BREAKING HOLLYWOOD'S STEREOTYPES: ARAB AMERICANS RESPOND

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Abstract: This article sheds light on the stereotypical representations of Arab Americans in Hollywood. It focuses on the response of Arab Americans to the increasing outrageous stereotypes of the industry in post 9/11 America. Hollywood has always dehumanized and demonized the Arab and Muslim characters in its movies and presented them as terrorists. The research explores how Arab American independent moviemakers and producers used counter-narratives and self-representation to challenge the long-established Hollywood's stereotypes and provide a reasonable and authentic portrayal of Arab Americans. The rise of independent cinema offered a room for Arab Americans to showcase the cultural differences of their ethnic communities. To reach the objectives of this research, both descriptive and qualitative methods are employed. The paper concludes that the efforts made by Arab Americans to counter Hollywood's stereotypes managed to have their voices heard and prompted them to continue their struggle against media racial stereotyping.

Keywords: Arab Americans ; counter-narratives ; Hollywood's stereotypes ; independent movies ; responding to stereotypes

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1. Introduction

Since the introduction of movies in the late 19th century, Arabs and Muslims have been frequently represented by the US media in negative, stereotypical, and racist ways. By using stereotypical imageries that are deeply rooted in a long history of wars and tensions, western cultural representations of Muslims and Arabs reveal an ideological assumption that centers on the binary paradigm of "Us" versus the "Other". Such Orientalist vision was largely exploited by US media to promote derogatory stereotypes to target ethnic minority groups, particularly Arabs. Hollywood has a long history of perpetuating stereotypical depictions of Arabs and Muslims. The industry's global hegemony was the catalyst to prevail the terrifying and defamatory representations of such ethnic groups. The absence of a real competitor led to Hollywood dominance as an international power. In recent years, independent cinema emerged as another source of moviemaking. Although this infant industry could not produce as many influential works as Hollywood, it was able to alter the dynamics of cinema world by carving out its own niche.

The rise of independent movies serves as an alternative for people of color or the outsiders in the United States to start making their own narratives that would authentically portray their communities and to make their voices heard inside and outside the country. Although, it was challenging to influence the public opinion and to change people's perceptions and conceptions, Arab American moviemakers and producers engaged in the process of self-representation to dismantle the instilled stereotypical imageries in people's minds and thoughts, particularly in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Self-representation was used as a means by Arab Americans to fight stereotypes and promote the Arab identity and its culture, because the only way to challenge a stereotype is creating a new picture that is opposed to the traditional one; thus, activism is highly required.

This article delves into the history of Hollywood's stereotypical representations of Arab and Muslim Americans who found themselves victims of racial and ethnic discrimination and the targets of a growing number of hate crimes following the events of September 11, 2001. Although, many works were published about the history of Hollywood's stereotypical representations of Arabs and Muslims, very few works tackled the representation of Arab Americans in the industry, especially as they were conflated with Arabs and Muslims. Therefore, the main objective of this article is to explore how Arab Americans responded to such representations in order to dispel the derogatory stereotypes produced by Hollywood movie industry. In this regard, the present article endeavors to find answers to the following questions: What are the most dominant negative stereotypes of Arab Americans in Hollywood? How has the Orientalist discourse been used in Hollywood? How did Arab Americans respond to such pervasive stereotypes in post 9/11 America? How did independent movies challenge the stereotypical representations?

To understand well the topic at hand and in order to effectively address and answer the research questions, the article employs both descriptive and qualitative methods. On the one hand, the descriptive method is used to provide a comprehensive and straightforward description and analysis of how Arab Americans are represented and portrayed in Hollywood by examining, recognizing, and discussing the rise and spread of these stereotypes and the emergence of the Orientalist discourse within the industry. On the other hand, the qualitative method is employed to explore Arab Americans' reaction towards the long-lasting undesirable stereotypes through exploring and examining the rise and development of advocacy groups, Arab American independent cinema, and other artistic forms that serve as counter-narratives for Hollywood. Such counter-narratives sought to educate Americans about Arab people and the religion of Islam, as well as to confront and challenge the stereotypical and demonized representations of Arab and Muslim Americans.

2. Historical Background: The Orientalist Discourse in Hollywood

Since their first influx to the United States of America, Arabs were constantly targeted by US media. Despite the fact that these Arab people belong to different groups from various national origins, Hollywood movies conflated the Arab people into single homogeneous Arab group (kabir, 2013, p. 84). Moreover, the terms Arab and Muslim were often used interchangeably by US media which led the American people to make no difference or distinction between the two and recognize that all Arabs are Muslims and certainly all Muslims are Arabs (Peek, 2011, p. 11). Arab Americans were also identified and depicted as Muslims, although the majority of them are Christians. These general judgments and understandings are not accurate, Muslims are not necessarily Arabs and not all Arabs are Muslims. Such media falsification overshadowed the life of those ethnic groups both inside and outside the United States. In this context, Erik Love assured that the majority of Muslim Americans do not belong to Arabs, and that most Arab Americans are not identified as Muslims. Thus, both Arab Americans and Muslim Americans are not monolithic groups (2009, P. 403). Considerably, Arabs are deemed as the most maligned ethnic minority group in the history of Hollywood industry. For over a century the derogatory stereotypes which have connected Islam and Arabs with violence led to widespread misconceptions and omissions that continue to affect the whole community. Among the first lessons children learn and the last lessons elderly individuals forget is "Arab = Muslim= Godless Enemy" (Shaheen, 2008, P. 1). Demonizing Arabs and Muslims and identifying them as the enemy has become a common-sense for Americans.

