and other minorities of the world but on the other hand portray a positive image of west and its culture. Under the perspective of orientalist, it draws a comparison between Orient and Occident in a binary fashion. Here the projection of Muslim as orient and its comparison with Occident will be discussed and following variables of this category are being analyzed;

- **Social Construct**
 - Civilized
 - Uncivilized
- **Political Construct**
 - Democracy
 - Monarchy or Dictatorship
- **Cultural Construct**
 - Fundamentalist
 - Tolerant

1.5.6. Islam as Religion

Islam is a favorite topic of Hollywood of Sep 9/11 and filming this subject gained momentum in last decade. Islam is a religion of major chunk of world population. Reality of Islam is far different from its projection on Media and Movies. Comparison and portrayal of Islam in Hollywood tends to create negative perception of the religion in minds of public. Various aspect of Islam is presented in Hollywood movies but for the purpose of this study following variables of this category are being analyzed;

- Monolithic
- Non- Tolerant

1.6. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

1.6.1. Factual Analysis

This research is fixated on finding Muslims depiction in Hollywood films which came to box office in 2012-2014. Six Hollywood films were carefully chosen through purposive selection amongst top hundred films of the year. The element of examination was frame of numerous acts in the films. Frames speak of an entire 'set' on which camera takes numerous angles. A total of 251 film scenes were collected during the research and the facts were analyzed on the coding sheet and frames. As per the examination, The Dictator had maximum acts i.e. 73 followed by Cleanskin which had 49. Lone Survivor and Java Heat were third with 36 while Honor had 34 acts and Camp X Ray had 23 scenes pertinent to the research. The table shows the percentage of scene, taken out from each film.

Table 4.1 below shows scenes from Sample Movies and their percentage

Movies	Years	Scenes	Percentage
The Dictator	2012	73	29.1%
Clean Skin	2012	49	19.6%
Lone Survivor	2013	36	14.3%
Java Heat	2013	36	14.3%
Camp X Ray	2014	23	9.2%
Honor	2014	34	13.5%
Total		251	100%

RQ1: How do Hollywood movies construct Muslims and Islam?

In regard of that one image has been taken from *Lone Survivor (2013)* which shows a Taliban leader Ahmad Shah in Afghanistan who is shown responsible for killing over twenty United States Marines, as well as villagers and refugees who were aiding American forces. Terrorists are shown in a typical frame of Muslims having beard, turban and carrying weapon. In response to these killings, a United States Navy SEALs unit is ordered to execute a counter-insurgent mission to capture Shah. The objective of this mission is to capture and kill Ahmad Shah. Bad guy. Senior Taliban commander id responsible for killing Marines in eastern Afghanistan. A Tier I target. If you want a positive I.D., note that Shah has no earlobes. Taraq, His right-hand man. Seems to do most of his chief shit for him.

Another Image has been taken from *Cleanskin (2012)* in which beheading of an SSgt is shown. Background of the scene is that Nabil orders Ash to assassinate Sgt. Glen Conlan (Glenn Wrage), an ex-soldier living alone on a farmhouse who gave torture to Muslims in Afghanistan. Nabil dispatches his buddy, Amin (Silas Carson) to assist Ash and Yussif in assassinating him. They are shown to get hold of the SGT. Ash searches the house and finds a woman with a baby but does not tell Amin about them. Amin then searches the house again and kills the woman and her baby. Ash and Amin take Conlan to an abandoned building where Ash films Amin beheading Conlan.

Further an image shows a suicide bomber in *Java Heat (2013)* who detonates himself at a party in Java, Indonesia, and a Javanese Sultan's daughter, Sultana (Atiqah Hasiholan), is believed to be one of the unidentified victims. The suicide bomber shouts Allah o Akbar before he detonates himself, giving a picture as Muslims are terrorists. Again terrorists are shown to have raised Muslim slogan before they starts firing to kill American Jake and Hashim. It's as public is being brain washed to construct a Muslim as terrorists in their minds.

RQ2: Whether the Muslims are constructed in a binary fashion under the orientalist perspective in the Hollywood movies?

