



The Portrayal of the ‘Other’; A Multimodal Analysis of Transitivity Patterns in the movie *The Dictator*

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ABSTRACT

The ongoing islamophobia in the world is much propagated through cinematic visuals. The western perspective of Orientalizing the ‘other’ in representing the ‘others’ deploys the stereotypical maintained images of the Arabs in the Hollywood movies. These depictions raise an issue regarding the portrayal of the arabs equated with the east, specifically the arab world. The immoral humour and barbaric depiction associated with the Arabs in the movies is an Orientalist creation. It is the cultural, linguistic, religious and political ‘other’ that makes epistemological concerns in postcolonial theory as it endeavours the self to be translated into ‘us’ and the other into ‘them’. The otherness is constructed by a dominant group, inevitably ‘ us’ to stigmatize the other dominated out-groups, ‘ them’, potentially presented as negation of the self, identity and logically discriminated. The Dictator (2012), a comedy genre, depicts the story of an Arab dictator and controversial tendencies of orientalist origin are associated with him. The generic amoral comedy explores hypocritical political issues, terrorism, freedom and ethical issues. The visuals of the movie are taken and analyzed through Kress and Lueewan multimodality and the transitivity patterns of the images are segregated into metafunctions for analysis. The images related to the depiction of the ruler of an Islamic state are narrowed down for analysis. The transitivity patterns in the images chosen for analysis and their signification in terms of metafunctions are investigated to explore the cinematic prospects of constructing identities of the Self and the Other, where Us is to be associated with the West and Them with the East.

Introduction

The term ‘ Orientalism’ refers to the attitude of the West in viewing the East. The concept imbued the development of creating an image of the East by the West for the

rest. The 'early painting which portrays the East as a lustful and exotic place, imbued with the romance of East and eroticism' (Said, 1978, p. 6). The portrayal also appeared on genre of movies and literature. The depiction of the 'others' in Hollywood movies has always been a topic of debate and discussion amongst scholars. Movies including The Sheik (1921), Harum Scarum (1965), True Lies (1994) and Three Kings (1999) project the orientalist prospect and stereotypical images of the arabs. In the context of Postcolonialism, 'Orientalism is meant to show the Western power over the inferior Orient and as a form to deal with foreign or the Orient' (Said, 1978, p.46). Rahman Ghauri and Mahmood comments on the representation of the Arabs in three ways, "Billionaire", "Bomber", and "Belly Dancer" (2016, p.10)

Prior to the 9/11 attacks on World Trade Centre, the nexus of terrorists activities have been fixed on the muslims worldwide. The orientalist trend was seemed to be in fashion since 1920s in the Hollywood regarding the representation of the Arabs, the muslims and the Easteners in a deleterious sense. The Arab world geographically occupies almost one-and-a-half times larger than the United States. It accommodates the regions where Asia, Africa and Europe meet. The shared religion of majority of the population of the arab world is Muslims, sharing common language (with dialectical variations), history and cultural heritage. Besides muslims, minority comprises of Christains mostly.

Through the Hollywood lens, the arabs have been portrayed as the cultural 'other', threatening and destructive. The projection of the religious lines and the racial segregation, arabs have been deeply stereotypically ingrained in the cinematic vision. The ever portrayal of the arabs is sustained as religious fanatics, brutal and uncivilized. Such destructive image of caricature as Hollywood presents, prowled the screen of the cinema displaying them oil-rich dimwits, surrounded by harem maidens, riding the camels and so on. The representation of the arabs has never been made in a regular manner, a normal specimen of cultural variation, perhaps someone who is respectable and leads a common life.

[the Arabs] all look alike to me," quips the American heroine in the movie e Sheik Steps Out (1937). "All Arabs look alike to me," admits the protagonist in Commando (1968). Decades later, nothing had changed. Quips the US Ambassador in Hostage (1986), "I can't tell one [Arab] from another. Wrapped in those bed sheets they all look the same to me. (Shaheen, 2009,p.21).

