
Multimedia Review

Multicultural Film

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Shaheen, Jack (Author), Jhally, Sut (Director), Earp, Jeremy (Producer). (2006). *Reel bad Arabs: How Hollywood vilifies a people* [Documentary]. USA: Media Education Foundation. (www.mediaed.org)

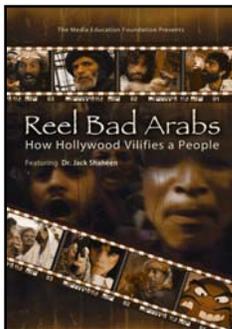
Jack Shaheen continues to be a piercing laser of fairness and sanity in pointing out Hollywood's ongoing egregious smearing of Arabs.

*Howard Rosenberg
Los Angeles Times TV Critic*

Jack G. Shaheen has long been a prophet in the Hollywood wilderness, writing from carefully documented scholarship that exposes the film industry's negative portrayals of Arabs and Muslims.

*James M. Wall
Senior Contributing Editor, The Christian Century*

Film Analysis



In a 50-minute documentary, with Arabic/English subtitles, Jack Shaheen, Emeritus Professor of Mass Communications and author of the book *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2001), narrates and illustrates with film clips the 100-year history of stereotyping Muslim Arabs in film and television as “villains, barbarians, bunglers, over-sexed bandits, submissive women and finally blood-thirsty terrorists.” Shaheen’s 2006 video is divided into seven segments and is accompanied by a 19-page

comprehensive study guide for teachers and diversity trainers containing three levels, key points, discussion questions, and three assignments.

The conclusion of Shaheen's researched commentary, after having viewed 1,000 films, is that "Muslim Arabs have been the most maligned group in the history of the cinema, characterized by excessive stereotyping that exceeded negative images of Blacks, Native Americans, Asians, Hispanics and Jews." He described the 1,000 films with Arab and Muslim



characters as having the following characteristics: 12 had positive depictions, 52 were even handed, and the remaining 936 were negative. Shaheen maintains that the current view of Muslim Arabs in films is the same as Nazi Germany's (1933-45) depictions of Jews except the Arabs wear headgear. The stereotypes of a Jewish Shylock and Rothschild banker conspiracy to take over global finances have been replaced by the Muslim Arab sheik using oil money to buy up the civilized and vulnerable Western world. The anti-Arab mythology is so pervasive that Iranians who are Muslims but not Arabs and who speak Farsi not Arabic are thrown into the mix of defaming and distrusting every Muslim in the Middle East. The media portrayals of Arabs in the 1990's and in particular after 9/11 in 2001 deal with endless and mindless carnage linked to terrorist groups driven by a religious struggle (*Jihad*).

Shaheen's video has seven segments, beginning with **Segment 1 – An Introduction** where viewers learn that Arabs are always maligned and belittled in Hollywood films: Arabs appear, act, and are described as less than human—*Untermenschen* in the Nazi vocabulary. However, his experience has informed him otherwise. As Lebanese Christian, Shaheen's began to study the history of Arabs and Islam as a Fulbright Scholar at the American University of Beirut in 1974 although he does not speak Arabic. Shaheen explained that most Arab Americans are Christian;



82% are US citizens; and 85% of the world's Muslims are not Arabs. The demographic facts do not match the media stereotypes of Arab terrorists in desert settings.

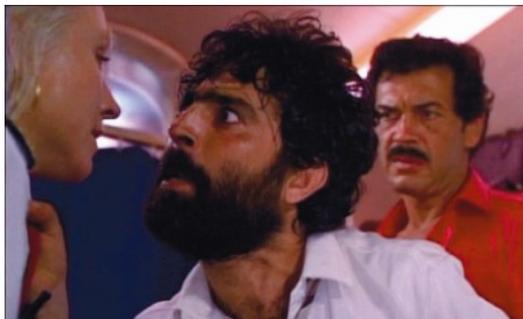
Segment 2 – Myths of Arabland. There is a place that does not exist except in the stereotypical minds, words, and images of writers, reporters, explorers, artists, and Hollywood