The cell under US government detains terrorist and suspects, mainly from Arab countries. The movies construct Arabs as terrorist and fundamentalists. By watching this movie general perception of public gets stronger to consider Muslims as terrorists under orientalist perspective. An image shows the detainees were detained in cell as long as for eight years. They were treated like animals and in small cells. Books and newspapers were old and most of them read those books several times. In short Muslims are considered and treated worse than animals.

RQ3: In what aspects of their portrayal; i.e. social, political or cultural, are the Muslims constructed as Orientalist?

In this regard an image has been taken from movie *The Dictator (2012)* shows general public in Muslim states are shown backward, uncivilized and uneducated. As a Shepherd shown in the movie for double role of General Aladeen. While addressing UN Security Council as General Aladeen, the Shepherd urinates in a jug and then drinks it. Ultimately uncivilized portrayal.

Image taken from movie *Lone Survivor (2013)* shows people of Muslim countries as backward, living old life style and lacking basic facilities and infrastructure. This scenes of *Clean Skin (2012)* shows how brutal and violent Muslims are, they even don't have mercy for women and children. As a woman and a baby was found in one of the rooms in an attempt to kill the Sgt. Ash leaves them alive whereas Amin brutally kill them and shows the woman and a baby killed by Amin brutally. And beheading is a phenomenon attributed to Muslims only which is shown in a scene where beheading of SGT Conlon was filmed by Ash and Amin.

Mr. Conlon was a banker and a former private in the Army Reserves. His sister, Rebecca Conlon, and her 8-month-old daughter were found brutally murdered at his farm in He Mordshire. The SEALs (*Lone Survivor*) are accidentally discovered by an elderly shepherd and two teenage goat herders. After a brief debate, Luttrell convinces the others that they will incite backlash if they kill the three herders. The team decides to release the herders and abort the mission, but before they can escape, they are discovered by Taliban forces. They took a lot of time whether to kill 3 shepherds or release them. But west is shown kind and advocate of human rights so they release them despite threat to their lives.

Comparison							Total
	Social		Political		Cultural		
	Civilized	Uncivilized	Democracy	Monarchy	Fundamentalist	Tolerant	
West	15	2	7	-	-	6	30
Muslims	1	24	1	6	25	2	59
Total	16	26	8	6	25	8	89

Table 4.1: Scenes from all 6 movies constructing Muslims in binary fashion

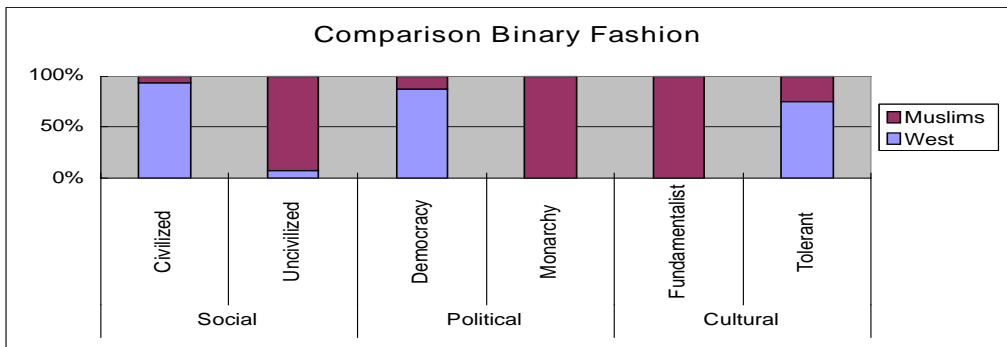


Figure 4.1: Percentage of Scenes from all 6 movies constructing Muslims in binary fashion

RQ4: What moral, social and human values are associated with Muslim as individuals and Islam as a religion?

