The Representation of Arabs in Western Cinema
“An Analytical Study on a Sample of Films after 2011”

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Master Degree in Communication

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Abstract:

Cinema is considered one of the most effective media for its visual and audible elements that has an effect on the public’s emotions and imagination, and aids in their involvement in the storyline. The importance of cinema is highlighted in its ability to overcome the barriers of age, social status and cultural differences, as the messages transformed through movies are visually striking and easy to understand regardless of the age or educational level.

Therefore, producers and directors turn to these movies to express their points of view on various issues and subjects through cinematic images of meanings and significations on different levels.

Since the events of 9/11, the global cinema has witnessed a change in addressing issues concerning Arabs and the Arabic countries in line with the political changes at the time. Currently, the Arab world is undergoing political developments that affect the way Arab reality is perceived through film; hence the importance of this study in understanding the patterns of images represented.

Accordingly, this research aims to examine the nature of Arabs image represented in Western cinema through identifying the different themes and issues discussed in foreign films, showcasing features and characteristics of Arab characters in those films, detecting main differences in the presented images according to the producing country, and spotting the shortcomings of presenting a realistic image.

This study employs the results of postcolonial studies and semiological/semiotic analysis as a methodology, for it is the primarily used method in film analysis on the basis of linguistics. The research’s methodology is mainly based on Roland Barth’s semiotic approach by analyzing the cinematic image in two levels, connotative and denotative, using tools of cinematic analysis (for the connotative level) and semiotic tools (for the denotative level).

The sample was chosen purposefully based on the intention of picking a film from both continents of the West (North America and Europe). The two sample films are: Salmon Fishing in the Yemen (2011) and Amira and Sam (2014).

The study has found that the two films have discussed multiple issues concerning Arabs, such as expatriation, political asylum and community development projects. The directors hired Arab actors to portray the Arabic character in the film for their ability to give credibility to the roles.

The study also found that the sample provided positive representations of Arabs in the form of generosity, hospitality, firmness and the ability of adapting and overcoming difficulties. Negative images were presented in the form of Arabs being outlaws, women oppressors and possessors of enormous wealth.

Although postcolonial theories contributed to the interpretations of the negative images presented by the films, the study has reinforced the results of previous studies in observing new trends that portrays Arabs in a more neutral light.

In addition, this study shows that Western cinema agrees on certain points when it comes to Arabs perception such as the orientalist impressions, while differences are present between films in accordance to their country of origin and the role their political agendas and historical conditions play in it.