film-makers. Their collective one-dimensional descriptions reduced a complex web of Islamic nations and diverse cultures, stretching from Morocco to Iraq to panoply of threatening deserts, ornate palaces, lush oases, shuffling camels and besieged forts. Each storyline contains the obligatory Ali Baba kit with belly dancers, flying carpets, snake charmers, scimitars, and fierce Bedouin bandits. Arabs appear as caricatures of themselves. The males are angry, irrational, fatalistic, fanatical, and lecherous while the women are subdued sexual objects, “veiled bundles in black” and more recently ruthless terrorists and suicide bombers. The benign Arab stock villain is one who vacillates between buffoonery and bomb making and thus is an incompetent terrorist easily vanquished. Hollywood’s Arab heavies even appear in G-rated Disney films. Shaheen is shocked by the cultural stereotyping in the 1992 Oscar-winning Disney animation film *Aladdin* watched by millions of children in America and around the world. The film *Aladdin* begins with a song whose original lyrics were “Oh I come from a land, from a faraway place / Where the caravan camels roam / Where they cut off your ear / If they don’t like your face / It’s barbaric, but, hey, it’s home.”

Segment 3 – The Arab Threat. Jack Valenti (1921-2007) who served as President of the Motion Picture Association of America for 38 years said, “Washington and Hollywood spring from the same DNA.” Thus historical events become movie themes and storylines. The political changes after WWII (1939-45) and the dissolution of European colonial empires gave rise to national movements, many of them violent as oppressed groups sought freedom and independence. There were three events that accelerated the negative media images of the Muslim Arabs: the Israeli-Palestinian conflict after the founding of Israel in 1948, the 1970’s Saudi oil embargo, and the Iranians holding US Embassy personnel hostage for 444 days until January 1981. The Arabs called themselves freedom fighters or *Fedayeen* as they formed organized resistance to neo-colonialism. These clashes grew and intensified as the Middle East was engulfed in internecine conflicts for the last 60 years. In Hollywood language, the West was depicted as the good guys and the Arabs as the bad guys in every conflict. As Arab oil wealth grew, the former indolent sheiks became international wheeler-dealers intent on using fiscal power to right political wrongs. According to the movies, Arabs plot to buy up America and control its destiny.

Segment 4 – Terror Incorporated, Demonizing Palestinians and Muslims. After defining Arab nationalism as a threat, Shaheen explains that Hollywood described it as a franchised group of political terrorists plotting nefarious agendas. Films such as *Exodus* (1960) and *Cast a Giant Shadow* (1966) portrayed Israelis as victims of murderous Palestinians. The film *Black Sunday* (1977) showed Arabs plotting the mass murder of 80,000 Americans during a Superbowl football game in Miami, Florida. The movie script was based on a book about the Black September attack on Israeli athletes at the 1972 Summer Olympics, confirming Valenti’s statement that “Washington and

Hollywood spring from the same DNA.” During the last 60 years, Hollywood rarely showed the Palestinians as victims, suffering in refugee camps while being shelled and bombed by occupying Israeli forces. In 30 movies made between 1979-90 by Cannon Pictures, owned by Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus, their low-budget, high-action films portrayed Arabs as the



most heinous and indifferent killers. Their movies included *The Delta Force* (1986), where kidnapped passengers on a hijacked flight are tormented but eventually rescued when the “bad Arabs” are all killed. This film was a precursor to *True Lies* (1994), a movie about Arab terrorists who steal a nuclear device and use it for extortion.

Segment 5 – The Only Good Arab. This paraphrased remark is attributed to US General Philip Sheridan who in 1869 said, “The only good Indians I ever saw were dead.” The Department of Defense supported a series of films that pitted the US government against Arab terrorists including *Navy Seals* (1990) and *Rules of Engagement* (2000) which gave license to the West to conduct, at least on film, a righteous slaughter of hundreds of Yemeni civilians. Shaheen maintains that these films stripped Arabs of their humanity and thus made it justifiable to kill them all to make them like good Indians.

Segment 6 – Islamophobia. Shaheen explains that this is the current stage of mass media stereotyping of Muslim Arabs. They appear intent on conducting a religious struggle (*Jihad*) to expel Western influences that corrupt their traditional societies. Large scale truck bombings such as the 1983 attack in Beirut, Lebanon, that killed 241 American servicemen became inextricably linked to Islamic fundamentalism. The public’s phobic reactions grew after Gulf War I (1991), when America turned on Saddam Hussein, an Iraqi dictator the US supported when he was fighting Iran (1980-88). After Timothy McVeigh, a White, Irish Catholic, decorated Gulf War I US Army veteran, bombed the Oklahoma City Federal building in April 1995 killing 168 people and wounding hundreds, the media and FBI immediately reported the bombing as the work of Muslim terrorists. Hollywood films have so conditioned the American public that any terrorist attack against US citizens is synonymous with Muslims.



