| RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Flawed World: Disney's *Aladdin* through the Lens of Orientalism

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| ABSTRACT

One Thousand and One Nights (Arabian Nights) is one of the most popular collections of stories published in the early eighteenth century. The story of "Aladdin and The Wonderful Lamp" became especially popular following the French Orientalist Antoine Gallard's translation. The story has been adapted many times throughout the years, and the most famous of these adaptations is Disney's *Aladdin* (1992). However, despite its success and popularity, the film has received harsh criticism for its portrayal of Middle Eastern people, which has inspired several studies of its use of Orientalism. Following the theoretical approach of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, this article discusses how Middle Eastern people are represented in *Aladdin* and explores some of the Orientalist stereotypes that are present in the film. This study uses two methods: first, a semiotic analysis of Orientalist signs in the movie; and second, a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the narration and dialogue. This study shows how *Aladdin* uses Orientalist narratives that depict Middle Eastern people as violent, greedy, or barbaric, and presents the Middle East as an exotic place.

| KEYWORDS

Aladdin (1992), Orientalism, Walt Disney, Cultural Representation, Stereotypes

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1. Introduction

One Thousand and One Nights, also known as the *Arabian Nights*, became one of the most popular collections of stories in the early eighteenth century. These stories of the far East, translated for Western readers by the French Orientalist Antoine Galland, contain anecdotes of magic and exoticism that were unfamiliar to readers in the West. The story of "Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp" was one of the most popular, receiving many different adaptations throughout the years such as *Aladdin and the Wonderful Lamp* (1917), *Le meraviglie di Aladino* (1961), and *Adventures of Aladdin* (1978). The most famous of these adaptations is Disney's film *Aladdin*, released in 1992.

In Disney's version of the story, Aladdin is a homeless young man living in the fictional city of Agrabah; he is a poor thief with a kind heart and good nature. Despite its success, *Aladdin* faced harsh criticism due to its often negative depictions of Middle Eastern people. Some critics have claimed that the movie is offensive because it includes Orientalist stereotypes, and such dismissals have prompted scholars to examine the film from this perspective. Using Edward Said's theories of Orientalism, this article seeks to further examine the representation of the Orient in Disney's *Aladdin* (1992) and to discuss the presence of Western stereotypes of Eastern people and places in the film. The choice of the movie for this study is mainly due to the popularity of Disney's movies and also to the large number of previous articles on the subject. This article is significant in its discussion of how Western media apply Oriental narratives even to stories of Eastern origin.

The limitation of this study is the possibility of different interpretations of the film and its fictional setting. This project does not discuss the political situation in the Middle East in the early 1990s, and instead argues that the choices of fashion, architecture, and animals originating in different countries are the results of ignorance on the part of *Aladdin's* directing team, particularly the Western misconception of the Orient as one country rather than many. However, other scholars might find the directors' choices justifiable in order to avoid any negative portrayals of Arabic countries during the Gulf War.

2. Literature Review

This article begins with a review of the literature regarding the concept of Orientalism, the representation of the Middle East and its peoples in the movie industry, and Orientalism in Disney's Aladdin (1992). In *Orientalism* (1978), Said defines Orientalism "as a system of knowledge about the Orients" that is generated by the West in search of power and domination (p. 6-7). By creating such knowledge of the Orient and its peoples in Western literature, the West asserts the existence of the "advanced/backward binarism" of the Occident and the Orient (Said, 1978, p. 207). This process of Orientalizing the Orient thus controls how these nations and peoples are perceived in the Western reader's mind (Said, 1978, p. 67). Said further states that the "electronic age" has made the mysterious Orient more accessible than ever, and the West more assertive in their stereotypes of the Orient: "television, the films, and all the media's resources have forced information into more and more standardized molds" so that such simplified Western views of the Orient become recognized images. Moreover, he provides an example by reviewing the representation of Arabs in media as "evil" and "terrorists" and how such representation became a fixed stereotype (Said, 1978, p. 26-27).

A series of studies have indicated that Western movie makers are using the same Orientalist views of earlier ages in their movies' plots and characters. For instance, in her article "I'll Make an American Out of You: Reflections on the Orientalism of Disney's *Mulan* (1998)" Nehal Amer (2022) discusses how the West has implemented the same orientalist views in contemporary media, such as films, which are considerably more accessible to people (p. 208). The negative representation of the Orient in Hollywood films is derived from the same narratives of Western literature. Najat Dajani (2000) points out in her article "Arabs in Hollywood: Orientalism in Films" that the movie industry has inherited the degrading narratives of Western texts, which inherited their narratives from older works (p. 9). Similarly, in *Visions of the East*, Matthew Bernstein (1997) believes that filmmakers of the last two centuries have consistently repeated negative narratives of the Orient in order to boost the popularity of their films in the West (p. 3). In *How Hollywood Projects Foreign Policy*, Sally-Ann Totman (2009) elaborates on Said's understanding of Michel Foucault's knowledge/power concept and argues that by inserting certain images and dialogue, film directors can influence how the viewer thinks and feels about any nation. Totman asserts that children's movies are not exceptions to this practice, particularly cases such as *Aladdin*, which does include instances of most Western stereotypes of the Orient (2009, p. 17).

