Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People

Jack Shaheen
New York: Olive Branch Press, 2001. 574 pages.

When it comes to Arab characters in movies, Hollywood has only one kind: Bad Arabs. So argues Jack Shaheen, professor emeritus of mass communications at Southern Illinois University and a former CBS News consultant on Middle East affairs in his new book, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People.*

In this groundbreaking study, Shaheen provides long-awaited evidence that since "cameras started cranking to the present," Hollywood, for more than a century, has targeted Arabs. It has portrayed them, knowingly or unknowingly, as "uncivilized religious fanatics and money-mad cultural 'others'." He convincingly makes the case that filmmakers must not be pardoned for distorting and sacrificing the truth under the false pretext of artistic license.

The book is divided into two main parts. Most important, perhaps, is the introduction. The second part reviews films from A to Z. The book contains notes, appendices, a glossary, an index of films, and lists and discusses, in alphabetical order, more than 900 feature films containing Arab characters. The overwhelming majority of them, such as *Prisoner in the Middle East, Wanted Dead or Alive*, *The Delta Force, and Executive Decision* negatively stereotype Arabs. Only a handful of scenarios that surfaced in the 1980s and 1990s featured Arab characters as heroes. *The Lion of the Desert* and The 13th *Warrior* come to mind.

Shaheen eloquently describes the links between the ability to create fictional narratives and images and the power to form social attitudes, shape thoughts and beliefs, and construct prisms through which people view the world, themselves, and other peoples. Over time and through repetition, these stereotypes become self-perpetuating, enduring, and hard to eliminate.

Part One consists of 12 sections, which enables the reader to navigate easily what otherwise could have been complicated issues and concepts. The first section, "The Genesis," discusses the negative stereotyping of Arabs in American pop culture. After this, he introduces "Real Arabs" as he has known them: his family, friends and colleagues, and people he has met and experienced throughout his life. Another part, "The Stereotype's Entry," deals with how stereotypical Arab images entered American popular culture. Here he argues that American image-makers did not invent

the negative Arab stereotype, but rather "inherited and embellished Europe's pre-existing Arab caricatures." He elaborates, without giving specific examples, that these inherited tales were inhabited with "cheating vendors and exotic concubines held hostage in slave markets." He concludes that the American public's acceptance of those images as valid tremendously influenced American culture in its relationship with the "Oriental" Arab.

The book offers a plain glimpse into how Hollywood movies depict the desert and the Arab: "The Desert locale consists of an Oasis, oil wells, palm trees, tents, fantastically ornate palaces, sleek limousines, and, of course, camels." The screen Arab male becomes an instant "Ali Baba kit" who lives in the desert with all of the kit's components: "curved dagger, scimitars, magic lamps, giant feather fans, and nargelihs." The Arab female follows the Arab male with "chadors, hijabs, (or) belly dancers' see-through pantaloons, veils, and jewels for their navels."

A timely and important observation is how today's image-makers unjustly treat Islam. They regularly link Islam "with male supremacy," jihad (mistranslated as "holy war"), and acts of terror. In the aftermath of the 9/11 tragedy, the debate about Islam and Muslims in the West has taken on a new intensity. Media pundits and self-styled experts attempt to convince the unsuspecting American public that terrorism resides in the very nature of Muslim and Arab cultures. *Reel Bad Arabs* testifies to the fact that the fertile soil for such hateful seeds has been plowed by Hollywood's negative Arab images.

In addition, the book astutely questions the studios' purpose behind exploiting notable African-American actors, whose own ethnic minority has suffered tremendously from negative and racist stereotyping, in order to legitimize the negative "reel" Arab. Such films as *The Siege* (1998: Denzel Washington), *Rules of Engagement* (2000: Samuel L. Jackson), and Disney's *Kazam* (1996: Shaquille O'Neal) fit this category perfectly. Shaheen does not offer any justification for those actors' motivation or reasons for agreeing to such roles.

The most important aspect of *Reel Bad Arabs* is its attempt to answer the question: Why the stereotype? The book suggests seven reasons, though it does not restrict itself to these. One answer is the Arab-Israeli conflict. Supporters of Israel recognized filmmaking as a powerful tool and set out to use it to propagate discriminatory images that suited their political agendas. This practice will endure as long as society as a whole tolerates dehumanizing and degrading negative images of other peoples.