Hollywood's conflated representation of Arabness and Islam depends on a similar foundation that reduces the cultural differences using the Manichean paradigm of binary oppositions including good versus evil, peaceful versus violent, civilized versus backward, and many others (Mahdi, 2016, p. 37). In fact, since its early productions, Hollywood portrayed Arabs and the Middle East with a great emphasis on foreign exoticism. Its stereotypical depiction depended on classic overgeneralization steeped in an Orientalist narrative (Soberon, 2016, p. 26). According to Edward Said, Orientalism refers to a style of belief that heavily relies on a kind of "ontological" and "epistemological" division between the Orient and the Occident. This concept was used by different writers, philosophers, political theorists and others. The East-West dichotomy was used to make a set of established philosophies, narratives, political and social imageries concerning the Orient, its individuals, customs, mind, and even destiny (1978, P. 2). In fact, the East-West dichotomy reflects the "Us" and "Other" paradigm in terms of good and evil.

In the beliefs and imagination of people, the concept of the "Other" usually represents someone who is different, alien, unwelcome, undesirable, and stranger. This reaction is quite common as people do not tend to express affection towards foreigners at first sight. Sometimes people are frightened of strangers who may cause a real or imaginary danger. Such response to the "Otherness" is considered natural and reflects the human being nature (Brons, 2015, P. 70). Nevertheless, Hollywood exploited this view to heavily generate biased stereotypes against the "Other" that usually represents a potential threat. Due to the demonization of Arabs, it became impossible for some people to believe that these individuals are real people. Conversely, they are recognized as the terrorists, the enemy, and as the "Other". From a historical perspective, the concept of the demonic "Other" has become dangerous and alluring during conflicts. The "Other", whatever his race is, harmed people in the past and intends to do it again in the future. He is an individual outside the boundaries of civilization, exotic, and dark who speaks different language and putting on distinct clothes. He lives in primitive places as desserts of Arabia and jangles of Africa, and presents an economic, religious and even sexual threat to the mainstream society. Moreover, unethical,

inferior, and incapable of democracy are other features related to that "Other" who can be saved only by courageous white man (Shaheen, 2008, pp. 1-2). This belief about the supremacy of the white man over others deepened people's perceptions of the Orient and the West.

Stereotypes about the Orient were strengthened. In reality, the media including television and movies forced standardized representations. Such kind of standardization and cultural stereotyping expanded the 19th century academic and imaginative perception of the mysterious Orient. Three factors contributed to transforming the modest perception of Arabs and Islam into a raucous and "highly politicized" issue. The first one is the historical context of popular anti-Arab and anti-Islamic prejudice in the west; the orientalist discourse. The second factor lies in the Arab-Israeli struggle, and finally the total absence of any cultural position or perspective made it impossible to identify or discuss the Arabs or Islam is considered as another factor (Said, 1978, pp. 26-27). Hollywood's stereotypes of Arabs date back to the early twentieth century. Actually, while Arab immigrants were still escaping their homelands towards America during the 1920's and 1930's, stereotypical imageries depicting Arabs as savages, desert bedouins, and lustful sheikhs were showed (Ayish 101). Movies like *The Sheik* (1921), *The Thief of Baghdad* (1924), and *The Son of the Sheik* (1926) were some examples of the movies that initiated such stereotypes. From that time, Hollywood produced hundreds of movies that promoted the negative stereotypical representations of both Arabs and Muslims.

In his book, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, Jack G. Shaheen listed and discussed more than 900 feature movies that depicted Arab characters. Unfortunately, only a few numbers of heroic Arabs were discovered. Moviemakers overwhelmed the marketplace with a plethora of Arab villains. They collectively portrayed Arabs negatively across all movies types, targeting adults in famous and high-budget productions including *Exodus* (1960), *Black Sunday* (1977), *Ishtar* (1987), and *The Siege* (1998). Teenagers were also targeted in financially successful low-quality movies such as *Five Weeks in a Balloon* (1962), *Things Are Tough All Over* (1982), *Sahara* (1983), and *Operation Condor* (1997). What dominates these movies is the presence of derogatory stereotypes that affected children, baby boomers, and older generations too (2009, p. 31). Hollywood movie producers continued to extend the existing stereotypes and transferred the iniquitous imageries of Arabs over to Arab Americans (Luther et al., 2018, p. 121). Thereby, Arab Americans were stereotyped as being rich and irresponsible, savage and brutal, sex lunatics, and terrorists (Muhtaseb, 2008, p. 620). Arab Americans have been perpetually portrayed as villains and terrorists. The pre 9/11 Hollywood movies including *True Lies* (1994) and *The Siege* (1998) provide some examples of the common stereotypes of this ethnic group. As a matter of fact, movie producers and writers usually use Middle Eastern traits, such as appearances and accents, for some characters in order to portray an evil, a threatening individual, or a terrorist. This was viewed as an easy way to prevail such stereotypes (Tabbah, 2020, p. 24).