Aladdin, produced by Walt Disney Studios in 1992, has attracted controversy for its depiction of the Middle East and its people; for example, Lebanese-Amercian media critic Jack Shaheen has criticized the film for depicting Oriental people in general and Arab people specifically as barbaric, uncharitable, and cruel. In his article "*Aladdin* Animated Racism" (1993), Shaheen accuses the opening song of *Aladdin*, "Arabian Nights," especially its inclusion of words like "barbaric," of insulting over three hundred million Arabs and their cultures (p. 49). In her article "The Aladdin Controversy Disney Can't Escape," Sophia Galer (2017) notes that Jack Shaheen personally led the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee in a 1993 campaign demanding that Disney producers change the lyrics of the song. However, the Western orientalist depiction of the East is not limited to the opening song, but is apparent throughout the movie. Samuel Scurry (2010) comments on the abundancy of Orientalist themes and characters in the movie, and in his article "Orientalism in American Cinema: Providing a Historical and Geographical Context for Postcolonial Theory" he elaborates on Disney's use of characterizations and narration that reinforce negative views of the Orient (p. 27).

The negative representation of the Orient and its peoples in *Aladdin* has been explored by many scholars since the release of the film in 1992. This study, similarly, investigates the depiction of the Orient in *Aladdin*. It uses critical discourse analysis (CDA), a method followed by many previous works on this subject, which examines written texts and/or spoken words. However, fewer studies have focused on the signs and objects in the movie. Therefore, this project uses semiotic analysis alongside critical discourse analysis to examine and understand *Aladdin's* use of signs, objects, narrative, and dialogue as parts of its overall Orientalist representation.

3. Methodology

In *Orientalism*, Said (1978) discusses how Western societies practice domination by creating definitions and controlling views of the Orient (p. 3). However, even if Orientalists take positive views of the Orient, such "overesteem was followed by a counterresponse: the Orient suddenly appeared lamentably under-humanized, antidemocratic, backward, barbaric" (Said, 1978, p. 150). This study will explore how the West negatively portrays the Orient in *Aladdin* and subtly reinforces such negative portrayals for viewers of the film.

This project uses two analytical methods. The first method is a semiotic analysis of the stereotypical images of the Orient in the movie, based on the analytical approach of Charles S. Peirce via Johannes Ehrat's book *Cinema and Semiotic: Peirce and Film Aesthetics, Narration, And Representation* (2005). Ehrat quotes Peirce's definition of the sign as an object that is related to itself to its interpretation at the same time (2005, p. 117). He discusses Peirce's semiotic framework in relation to cinematic production, and claims that interpretation of signs allows readers to determine the "ideology" or the "psyche" of the author (p. 323) as well as the author/filmmaker's intended message. In addition, in "A Semiotic Analysis of the Movie *Black Panther*" (2021), Sadiq Aminu outlines the parts of Peirce's "triadic theory": the representamen, which is the sign or the physical object we observe or know; the interpretant, which is what we understand from this sign or the concept we have about it; and the object, which is what we make of the sign or how our interpretation of it makes us behave (p. 72). This article regards the settings, fashions, animals, and characters in *Aladdin* as signs of Orientalism, and interprets these signs in order to examine the film's Orientalist ideology.

The second method used in this study is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), based on Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer's *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis* (2001), which "aims to investigate critically social inequality as it is expressed, signaled, constituted, legitimized and so on by language use (or in discourse)" (p. 2); in other words, by examining the text in terms of its social, political, and historical contexts. This investigation of social inequality will unveil how the West uses stereotypical narratives and dialogue in movies to reinforce the notion of the Orient as inferior.

4. Analysis and Discussion
Semiotic Analysis
This section discusses the filmmakers' use of objects, character designs, and animals as signs of Orientalist understanding. These signs are explored and interpreted to demonstrate the directors' inconsistency and their stereotypical views of the Orient as an exotic and fantastic location.