Image taken from *The Dictator* (2012) symbolizes the State of Wadiya (a fictional country situated in the Horn of Africa, ousting the definite nation of Eritrea) has been governed by Admiral General Haffaz Aladeen (Sacha Baron Cohen) who supports al-Qaeda (particularly offering shelter to Osama Bin Laden after "they assassinated his double a year ago") and is working on developing WMD to attack Israel. Muslims states are shown threat to Israel. *Supreme Leader, let me explain to you. You've lost me, this is the missile in Wadiya, you push the button, "Boop!" Israel!* The movie has also shown Muslims politically supporting terrorism and possessing anti Israel sentiment. As Aladeen is shown to procure nuclear weapons to attack Israel. By large Muslim countries are shown in struggle of nuclear weapons to be used against west showing their anti-western sentiments. *Lone Survivor* (2013) shows 3 shepherd who accidentally come across the SEALs. One they were release the old man after release utters in Pashto on his way back and that you would die tonight which Seals did not understand. Giving an image that anti west sentiments exists in young, teenage and old age Muslim fellows.

Further an Image shows a scene from *Lone Survivor* (2013) in which within the few minutes of movie shows terrorists holding weapons and dressed in turban and women in shuttle cock veils. The scenes depict on adherence to fundamental women rights in Muslim countries and terrorism in Muslim countries. *Honor* (2014) is constructed on the notion of honor killings, an exercise that not only prevails in Muslim societies but in other nations as well, it emphasizes on the way in which Mona (Aiysha Hart), 'transgresses' her family's sense of beliefs by falling in love with a Punjabi male Tanvir (Nikesh Patel). There an image shows Mona who was killed by her brother and mother with a wrapping a rope around her neck and suffocating her to death.

A very cruel picture of Muslim are shown where a mother and brother can kill her daughter and sister for such transgress. *I can't control you anymore. Your father gone... Life's hard enough for me. It's hard for all of us, Mum. When a child brings more pain than joy, what's left? Is this child me? I'm sorry. She's dead?*

Clean Skin (2012) shows Ash who films a video before going for suicide mission and explains the reason for his actions. His reasoning is very alarming for west and western public. The movie shows how extremely non tolerant are Muslim. Islam is show as a religion which is monolithic and does not tolerate existence of other religion.

Table 2. Scenes from different movies constructing Muslims as individuals and Islam as religion

Movies					
	Muslims as individuals		Islam as Religion		
	Anti West	Anti Women Rights	Monolithic	Non Tolerant	
Dictatorship	5	5	1	6	17
Clean Skin	7	2	1	8	18

Lone Survivor	2	1	2	4	9
Java Heat	4	3	1	3	11
Camp X Ray	2	3	1	2	8
Honor	3	15	4	5	27
Total	23	29	10	28	90

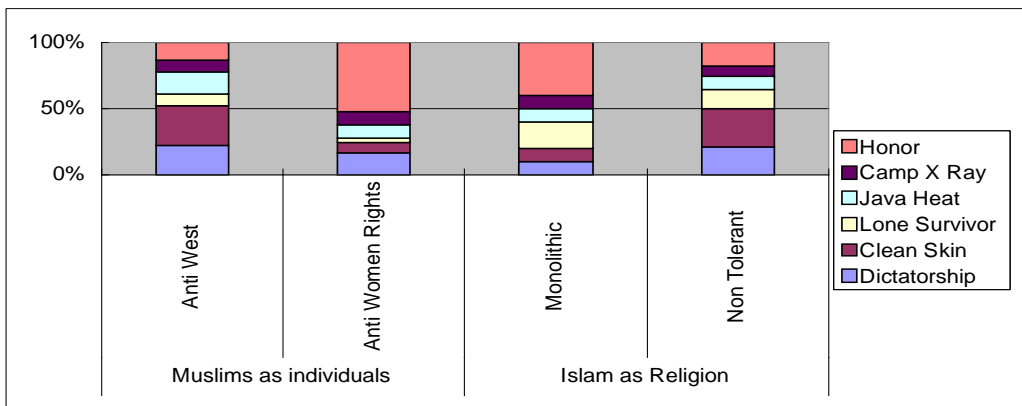


Figure 2. Percentage of scenes from different movies constructing Muslims as individuals and Islam as religion