3. Responding to Hollywood: The Rise of Independent Moviemaking Industry

Independent movies are defined by Robert Ebert, a movie critic, as productions made outside the traditional Hollywood studio framework, and that are characterized by unconventional financing. They are produced because they express the personal visions of the director rather than embracing the notion of box office success (Levy, 1999, p. 3). Independent moviemaking involves low budget projects produced by young moviemakers who advance resilient personal visualizations that are totally free from the pressure and influence of the few leading and dominant conglomerates that largely dominate the American movie industry. Those independent moviemakers try to produce works which challenge the

overt commercialism prevalent in mainstream Hollywood by tackling innovative themes and distinct modes of representations (Tzioumakis, 2017, p. 1).

Independent moviemaking landscape has significantly shifted, as several expensive independent feature movies are now being produced and distributed by mini-majors and the independent divisions of major studios. This development proposes that independent movies have transitioned into the mainstream, departing from their old-style role on the periphery, where they historically supplemented studio productions and recurrently conveyed "outsider" perspectives (Holmlund, 2004, p. 1). Calls and efforts to promote diversity and inclusion within the American movie industry have a long history, beginning with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People's (NAACP) campaigns in the 1940s that challenged Hollywood studios for their role in disseminating racist stereotypes. More recently, the hashtag #OscarsSoWhite, introduced by April Reign in 2015, shed light on the ongoing subjects of exclusion, marginalization, and misrepresentation of nonwhite individuals in movie production (Field, 2023, p. 12). Exhausted with misrepresentation and underrepresentation, people of color seek to find more rooms and spaces to present their talents and convey their messages so that their voices might be heard in mainstream America.

The start of a new era in American independent cinema was characterized by the shift in the meaning of the term independent which no longer denoted economic independence from major studios regarding production issues. Instead, it signified a particular genre known as the "indie" movie that later sparked argument about movies with an independent spirit. This era represents the American indie cinema that should be distinguished from the independent cinema of the 1980's (Tzioumakis, 2012, p. 34). The primary artistic drive behind the new independent cinema came from "outsiders". The indie cinema represents the "Other" America. Both the movie characters and moviemakers are outsiders; particularly members of ethnic minority groups. Hence, the industry accentuates cultural diversities by presenting new works produced by movie directors who are either ignored in mainstream culture or their voices were not heard (Levy, 1999, p. 52). The 1990's represented a significant period for American independent cinema that made a remarkable impact on culture. The social and commercial influence of independent movies garnered immense press coverage, alongside both academic and popular criticism. This period was marked by two landmark movies, *Sex, Lies, and Videotape* (1989) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994), that won the Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival. American independent cinema thrived at Cannes in the years between these two releases, with David Lynch's *Wild at Heart* (1990) and the low-budget Coen brothers' movie, *Barton Fink* (1991), released by Fox, also receiving the Palme d'Or (Phillips & Wyatt, 2023, p. 8). The emergence of international film festivals helped the indie cinema to proliferate and prevail worldwide.

Organizations like the Independent Feature Project and the Sundance Film Festival in Park City, Utah, were established to promote and encourage independent productions (Croce, 2016, p.146). Undeniably, the Sundance Film Festival served as a "clearinghouse" for indie productions by increasing the chances that a low-budget or micro-budget indie movies would draw the attention of mainstream distributors (Lucia, 2015, p. 322). Standards for movies' presence in the dramatic competition at the Sundance Film Festival postulate that movies must be independently produced and that at least 50% of their budgets have to be American financing. People who take into account the quality of independent movies express concerns regarding the current absence of "radically political" and "avant-garde" visions that featured early American independent cinema. In fact, the industry has increasingly adopted conventional and mainstream characteristics (Levy, 1999, p. 5). Despite Hollywood dominance, the independent movie industry was able to attract more audiences and make