1. Exoticism
In the eyes of the West, the countries of the Orient are seen as exotic and fascinating. Said (1978) describes this perception in terms of the East as a stage on which these traits are presented to the audience of the West (p. 63). In the case of *Aladdin*, the stage is Agrabah, and the audience are the Western viewers of the movie who are perceived as tourists. Within the first few minutes of the movie, we encounter a man blowing fire from his mouth, followed by images of a man walking on burning coal and another lying on a board of needles, all of which reinforce the image of the Orient as a place of fantastical elements, and its people as different from the Western viewers. As Ronald Silalahi (2018) elaborates in his article "Western Capitalism and Eastern Exoticism: Orientalism in Edward Said's Perspectives," the idea of the Orient being different and exotic is produced by colonialists to make themselves appear superior and more human-like (p. 95). Thus, the West continues to use such narratives in film and literature to identify themselves as the Orient's "contrasting image, idea, personality, experience" to set binary opposition according to Said (1978, p. 2).

The animals in the film also act as signs of exoticism, since the main characters do not have pets who are common in the West such as dogs or cats; instead, Princess Jasmine has a pet tiger, and Aladdin's animal companion is a monkey. Although the directors may have derived the idea from observing Arabs, Indians, and other people of Oriental backgrounds who do have wild animals in their homes as pets, generalizing such behaviour from only a few examples helps to establish a fixed belief that all Oriental people have zoos in their houses. This decision, however, merely reflects ignorance on the part of the directors.

2. Inconsistency
When watching the movie *Aladdin*, the viewer can see the inconsistency in its representation of the Orient. The directors did not choose one specific country as a setting, but instead used elements from different countries throughout the Orient and combined them into a generalized, and stereotypical, representation of the Orient as a whole. For example, the palace of the Sultan and his daughter Jasmine is not derived from the usual architecture of Arabic/Islamic palaces, but rather bears a strong resemblance to the Taj Mahal in India. Outside the palace, the houses of the common people are the same mud, square houses of the poor communities in old Arabic countries, to reflect that the city is demarcated into two different parts: the modern, organized wealthy part where the rich reside, and the backward, disorganized part where the poor live.

A second example of the filmmakers' inconsistency in representation can be seen in the outfits that the characters wear. Aladdin's outfit consists of a vest, a shirwal (wide trousers), and a tarbouch, which are all examples of lower-class Ottoman men's attire. Additionally, the sultan is also wearing Ottoman pieces, but those of a high-status member, including the robe, the turban, and the belt. On the other hand, Princess Jasmine is wearing a provocative Indian outfit with a hairstyle similar to the architecture of the Taj Mahal. Like her, almost all the adult female characters in the movie are wearing provocative attire that shows their chests

and stomachs. Abderrahmene Bourenane (2020) claims in his article "Authenticity and Discourses in *Aladdin* (1992)" that the choice of outfits for the female characters is not arbitrary but intended to fit the Western male gaze of Oriental women (p. 246). In *Orientalism*, Said addresses the Western male gaze of Oriental women, using Gustave Flaubert's declaration that "the oriental woman is no more than a machine: she makes no distinction between one man and another man", and points out that women of the East represent nothing but "a display of impressive but verbally inexpressive femininity" (p. 187). This is true when we see the difference between women's outfits in *Aladdin* and in other Disney movies. Among all the Disney princesses, Jasmine is the only princess whose revealing outfit is directly linked with unbashful eroticism and women's exploitation of their sexual power. This is evident in the movie when Jafar captures Jasmine; she changes to a more provocative attire and attempts to distract Jafar by seducing him.

The inconsistency of *Aladdin's* directors can also be seen with the choices of animals appearing in the film. The animals we see in the city of Agrabah originate in many different places. The first animal we encounter in the movie is the camel, which is one of the most famous animals in the Middle East, which would hint to the viewer that this story is set in an Arabic land. However, the other animals in the story come from other places than the Arab world. For instance, the elephant is the national animal of Thailand; the tiger is the national animal of India; and the talking parrot comes from Australia or the Dominican Republic. Even though these animals serve various purposes in the story and add to the element of fun, the film would have provided a more accurate portrayal of the region if the directors had remained consistent and stuck to depicting animals from Arabic countries.

Critical Discourse Analysis

This section discusses the narration and dialogue of *Aladdin*, using critical discourse analysis to examine the stereotypical image of the Orient as barbaric and violent, and in turn the attitude of the directors as racist.