The dominating culture of Hollywood maintains the celluloid mythical representation of the 'others' and frames stereotypical images in the minds of the viewers. The Arab stereotypes in the visual narrative are nurtured, created and distributed.

Since the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre on 9/11, Islam become the 'other' for the west that oppressed those who are different in caste and creed. As Dabashi (2008, p. 1) puts it, the attempts of the terrorists have raised "the specter of Islam as the principal nemesis of the western civilization". The issue contributed to the construction of Islamophobia through out the western world especially when it was located with the east and the Arab world. The theme became one of the main streams in the Hollywood movies and the orientalist representations of the muslims in general took a sinister turn. The representation of the muslims started occupying the Hollywood screen since 1920s and mainly the representation. The present movie The Dictator by Larry Brown also represents the construction of the identities of the West v/s the East, " The Others".

The present article aims at investigating the transitivity patterns in the representation of the Arab rulers in the film. The represented /distorted images of the arabs are often comical in their representation rather than their natural form. As a result, they are

deemed as bombers, buffoons, lusty and barbaric. In *The Dictator*, the image of the arab ruler is depicted as comical characters by the use of immoral humour. The controversial legacy of the dictators, the life threats from their near ones and resultant exodus from their countries make up the story of the movie. The amoral comedy depicts the message that is conveyed through the behavior of the dictator. The script is used to use humour in situations of social and political implications. The representation of the arab leader in the movie creates a stereotypical image of the ‘other’ in the minds of the readers. This media representation is often derogatory, partial negative and inaccurate. The Orient in the representation maintains the stereotypical image of the arab dictator and the entire script is replete with humour in order to reflect the arab state of mind with reference to the important political and social issues. The process of exchanging culture of the orient, or the other, creates a typical image of them that generates the sense of stereotype, often partial, negative and inaccurate. The movie *Dictator* is taken to explore the stereotypical representation of the ‘others’ that contributes in creating an image of the ‘others’ as ‘others’. The papers applies multimodality by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen to investigate the transitivity patterns in the images that represented the arab leader in the movie *The Dictator*.

Methodology

This study adopts a multimodal discourse analysis framework as proposed by Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen to examine the visual representation of Arabs in the Hollywood film *The Dictator* (2012). The selection of images follows a purposive sampling strategy, focusing on key scenes that prominently depict the Arab protagonist and supporting characters in ways that foreground cultural identity, power relations, and ideological meanings. Still images are extracted from moments of high narrative and visual salience—such as scenes involving political authority, public appearances, and interactions with Western characters—to ensure relevance to representational patterns. These images are then analyzed using Kress and van Leeuwen’s visual grammar, particularly the ideational, interpersonal and intertextual metafunctions. The ideational metafunction is employed to examine how Arabs are portrayed through narrative processes, participant roles, and attributes; the interpersonal metafunction analyzes gaze, social distance, and angle to understand viewer positioning and power dynamics; and the intertextual metafunction focuses on information value, salience, and framing to identify how visual elements guide interpretation. Through this multimodal approach, the study systematically investigates how visual choices contribute to the construction and reinforcement of stereotypical meanings about Arabs within Hollywood cinema.

Analysis



Description

The image is taken from the starting scenes of the movie. The movie dictator begins with a humorous and satirical scene that introduces the main character General Aladeen. It shows the moment when he is born in the hospital in the fictional North African country Wadeeya. As, the doctor delivers the baby, he is shocked to see that newborn Aladeen has already full-grown beard and his right arm is detailed in a dictatorial salute. This exaggerated scene sets the tone for the rest of the film, satirical, politically incorrect and darkly comical.