some profits. The figure below delves into the profitability among theatrically distributed live-action independent movies from the US, (1999-2018).
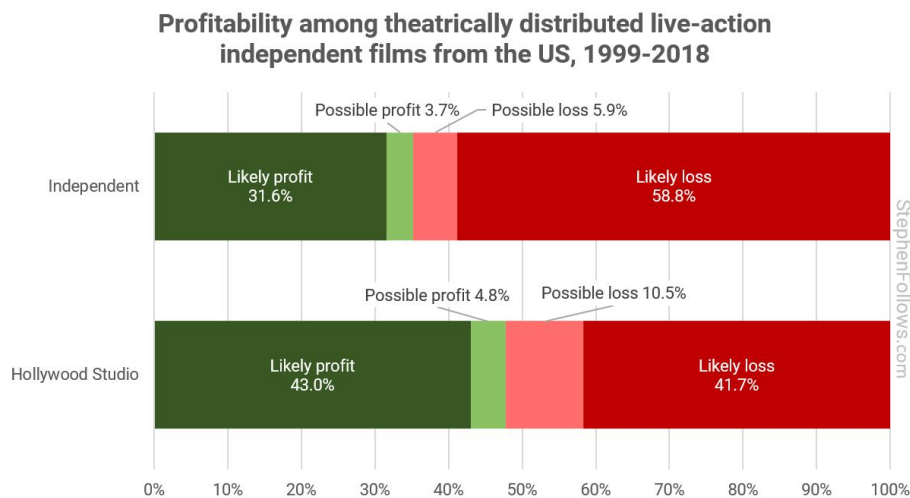

Figure 1: Profitability among Theatrically Distributed Live-Action Independent Films from the US, 1999-2018

Source: https://stephenfollows.com/what-percentage-of-independent-films-are-profitable/

The figure compares profitability of theatrically distributed live-actions movies from the US between 1999 and 2018. Independent movies show a higher likelihood of experiencing losses, with 58.8% as opposed to 41.7% for Hollywood. Additionally, Hollywood movies have a higher potential for profits, representing 43.0% as opposed to 31.6% for independent movies. Despite this difference between the two industries, however, independent movies are showing a steadily and gradual increase in making profits and prevailing their narratives to larger audience inside and outside the United States.

4. Arab Americans Respond

Inevitably, every action prompts a reaction or a response, even if postponed. Following the example of other ethnic minorities, especially African Americans and their long struggle against racism, Arab Americans started to think diligently about how to address media misrepresentations and stereotypes, and the orientalist discourse endorsed by Hollywood particularly in the light of political and social challenges they encountered in post 9/11 America. Given the commonalities and shared challenges that lump Arabs, Muslims, and Arab / Muslim Americans together, a resilient tendency to fight against damaging stereotypes using all available means has aroused. Seemingly, this kind of activism, including using counter-narratives in theatre and cinema, establishing international festivals, and boosting the role of advocacy organizations has come to fruition.

4.1 Arab Americans Redefining and Awakening in Post 9/11

September 11, 2001 is considered as one of the darkest days in the history of contemporary America. The terrorist attacks remain deeply instilled in the minds of millions of Americans who surprisingly witnessed the Twin Towers' collapse on television screens. For Arab and Muslim Americans, the 9/11 events represent a day of sorrow and shock as it marks the beginning of a new period in which they became victims of backlash. Arab and Muslim Americans experienced a surge in hate crimes, discrimination, and racial profiling. Despite the fact that discrimination and stereotypes of these ethnic groups existed before, the

persistence and intensity of the backlash following the 9/11 attacks were really unprecedented (Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009, p. 1). Substantially, Arab Americans, one of the US previously forgotten ethnic minorities, found themselves in the spotlight. Historically, Arabs lived in the United States mostly without any public recognition. Certainly, they were deemed as the "most invisible of the invisibles" among the US minority groups. Ironically, these Americans now become the most visible individuals in national discourse (Schmidt, 2014, P. 14). The term Arab was usually equated with Islamic fundamentalism in contemporary western culture. The 9/11 terrorist events, the Iraq war, and the on-going conflict in Palestine have associated Islamic fundamentalism with terrorism, positioning Muslim fundamentalists as the primary anti-western enemy. The perception of the concept of Islamic fundamentalism was shaped and influenced by a series of myths that are mainly rooted in the East/West binary (Khatib, 2006, p.165).

Arab American drama and theatre proliferated in post 9/11. Calls and efforts to meet the increasing threats of Islamophobia and identity concerns, and to combat racial profiling were raised by Arab American playwrights. Prior to 9/11, Arab American cinema was inconsistent and sporadic where a relative absence was marked regarding the Arab American theatre or the playwrights who were able to make their voices heard across the United States. However, in the wake of the 9/11 events, there was a remarkable increase in Arab American theatrical productions that aimed at addressing a wide-ranging American audience and to voice the worries and major concerns of Arab American individuals. This new wave of writers raised their voices by using drama, theatre, cinema and other literary form, such as novels and poetry, to dismantle the pervasive stereotypes that were erroneously associated with them as a result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Alshetawi, 2020, p. 178).

In post 9/11 era, creative works were produced by Arab and Muslim Americans to challenge stereotypes and governing conceptions about Muslims and Arabs. Artists, poets, novelists, moviemakers, stand-up comedians, and artistic organizations used absurd, subtle, devastating, and comic ways to challenge the limited representations of commercial media. They went beyond media's monochromatic representations of their ethnic groups and showcased the human complexity of Arabs and Muslims as intellectual individuals, teachers, artists, poets, and family members. Moreover, they were shown as suffering the consequences of US racism and wars, and facing life hardships with desperation and optimism, by laughing and crying (Alsultany, 2012, p.171). Ostensibly, Counter-narratives played a leading role in providing alternative aspects or perspectives and challenging the pervasive stereotypes fostered by dominant narratives.