1. Racism

The dialogue and narration in *Aladdin* are extremely lively and amusing, but hardly innocent, as they contain many negative and racist connotations of the Orient and its people. The narrator of *Aladdin* is an Arabic merchant who welcomes the viewer to Agrabah. First, the merchant narrator begins to show the tourist/viewer his "finest merchandise this side of the river Jordan." However, everything he takes out is either broken or completely useless. This suggests to the viewer that the Orient does not possess good merchandise, and that merchants lie in order to earn money and satisfy their green. Second, racism is also shown in the description of Jafar, the evil magician. The narrator uses the phrase "A dark man waits with a dark purpose," which can be understood in two ways: "dark" can mean evil or mysterious, but it can also refer to Jafar's skin colour. The word "dark" is used again when the Genie describes Jafar as a "tall, dark, and sinister ugly man." In *Orientalism*, Said (1978) discusses the binary opposition in how the West uses the Orient to identifies itself as "its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience." (p. 2). Therefore, these connections of the villain's skintone and personality help to associate Western, lighter skin colours with kindness, and Oriental, darker skin colours with evil.

The characters' accents and speech patterns also have racist connotations. The good characters, such as Aladdin, Jasmine, and the Sultan, have American-sounding accents, while the evil or unlikeable characters such as Jafar have accents more closely associated with Arabic countries, adding to the association of Arabs with evil. Said (1978) elaborates in *Orientalism* on the deliberate attempts of Western media to represent Arabs after the 1973 war as "more menacing" with "their sharply hooked noses, the evil mustachioed leer on their faces" (p. 286), and such imagery combines with the characters' accents to further reinforce the binary opposition of good Occident with evil Orient.

2. Barbarism

One of the most familiar stereotypes of the Middle East and its people is violence and barbarism. The opening song of *Aladdin* helps to set up and reinforce this stereotype, with the lyrics "Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face / It's barbaric, but hey, it's home"; however, these lines were changed to "Where it's flat and immense, and the heat is intense" following harsh reviews from critics such as Jack Shaheen. Mundi Rahayu (2016) comments on this change in her article "Identity Politics in *Aladdin* – From Arabian Nights to Disney Animated Film," and explains that there was indeed a barbaric tradition of cutting off the enemy's ear in battle in ancient times (p. 6). The action is barbaric, but the original song lyric exaggerates this practice to suggest to the viewers that Oriental people would harm others for nothing because it is part of their culture. This exaggeration is either a result of ignorance or an intended choice to draw their desired picture of the Orient and its peoples.

Almost all of the guards seen in the movie are depicted as angry men who always chase after Aladdin or rush to cut people's hands off for stealing. For example, when Princess Jasmine took an apple without purchasing it, the guards grabbed her hand to cut it off immediately, without allowing her to speak or defend herself. Similarly, they later take Aladdin to prison and plan

to behead him with no clear justification. The nobles in the movie are no exception to this stereotype; they are not characterized as sophisticated and generous, but as cruel and cheap, even willing to harm children who step in the way of the nobleman's camel. These characterizations, as with the narrative and dialogue, further support the Western fixed idea about the Orient and its people that the film helps to promote to its audience.

5. Conclusion

The representation of the Orient and its people in the movie industry continues narratives and images that were already present in Western literature. Evidence from previous studies indicates that Western societies have continued to use these narratives to assert power and dominance over the East through literature, media, and art. Disney's Aladdin (1992) is one such film that uses Western views of the East to promote the ideas of the East being the opposite of the West. This case study of the film shows how it uses stereotypes of the Orient and its peoples as violent and barbaric, and their countries as exotic places. Semiotic analysis and critical discourse analysis of the visual, auditory, and narrative elements of *Aladdin* help to demonstrate the racism and inconsistency of the film's directors in their choices of representation of the Orient.

In reflecting on the experience of writing this project, I find my understanding of Orientalism has become deeper and more profound. As I navigated the intricacies of the link between the Orient and the Occident, and how they view and act toward each other, I realize that Orientalist discourse is deeply rooted even in the minds of newer generations. The implications of my current study highlight the importance of enforcing laws of content moderation to control and limit the presence of backward representation of the Orient and its people in mainstream media. By emphasizing the danger of creating false images of the Orient, I believe in the necessity of raising awareness of the West's attempts to keep Orientalizing the Orients, and educating the public on the rich and diverses cultures of the Orient.

My first recommendation for future study of Orientalist movies is to pay attention to the Western representation of Oriental countries and peoples, and to decipher the Orientalist subtext in films. The second recommendation is to conduct such studies with regard to the social and political contexts of the movie and to analyze the influence these contexts have on depictions of the Orient. Future scholars should recognize the intentions behind the use of stereotypical images of the Orient and work to unveil any hidden meanings in the movie. This process will help scholars and readers better understand the concept of Orientalism present in the film industry, and will also aid in further study.

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