Ideational Metafunction

The image is active and narrative capturing an unexpected moment of birth as a political statement. The doctor and the new born are the represented participants in the image. The baby, though a newly born, performs the role of an actor due to the gesture of saluting; a symbol of power control and predetermined domination. The doctor here becomes the 'reactor', as he expresses shock and disbelief. The vector is formed by the uplifted arm of the baby, signaling the visual action that surpasses the normal expectation of newly born life. The beard relates to the baby in an attributive manner, signifying already attained masculinity and fundamentally 'muslim' in conduct. The setting is locative and supporting the contrast between birth and politics. This representation is deeply rooted in the orientalist traditions, where Arabs and by extension, Muslims are portrayed as inherently barbaric, authoritarian and threatening. The baby's facial hair and dominating gesture serves as the symbol of 'other' being born with the leadership or terrorist identity, implying innate barbarism. It reinforces the idea that East is uncivilized and far removed from the western norms of innocence and humanity and they are born with the innate abilities of being fundamental in beliefs.

Interpersonal Metafunction

The gaze and the action of represented participants serve as 'offer', a message to the viewers for interpretation. The scene created a bridge between the fictional world and the viewers through irony and exaggeration. The act of saluting and being born with a beard is satirical, representing the ideological statement that power is innate heredity and even absurdly predestined. The frame size is mid-shot creating formal yet comic distant that is far- personal, maintaining non intimacy but curiosity. The vertical angle is equal power to the adult character. The reaction of the Western medical doctor who is clearly white, presents the 'self' as shocked by 'them'- the 'other'. It is a typical scene of identity politics, where the dominant group 'us' reacts to the deviant; 'them'. This reaction strengthens the idea that Muslim bodies are unfamiliar, terrifying, or somehow threatening. Which is exactly what islamophobia and orientalism aim to maintain in the western ideology.

Textual Metafunction

The given in this frame is the doctor placed at the left side, representing the 'real'. Which is the world of science, reality and expectation and the baby with fully grown beard on the face is placed on the right side in the frame. It symbolizes the irony and satire of the situation. The salience is focused on the raised arm and the bearded face, sharply contrasting with the sterile, peaceful setting reference to the idealized view of power and authority from the birth. The western perspective of Orientalizing the 'other' in representing the others deploys the stereotypical maintained image of the Arabs in Hollywood movies. The depictions raise an issue regarding the portrayal of Arabs equated with the East, specifically the Arab world. The central placement and satiric details (beard, gesture, facial strength) recreate the iamge of 'Archetypal Arab Despot'. He is not just a baby, he is born as a leader, inevitably brutal. This is a prime

example of Orientalism, where Western culture fashions the East as inherently violent, repressive and ridiculous- a persistent Hollywood stereotype.



Description:

The scene depicts a toddler aged dictator sitting on the floor dressed in a miniature uniform and adorned with the medals and badges. This signifies power and authority at a very young age. Behind him are two young English women. One sitting to his left side is smoking a cigarette. Their composure suggests that they are raising and guiding the child. The image gives a satirical commentary on power dynamics, imperialism and western influence in shaping despots.

Ideational Metafunction

The image is a narrative representation with action and reaction elements. The child in the uniform is the central represented participants drawing all the attention of the audience towards him. The two women behind him are the supporting participants. The vectors in the scene are formed by the body posture of the women, specially the one smoking on the left. It signals control, apathy and dominance of the women over the child. The women function as actors and the child is the Goal; the object of their ideological investment. The uniforms and medal are circumstance of means, signifying the tools through which power is manufactured. The scene mirrors Edward Said's notion of Orientalism, where the Eastern subject is a product constructed by the West. The child 'dictator' symbolises a so called despot being shaped by the Western influences, suggesting a satire that even tyranny is not native but instilled. The connection to Islamophobia appears subtly; the uniform, medals and tropes of military authority associated with Middle Eastern dictators.