An increasing number of Arab American comics found a way to counter Hollywood's stereotypical representations of Arab characters. They started to use comedy as a means to combat discrimination. Instead of keeping silent, they voiced their concerns through humor and jokes telling. Stand-up comedies were employed to campaign for the inclusion of Arabs and Muslims in the American society. They justified the use of comedy by the fact that they cannot define who they are seriously because no one is supposed to listen, so the unique approach to make it is to be humorous about it (Shaheen, 2015). Stand-up comedy can be defined as a type of dramatic performance which takes place on a stage where either an improvised or scripted funny monologues are given by a performer (Selim, 2014, p. 78). Arab American stand-up comedian Ahmed Ahmed struggled in Hollywood as he was often being cast as a cab driver or terrorist. However, he ultimately decided to take control of the narrative as he started writing and performing stand-up comedies. Ahmed and his contemporaries are part of a long lineage of Arab comedy with roots in Arab theatrical and filmic history. Indeed, Arab American stand-up comedy was the most successful of all Arab American art forms. Comedians started from relative anonymity and gradually achieved mainstream success. Some comedians, like Danny Thomas, before attaining success, toiled in small night clubs for

several years, and Ahmed Ahmed played stereotypical Arab characters in Hollywood. These comics used humor as a coping mechanism and blended their personal experiences with their comedic impulses (Najjar, 2015, pp.164-165). Comedian Dean Obeidallah opted for comedy to combat suspicion and ignorance he faced following the 9/11. In 2003, he co-founded the New York Arab-American Comedy Festival to bridge cultures and to end that fading siege against the Arab American communities. People enjoyed the jokes by laughing, and as comedians the aim was to teach them about the real Arab culture and to make sure for Americans that Arab Americans are not terrorists (James, 2009). Unquestionably, theatre played a pivotal role in redefining narratives and containing stereotypes.

4.2 Post-9/11 Arab Americans' Counter-Narratives: Independent Movies

Many Arab American movie actors like Salma Hayek, Tony Shalhoub, and Vince Vaughn are famous actors who made Arab Americans proud for many years. Nevertheless, the influence of Arab Americans considerably extends beyond acting; great contributions behind the camera were made. Accordingly, Arab American writers, directors, producers, and cinematographers captivated audience in theatres for several decades. One prominent Arab American producer is Mario Kassar who established Carolco, a self-governing corporation for movie productions which produced *Terminator 2*, *Total Recall*, *Basic Instinct* and the first three Rambo movies. In this regard, Mario Kassar has received twelve Oscar nominations and successfully contributed to creating millions of dollars in the field of movie industry (Eadeh, 2016).

Exhausted with the stereotypical representations in Hollywood, Arab American writers and movie producers endeavored to challenge and put an end to the growing stereotypes that colossally affected their lives and drastically increased hate crimes and racial profiling against their distinct ethnic communities. Irum Shiekh considered movies productions as a form of resistance. Distortions, misrepresentations, and dehumanizing depictions motivated directors and producers to begin making movies by shedding light on areas which were overlooked or misrepresented (2023). Although they knew that they could not compete with the global hegemony of Hollywood movie industry, they started their infant productions which virtually displayed and promoted their ethnic identities and cultural traits in an attempt to restore their reputation that Hollywood distorted and tarnished throughout history. In this regard, Tony Shalhoub along with the network of Arab American professionals established the Arab American Filmmaker Award Competition in 2005. This competition aimed at enabling young Arab Americans to write and present their screenplays, with the objective of changing the negative stereotypes of both Arabs and Muslims (Mason, 2024).

Arab American moviemakers aimed at telling their own stories authentically by presenting the real richness and intricacies of the Arab American culture. Actually, the independent movie industry provided a perspective that is different from the one presented by mainstream Hollywood movies in order to get rid of the misconceptions provided by the dominant Hollywood industry and bridge cultural divides. This view was emphasized by Tony Shalhoub who asserted that it is crucial for Arab Americans to narrate their own stories and experiences. The Arab American actor reassured that they should create movies that narrate the factual stories of their diverse cultural heritage; shed light on the humanity and kindness of Arab American families and their values, and displaying that they are not fundamentally different from other members of society (Mason, 2024). Allegedly, in the aftermath of 9/11, Hollywood temporarily abandoned violent spectacles which dominated the late 1990's cinema by making space for family movies as a kind of escape from the 9/11 tragedy. Nevertheless, this change did not last long as Hollywood rapidly returned to produce series of successful "crush and burn" movies. Although Hollywood returned to its old ways, the 9/11 influence on the American psyche cannot be easily removed. The 9/11 tragedy

symbolized the country's entry into a new period of danger and uncertainty in which wars are no longer conducted by nations but by terrorist groups (Dixon, 2004, pp.3-4).