After 9/11 in 2001 and the expiated 2003 invasion of Iraq, what little compassion there was for Arabs was stripped away. The torture and public humiliation of Iraqis in Abu Ghraib prison by US military personnel was described by Rush Limbaugh, a

reactionary radio talk show host, as being little more than fraternity hazing or a way to let out steam. Arab prisoners were treated like animals. Shaheen complained that Arabs, whether they live in the Middle East or are American citizens, often get profiled at airports, searched, and interrogated before they can board any flight.

Segment 7 – Getting Real. Shaheen’s powerful and incisive video concludes with his sincere hope that negative stereotypes of Muslim Arabs will begin to fade away and mutual respect will arise. Films such as *Three Kings* (1999), *Syriana* (2005), and *The Kingdom of Heaven* (2005) give Arabs back the humanity that Hollywood stripped from them. Shaheen calls himself an optimist. He believes that, as more Americans realize it is morally and ethically wrong to demonize a people, Hollywood and the mass media will help to unlearn the negative stereotypes put upon Muslim Arabs for the last 100 years.

Dr. Jack Shaheen’s 2006 documentary is a skillfully articulated and illustrated explanation of how Hollywood and the mass media have stereotyped 1.6 billion Muslims by depicting them as Arab terrorists. The documentary earns a 9.6 on a scale of 10 for meeting or exceeding multicultural educational standards in terms of expressing social conditions, engaging dialogue, and promoting self-reflection and transformational education and for adopting excellent mechanics of cinematography, pacing, sound, music, and editing.

Discounted Pricing and Study Guide

The Media Education Foundation, a non-profit organization located in Northampton, MA, offers subsidized prices to high schools (\$10), public libraries (\$10), and college communication or journalism departments (\$50) to purchase a copy of *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood vilifies a people*. Call 413-584-8500 or email info@mediaed.org for details.

The 19-page study guide for the video contains key points, discussion questions, and assignments for each of the seven segments. One valuable teaching tool is the *Media Literacy Circle of Empowerment*, which helps educators and students engage in the following spheres:

1. **AWARENESS:** Students learn about the pervasiveness of the media in their lives.
2. **ANALYSIS:** Students discuss the forms and contents of the media’s various messages as well as the intent of most media to persuade an audience.

3. **ACTIVISM:** Students develop their own opinions about the negative and positive effects of the media and decide to do something about it.
4. **ADVOCACY:** Students learn how to work with media, use their own media to develop, and publicize healthy and constructive messages that are all too often ignored by our society.
5. **ACCESS:** Students gain access to the media--radio, newspaper, Internet, and television--to spread their own message. This in turn leads to further awareness of the media and its function, which leads to a deeper analysis and so forth.

Further Resources

The following websites and books can help educators and diversity trainers use this video in learning environments:

- A one-hour lecture about the video Dr. Shaheen delivered at the American University of Beirut (<http://marcelinopena.wordpress.com/2008/06/07/jack-shaheens-reel-bad-arabs-how-hollywood-vilifies-a-people/>)
- *Planet of the Arabs*, a 9-minute montage of negative depiction of Arabs in movies (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ml1ZNEjEarw>)
- *Guilty? Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11*, by Jack Shaheen, Interlink Publishing Group, 2007
- *Typcasting: On the Arts and Sciences of Human Inequality*, by Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen, Seven Stories Press, 2006
- *Media Messages: What Film, Television, and Popular Music Teach Us About Race, Class, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*, by Linda Holtzman, M.E. Sharpe, 2000
- *Camera Politica: The Politics and Ideology of Contemporary Hollywood Film*, by Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner, Indiana University Press, 1988
- *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, by Edward Said, Knopf Publishing Group, 1997
- *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*, by Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, Taylor and Francis, 1994
- *"Evil" Arabs in American Popular Film: Orientalist Fear*, by Tim John Semmerling, University of Texas Press, 2006

Photo Credits

1. DVD jacket of *Reel bad Arabs: How Hollywood vilifies a people* (2006)
2. Still of Arab slave trader from the movie *Gladiator* (2000).
3. Oil painting by Leon Belly, *Pilgrims going to Mecca* (1861).
4. Still of the hijackers from the movie *The Delta Force* (1986).
5. Satar Jabar, an Iraqi arrested for carjacking and tortured by Americans in Abu Ghraib Prison, Iraq (2003).