Interpersonal Metafunction:

The gaze and the posture of the women are demanding though subtle; offering their presence as powerful figures in the narrative. The fact that the child is not giving gaze connotes that he lacks awareness of the audience, fostering a naïve yet symbolic identity. The social distance is personal; creating slightly intimate yet controlled view. The public distance of the frame with the audience signifies that this situation depicted here is far from the reality of the viewers. The interpersonal metafunction presents the western women as benevolent colonial guardians silently raising and guiding a soon to be dictator. This reinforces Orientalist assumptions that the East needs Western mothering or nurturing. The smoking woman adds a classic satirical element that Western values are not necessarily morally superior, yet they assume

superiority. The infant as a future dictator implies a Western backed project gone wrong.

Textual Metafunction:

The textual metafunction focuses on how information is structured and organized visually to create and guide the viewers' interpretation. In this image, the 'given' new structure appears to separate the toddler dictator as the new element; yet to be explored by the audience, placed on the right side of the frame. While two women behind him sitting on the floor, fulfill the role of the 'given'; the information about the Western world already known to the public. The salience of the toddler in the bright white military uniform adorned with badges is achieved with color, positioning and size. White connotes peace which is a visible irony here. The toddler in this bright uniform creates a focal point that immediately draws people's attention. The setting place of the toddler in this image is low suggesting his youth and vulnerability yet. The medals and posture create a juxtaposition that infers power beyond his years. The frame thus highlights the absurdity and irony of the placing political authority in the hands of a child. As for the orientalism and Islamophobia, the textual organization reinforces western dominance and the idea of the 'other', the child dictator, shown as a byproduct of western parenting influence implying that even despotism is the farcical outcome of the East.



Image description:

The image depicts General Aladeen standing on the balcony of his mansion, his back to the camera, facing a vast crowd of people. His posture, with both arms raised in a victory gesture.

Ideational Metafunction:

The posture of the dictator is an act of power, authority and dominance. This image is power posture of the dictator and signifies authority and dominance. It also suggests that he is controlling and has won over the masses by force. His military uniform is a symbol of authority and dictatorial power, which reinforces the idea of strict control and intimidation. The camera angle placed behind Aladeen puts the viewers in the position of the other who observes and submits to his power, suggesting power imbalance between the leader and the public. This spatial dynamic suggests the theme of subjectivity and domination. The crowd below is visually similar to collectively forming a mass of subordinate subjects, which contrasts with the individual large figure of the dictator. The military uniform and the victory posture of Aladeen depicts

the image as a hegemonic authority that is both threatening and controlling. This fits orientalism's paradigm of threatening other.

Interpersonal Metafunction:

The camera's angle behind the back angle places the viewer in the position of a witness observing an act of power and authority without possibility of intervention. The distance creates a power fascination and sense of hyper reality as the leader is presented a figure beyond the reach. The positioning of Aladeen with his arms raised conveys communication of conquest and triumph, signaling his control and high status. The visual language acts as a dominating message to the audience. From a critical perspective, this distance also reinforces the Orientalist concept of the 'distant and unknown' Eastern dictator, creating a divide between us; the civilized West and them; the mystified East.

Textual Metafunction

The visual composition focuses dominantly on Aladeen, positioning him the center of the frame. The salience is made here with his big image and bright white color, making him the center of the information for the interactive participant or the audience. While the mass of the people is shown as a collective figure, the miniature and subordinate of the dictator. The lines of the sight and gesture serve to guide the viewer's attention to the actor and his arms raised. In this image, the public is placed in the lower half of the frame which shows that they are least important here. The uniform of the dictator has a great visual importance, the dark material and high contrast of his uniform aggravate the authoritarian and militant qualities, essential to the construction of the dictator.

Finally, the composition subtly suggests a discourse of Us v/s Them, where the West is the observer and the East is the Mystified, powerful other to be watched and controlled.



Description:

In this image, the dictator Aladeen is shown running in a marathon/race. He has a confident and dominating stride while holding a pistol which he uses to shoot the other runners on the track. Once all others are shot, he raises his arm in triumph, winning the race in a grandiose manner. The scene is rounded with the clear reaction of onlookers who are in shock and fear.