Another answer can be found in the American government's pursuit of its foreign policy interests in the Middle East. This explains the extent to which the Department of Defense collaborates in making movies that lambaste Arabs, portraying them as terrorists out to kill Americans and destroy "the Western way of life." After 9/11, a widely reported meeting between executives and high-level managers and producers from Hollywood and the White House was held, on President Bush's initiative, to discuss how Hollywood can contribute to "combating terrorism." This shows how the government can use Hollywood as an instrument of social conditioning.

 Another contributing factor is the all-pervasive silence characterizing the public's response, as well as (and even more importantly) that of the intellectual elites, scholars, and government officials. Even those who run for public office on anti-stereotyping platforms fail to mention that Arabs are – and have long been – the media's favorite whipping boy. If we, as a society, are to be true to the American principle of "all persons are created equal," we must openly and loudly challenge *all* hateful stereotypes, including that of the "reel" bad Arab.

Shaheen, in all fairness, does not restrict the reasons for the enduring negative Arab stereotype to external factors, but looks inward to criticize the Arab-American community's lack of public presence. Other groups that have suffered from negative stereotyping, such as African-Americans, Asian-Americans, and Jewish-Americans, have aggressively fought and diminished negative portraits. Arab-Americans as a group, according to Shaheen, tend to be timid and slow to mobilize. Hollywood barely listens when they do protest, and so the film industry's undeclared war against Arabs continues unabated.

All of its merits notwithstanding, the book has its flaws as well as peculiar omissions. For example, its suggestion for resolving the problem, offered in the subsection "Solutions," is oversimplified. Shaheen seeks a solution in the filmmakers' goodwill. He challenges Hollywood producers to recognize past unjust practices and embrace the wisdom of fairness in portraying people. I think it is naive to presume that simply educating filmmakers of the truth and providing them with evidence of the evils of negatively stereotyping people that they will stop, just as they did with other ethnic minorities in the past. Such reliance on goodwill ignores the powerful political agendas behind stereotyping that Shaheen analyzed earlier in his book. The phenomenon of persisting negative stereotyping of an ethnic or racial minority is the result of many interrelated and complex political, social, cultural, religious, and psychological factors. Stopping it requires a

social transformation that takes all of these factors into account, not just educating filmmakers or tackling any one factor alone.

Nevertheless, this important, pioneering, and creative study should open the door to completely new modes of activism for the Arab and Muslim communities. It is my hope that they will be propelled to upgrade their understanding and responses to this phenomenon, and begin the tedious work of organizing to eradicate it.

The sure approach to ending Hollywood's injurious practice of dehumanizing Arabs and reducing them to mere caricatures is a comprehensive approach. Hollywood should not be targeted alone for education and dialogue – the whole society should be targeted. Moreover, education alone cannot resolve the problem. It should be used as a tool to augment our involvement, as Arabs, in all aspects of America's social, economical, scientific, and cultural life as producers and not as mere consumers.

Reel Bad Arabs should make its way into university and college classrooms to help raise an enlightened new generation of filmmakers who will explore and present the lives of people in ways that are not distorted to serve an ulterior agenda. This will make it easier for Arabs to produce and shape our own image as we know it. This process would then give rise to story-telling and image-making that broadens horizons, promotes understanding, and creates harmony within cultural diversity.

<div align="right">

Michel Shehadeh
ADC West Coast Director
Stanton, California

</div>

Roman Catholics and Shi'i Muslims:
Prayer, Passion, and Politics

James A. Bill and John Alden Williams
Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. 166 pages.

Comparing Roman Catholicism and Twelver Shi'i Islam suggests itself for several reasons: the parallel passions of Jesus Christ and Prophet Muhammad's grandson Husayn; the suffering of and devotion of their mothers, Mary and Fatimah; and perhaps most prominently in recent years, the powerful hierarchies of authority within each faith, headed by the Pope on the Catholic side and by several leading jurists (mujtahidun) who bear the title of legal authority for laymen (marji> al-taqlid) on the Shi'i side. In fact, the papacy is frequently mentioned in contemporary debates about the marji> al-taqlid*'s*