In contrast to the dominant post 9/11 narrative found in American cinema, exemplified by movies like *United 93* (2006), *World Trade Center* (2006), and *The Hurt Locker* (2008) that underscore the American determination to recover and the one-dimensional portrayal and representation of Muslim radicalism, Joseph Castelo's *The War Within* (2005) and Hesham Issawi's *American East* (2008) serve as compelling counter-narratives. These two post 9/11 movies highlight the real and imaginary threat of Muslim terrorism in the United States; however, they constantly criticized the US government policies and media systems. Moreover, they offer a number of subjectivities and stories for Arab Americans, moving beyond the narrow depiction of the radical terrorist which is dominant in the Television series *24* and in movies related to the war in Iraq such as Clint Eastwood's movie *American Sniper* (2014). It is crucial to develop a diverse selection of Arab American characters to enlarge public perception and understanding because only through cultural exposure of different Arab American experiences and practices Islamophobic rhetoric of American politicians can be fought (Petrovic, 2017, p. 90). In fact, along with Egyptian Americans Hesham Issawi and Sayed Badreya, a number of Arab Americans moviemakers emerged recently by producing works that present Arab Americans in a more humanistic way and provide dimensional depictions of this ethnic group. The Palestinian Americans Cherien Dabis and Jackie Reem Salloum, and many others are among these Arab American movie producers. The ultimate goals of these writers and moviemakers are to recast Hollywood Arab and Arab American characters, and to truthfully portray them as opposed to mainstream Hollywood (Najjar, 2015, p. 316).

There was a slow move towards building a repertoire of Muslim produced movies and television shows by Muslim moviemakers to offer more accurate and realistic depiction of American Muslim lives, though most of those movies and shows are mainly produced with an orientalist perspective to challenge stereotypes about Muslims. Recently, as they became more sophisticated, Muslim moviemakers prioritized narratives that reflected the experiences of Muslims, including their struggles and shortcomings, and moved away from themes of extremism and 9/11 narratives. Since 2015, a notable increase in professionally produced movies and shows by Muslim producers was marked. Although, few movies were produced before this period, they tended to provide a more simplistic portrayal of Arabs and Muslims' struggles in the aftermath of the 9/11 trauma (Aslan, 2024, pp. 80-81).

American East (2008) directed by Egyptian American Hesham Issawi and written by Sayed Badreya, who played the lead role of Mustafa, was praised as the first Arab American cinematic work. The movie covers various topics of concern to Arab Americans including FBI surveillance, biased media representation of the Middle East, prejudice, Muslim culture stereotypes, the Arab Israeli struggle, and cultural dilemmas faced by Arab teenagers (Raphael-Hernandez, 2022, P.176). The movie explores themes of immigration and identity discovery, cultural conflicts and integration, bigotry and racial stereotyping, as well as perseverance and optimism in post 9/11 America. Such themes were not accentuated in Hollywood industry. Considerably, *American East* (2008) offers a critical examination of Hollywood's casting traditional practices and deeply challenged and opposed the construction and depiction of Arab Americans in the industry. Following many years of playing terrorist roles in Hollywood movies, Sayed Badreya, the Egyptian American actor had the occasion to play the lead role of Mustafa, an Egyptian immigrant. Mustafa struggled to realize his American dream due to the anti- Arab public sentiment and bias in post 9/11. Mustafa encounters the challenges and difficulties of balancing his Arabic identity with American Life requirements, challenging familial, political, and cultural barriers that threatened the realization of his dream to become a successful businessman. He was presented as a man who

forcefully navigated the 9/11 paranoia where the FBI agents increasingly questioned the connection between his Islamic background and terrorism. Another theme was the heavy burden of being responsible of raising his Americanized family, while adhering to Egyptian cultural traditions. Moreover, the movie captured Middle Eastern immigrants' personal struggles in a multifaceted narrative (Mahdi, 2019, pp. 109-110).

The movie sheds light on the daily life experiences of Arab Muslims concerning the civil rights violation in post 9/11 America. Their sufferings were depicted and the real Arab picture beyond stereotypes was showcased. The use of prayer by Issawi serves as a "signifier of religiosity and as a pedagogical tool" to enable the audience to grasp the real meaning of prayer as opposed to how it was portrayed by Hollywood. The protagonist, Mustafa owns a halal restaurant where the Muslim clients are allowed to pray. In addition to that, he attends Jumuah (Friday) prayers at a local mosque where it is mandatory to present his identity card to get in there. The red alert around terrorism makes the police presence high (Aslan, 2024, p. 81). Issawi's objective with his movie, *American East*, was to transcend the stereotypical perceptions of Middle Eastern individuals. He asserted that the movie basically explores themes of comprehension and miscomprehension, highlighting the challenges associated with dismantling entrenched beliefs regarding Middle Eastern culture. The goal was to illustrate the consequences that arise when diverse cultures and mindsets intersect, as well as the confrontation between aspirations and actualities (Najjar, 2015, p. 316). Hesham Issaoui considers his movie as a way to narrate stories of his marginalized community in the United States, and that his mission is to spread education among Americans about the internal lives of Muslims and Arabs (Aslan, 2024, p. 81). Hesham Issawi's counter-narratives encouraged other Arab American moviemakers to generate diverse stories that seek a genuine representation of their communities.