1.7. DISCUSSION

Media and specifically films are important tools to develop and construct opinion. Cinema Screens are a major source of enjoyment and as by product people get educated regarding other

civilizations and cultures. Moreover, their opinion on core issues are developed the way it is projected in movies. The social construction of reality is primarily developed while sitting in front of big screens. Therefore, it is important to see whatever shown on big screen are how far or close to reality. Hollywood has enormous number of fans and viewers. Film released in English are watched across the globe and translated for non-English speaking countries in the native language. People watch movies for entertainment but on the other hand the film maker would have different aim, like, developing a particular opinion on some hard core national and international issue. Sometime films are used to inform the public and some time to misinform.

After World War II most movies were based on cold war between capitalist and communist world. However, after the fall of USSR there was a shift observed in Hollywood movies. Islam and Muslims were next favorite topic and post 9/11 has seen a flooding of misinformation against Muslims and Islam. Islam was taken as new topic while relating it to terrorism, violence, fundamentalism and more and more. Which changed the public opinion on so called war against terrorism and earned the support of public against recent conflicts by stereotyping Muslims and generating Islamophobia in their minds. Researchers like Jack Shaheen worked on this subject in details and brought forward changes in different eras in representation of Muslims in Hollywood. The depiction of Muslims started with women in desert seducing men who were desperate for wealth and women in desert. This era was followed by portraying Arab Muslims as “Oil rich millionaires” in the 70s once there was oil crisis in the world. Recent shift was forced by 9/11 attacks followed by Afghanistan’s invasion by US led NATO forces.

This research was based on inspirational work of Jack Shaheen and procedure of purposive sampling was adopted in which six movies were selected. Portrayal of Muslims were analyzed under four major categories which is not as detailed work as done by famous researchers but

an addition to it by focusing of few aspect and dimensions of construction of Muslims in Hollywood. These films were studied in detail and analysis was done by selecting scenes, dialogues and background in the movies. This study added and enforced perception against Hollywood in stereotyping and radicalizing Muslims across the world. The finding of this research is shown in form of construction of Muslims under different categories and data was presented in form of percentages and total number of scenes in different categories. Portrayal of all variables were discussed by selecting relevant scenes and reaching to a conclusion basing data extracted.

1.8. CONCLUSION

The Muslim viewers will not be astonished when seeing a movie about Muslims, nor do the columns lovers who go through the print media that treat a subject regarding Muslims, nor the listeners who listen the news that concern Muslims, because the Western media reserve agreed stereotypes for the Arab Muslims whether they are on TV, published or aired. These issues are so comprehensive, so intensified that they are endangered and problematized. The query is not limited in a casual noticed stereotypes and misrepresentations of realism, but it is stretched to the justification of the problem. The Western media attempts at whatever price and authority to legitimize the partialities and give the logic of reliability. It is obvious, therefore, that the Western media shore their rights up with “indications”, “influences” and “evidences” in order to determine that the Muslims’ “activities”, “beliefs” and “purpose” are evil. The Western media, then, is answerable for infusing and indoctrinating the Western masses with prejudiced and false presumption regarding Arabs and Muslims. If the Western media alter their thoughts regarding the Arab Muslims, they will get in return same response from the masses.

Henceforth the depiction of Muslims over a period of time has experienced certain variations. But before being euphoric one needs to sensibly comprehend the consequences of these variations. One should see how far the moves give space to Muslims to speak for themselves through an autonomous Muslim discourse. While the existence of a massive Muslim minority is pushing the restrictions of nationality, they must shape out a space for themselves. They also play a vital role in determining the greater demonstration of Muslims. Although this group is not a monolith, they have of late become vocal in assaulting conventional depiction of Muslims. Other problems like how sensible Muslims and so called extremists are seen as equally exclusive groups also need to be problematized. The source of violence remains to be thought of as some or other understanding of Islam rather than contextualizing the development of extremism on socio-political changes that the particular nations went over and the global political situation which has donated to a great degree. The necessity is to regularly engage in examining the innovative stereotypes that will arise from such an understanding and contest such reductionist understanding of Islam and Muslims.

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