Ideational Metafunction

The image constructs the dictator as a violent and an absolute power figure, who eliminates all the competition through force. This is an active image as the represented participant is in the middle of the act of running a race. The vector is formed from his gaze towards the other participants he shoots till no one remains alive. His use of gun in a sports event contrasts with the ideal of fair play and sportsmanship. The race is framed as a situation where violence is the means to achieve dominance and success. The shocked reaction of onlookers also emphasizes the abnormality of this scene. This representation reinforces Orientalist stereotypes that people from the east are barbaric, irrational and cruel. The dictator's excessive violence in a supposedly civil activity signals a lack of control and depravity. Orientalism has long persisted in constructing the East as a threat to the West, and the Dictator's act here feeds into this narrative by portraying him as a menacing figure who disregards rules and uses brutality to achieve goals.

Interpersonal Metafunction:

The dictator does not make any eye contact with any other runner, establishing a powerful authoritarian presence through his dominant and aggressive body language, the onlookers faces reflect fear, confusion and horror, creating a distant relationship between the represented participants and the interactive participants and this dynamic relationship reinforces the idea of the 'other' as someone to be watched, feared and controlled. Furthermore, the posture of the dictator signifies orientalist narrative of Muslim leaders who rule through fear and violence and the reaction of the public in the stadium emphasizes 'Us' v/s 'Them' divide, where the Eastern other is perceived as uncivilized, threatening and incomprehensible.

Textual Metafunction

The image is structured to direct the viewers; attention towards Aladeen, who is placed in the center of the image and highlighted through action. The layout favors left to right reading pattern, signaling a progression that is unnaturally interrupted by the shooting. The other runners spread in the background, aligned in a linear formation the order and competition, yet this order is shattered by Aladeen's breach of rules. The bullet and weapons act as visual markers. These recode the scene from sporting event into the theatre of war and dominance. The clear lines and symmetric positioning of the runners generates a sense of structure. The grouping of the other characters, the uniform clothing and the dead bodies create a visual hierarchy. The image draws Islamophobic discourse showing Aladeen who trivializes violence, suggesting lack of moral sensibility. This depiction is a core strategy of Orientalism and Islamophobia in pop culture.

Conclusion

The Islamophobic assumptions are created and maintained by the directors and the writers of Hollywood. The muslims, especially the Arab muslims are represented in a wrapped view. 'the relentless cinematic assault on Arabs has been our culture's most insidious yet closeted disgrace--until now. Jack Shaheen's landmark work casts a penetrating spotlight on the movies that have shaped our infinitely distorted and warped views of Arab and Muslim life'-----Renee Tajima-Pena, producer-director, Sundance award-winning film, My America (comments on Reel Bad Arabs)

Shaheen asserts, 'Hollywood's reel Arabs spin around and around non-stop, like flywheels, magnifying ugly prejudices. Heinous images do not fade into the sunset. They continue to impact viewers without let-up, via TV repeats, big screen revivals, the internet, and movie rentals. Regretfully, they wreak their damaging psychological havoc on us all, inflaming bigotry and xenophobia page' (Shaheen, 2009, p.16).

In conclusion, *The Dictator* exemplifies Hollywood's enduring ability to frame Arabs through an Orientalist lens that reduces them to caricatures of excess, violence, and absurdity. By relying on familiar tropes of despotism, fanaticism, and cultural backwardness, the film reinforces a binary between the "civilized" West and the irrational, exotic "Other." This representational strategy demonstrates how Hollywood writers and directors wield cultural power to normalize stereotypes under the guise of satire and comedy, making such portrayals appear harmless while perpetuating long-standing prejudices. Rather than challenging dominant narratives, *The Dictator* reproduces them, revealing how popular cinema continues to construct Arab identity as foreign, inferior, and fundamentally incompatible with Western norms. As a result, the film underscores the persistence of Orientalism in contemporary media and highlights the urgent need for more nuanced, self-representative, and humanizing portrayals of Arabs in global cinema.

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