The independent moviemaker Cherien Dabis was born in 1976 and was raised in Cellina, Ohio during the first Gulf war. Her political awakening started at an early age due to the bad conditions she and her family experienced in the United States. Dabis asserted that she recognized that the media's consistent stereotypes of both Arabs and Arab Americans affected their lives as people believed in such stereotypes. She confirmed that she was determined to do something to change the situation (Najjar, 2015, p. 314). To achieve her goal, she produced several movies to make the world hear the voice of Arab Americans. Cherien Dabis's movie; *Amreeka* (2009) premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, and it opened the New Directors/ New Films 2009 program at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and the Film Society at Lincoln Center. Moreover, the movie was nominated at the Independent Spirit Awards for Best Film, and at the Cairo International Film Festival, it won Best Arabic Film (Selbo, 2015, p. 143). *Amreeka*, a drama comedy that tells the story of a single Palestinian woman, Muna, who immigrated to the United States with her teenage son, Fadi, digs into the experiences of endeavoring to adopt to a new life in America. Indeed, cultural clashes, complexities and struggles of immigrant life, and assimilation challenges are themes highlighted and represented by the movie. Additionally, themes of identity, belonging, and the pursuit of the American dream are tackled by blending humor and drama.

Amreeka is free of any cultural gender prejudice as it represented resilient and strong Palestinian American women; Muna and her sister Raghda and Salma; Raghda's teenage daughter, along with Nabeel, the husband of Raghda. In fact, gender stereotypes were not followed in the portrayal of the different characters (Raphael-Hernandez, 2022, p. 178). Gender stereotypes of Arabs, Arab Americans, and Muslim women were usually represented in Hollywood. While men were portrayed as villains, fanatical, and terrorists, women were represented as oppressed. The headscarf or hijab was used as the most "visible manifestation" of women's oppression. Such stereotypes were not only maintained in movies or popular culture, but even in school curricula. This demonstrated the fact that many Americans are

convinced about the accuracy of this stereotype (Ayish, 2006, p. 86). Such representations support and strengthen the traditional narratives of vulnerable Muslim women who are fated to endure suffering inflicted by misogynistic Muslim men until they are saved by enlightened and benevolent Westerners. In general, Muslim societies are represented as being sexist that foster gender inequality. This holistically affected the perception of the Islamic culture which is depicted as discriminatory and biased against females. The imageries of submissive and oppressed women were used as an excuse for American political actions towards Muslim societies. Thereby, the discourse of Muslim women liberation from ideological fanaticism, racism, and Islamophobia was raised (Tan & Vishnevskaya, 2022, pp.14-15).

The movie portrayed Arab Americans as ordinary individuals who struggle to counter the post 9/11 stereotypes of Arabs as potential threats or terrorists. Muna and her family were portrayed as peaceful and hardworking individuals. Women were depicted as strong and independent who navigate their lives with resilience and determination. This representation challenges the perpetuating stereotypes of Arab women as oppressed and passive. Additionally, the movie endeavored to shed light on the remarkable cultural and religious disparities within the Arab American communities. It depicted the leading characters as Christian Arab Americans. Thus, it aimed at ending the conflation that all Arab Americans are Muslims. In this regard, American "patriots" often struggle to differentiate among various Arab communities and may not recognize that this particular family does not identify as Muslim (Honeycutt, 2009).

These two counter-narratives offer distinct representations of the Arab American communities. While *American East* introduces the daily struggles and complexities of Arab American Muslim characters, *Amreeka* provides an overview of the post 9/11 difficulties facing Christian Arab American characters. Eventually, the one-dimensional representation fostered by Hollywood seemed to be inaccurate and does not reflect the diversity of Arab American communities. Both movies managed to portray Arab and Muslim American communities and their descendants.

Palpably, Digital media democratization offered opportunities to Muslim storytellers. Indeed, various streaming platforms such as Netflix, Hulu, Amazon, and many others fostered a broader range of perspectives and talent opportunities. Thus, both producers and audience can develop and watch movies that push boundaries and provide diverse content (Shiekh, 2023). Besides, the widespread of international movie festivals contributed to presenting various works produced by Arab Americans. These festivals provided an unparalleled opportunity for producers to introduce and publicize their works. The Arab Film Festival which is the biggest annual showcase of works produced by independent Arab moviemakers. The festival describes itself as a significant channel connecting the Arab world, the diverse Arab American communities, and the American public by shedding light on productions that feature realistic perspectives and stories of Arabs, the Arab culture, history, and even politics (Ferabolli, 2014, p.173).

In addition to the fundamental details of the movie, the Arab Film Festival urges other details and information about the country of origin and the movie original language as a condition for submission for its Annual Film Festival. A movie is classified as Arab movie from the Arab world if it is produced in an Arab country or spoken in Arabic. However, if it is produced in a country outside the Arab nations, the extremely subjective category "about the Arab world" must be mentioned (Ferabolli, 2014, p.173). Ostensibly, these measures are taken to avoid any kind of stereotyping or misrepresentation of the Arab culture. International festivals serve as an intermediate between the movie and the audience. They assisted in promoting and streaming movies worldwide. Inevitably, their influential role cannot be denied.

4.3 Arab Americans' Advocacy Groups

Ethnic stereotypes do not fade away on their own, but they are challenged and hunted down by people who are affected by them. Compared to other ethnic minority groups like African Americans, Jewish Americans, or Asian Americans who acted aggressively against Hollywood's consistent and discriminatory depictions, Arab Americans were slow to mobilize as a group (Shaheen, 2009, P. 55). Indeed, organizations and collective actions are required to oppose Hollywood defamation. Eventually, Arab Americans made a notable progress in creating many organizations that became steadily more active (Shora, 2009, p. 275). Arab and Muslim American organizations were actively vigilant in monitoring media presentations for instances of Islamophobia. They promoted political involvement of all Arab and Muslim Americans and extended a common interpretation and understanding of Islam and Arabness in the United States. (Alsultany, 2012, p.170). Although, there were challenges in identifying Islamophobia as significant social problem, numerous advocacy groups worked harder to counter such problem for decades. Among the well-known organizations are American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC, established in 1980), the Islamic Society of North America (1982), the Arab American Institute (1984), the Muslim American Society (1992), the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR, 1994), the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), and many others. These organizations engaged in electoral activism and political lobbying by providing legal assistance and publishing reports and researches about hate crimes and racial discrimination. Recently, Arab American advocacy organizations achieved notable successes such as the establishment of cultural awareness training programs for law enforcement officials, and implementing policy reforms. They started to possess an increasing political power via the formation of coalitions and the expansion of their electoral base (Love, 2009, p. 417).

The ADC struggle in countering stereotypes did not start in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, however, it dates back to its vociferous reaction against stereotypes fostered by Disney's *Alladin* (1992). Accordingly, Disney agreed to rewrite some offensive song lyrics, but others scenes were not eliminated and the studio continued to use Arab stereotypes in its works. *The Siege*, *Rules of Engagement*, and many other releases are among the works the organization protested (Benshoff & Griffin, 2009, p. 120). Recently, the ADC wrote a letter to director Clint Eastwood and actor Bradly Cooper after the release of *American Sniper* movie (2014) to denounce the hateful language against Arabs and Muslims, and asked them to speak out to help reduce that hateful rhetoric that would affect Arab and Muslim Americans. "Do not use our film to push hate and bigotry" said Abed Ayoub, the national legal and policy director for the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (Woolf, 2015). Besides, the CAIR prepared a guide aimed at explaining Islam for journalist, and in April 2007, the MPAC created a Hollywood bureau to offer consultation, host movies screening, review movie and television scripts, and make an awards ceremony to appreciate and honor efforts that challenge stereotypes. The communication director, Edina Lekovic pursued that the MPAC seeks to be a supportive partner in promoting better narratives about Muslims in general rather than acting as a Watchdog. Additionally, to support these initiatives, other media alternatives occurred, including Bridges Television which is the only English language Muslim television station in the United States, and Link Television which is an independent media organization which amplifies voices usually overlooked by mainstream media (Alsultany, 2012, pp.170-171).

Such advocacy organizations urged their members to raise their voices and claim their rights as American citizens, to fight against bias, hate crimes, US government power abuse, discrimination, and prejudice. They used legal challenges and political activism to reach political integration and civic engagement in the American society (Bakalian & Bozorgmehr, 2009, p. 2). To reach their members, many Muslim American organizations used different

means offered by new media. Engaging through various platforms including, Facebook, twitter, online videos, and blogs became largely prevalent. These new platforms facilitated the outreach of Muslim organizations to younger generations of Muslims (Moore, 2013, p. 382). Activism is exceedingly required as it represents ultimate objection of the actual circumstances and a strong desire for change, the thing that advocacy organizations conducted.

5. Conclusion

In post 9/11 America, racial discrimination, prejudice, and hate crimes against Arabs and Arab Americans enormously increased. The atmosphere was marked by a pervasive sense of tension and anger. Arab and Muslim Americans were held responsible, thus feelings of uncertainty and suspicion prevailed. US media entertainment industry fueled these feeling, and launched series of movies and shows to spread ethnic and racial stereotypes. Villains, evils, fanatical, extremists, and terrorists are some of Hollywood's stereotypical imageries associated with Arabs, as well as Arab and Muslim Americans, who were lumped into one ethnic group despite their huge heterogeneity. Substantially, in an attempt to contain the situation, Arab Americans reacted in different ways. Arab American advocacy groups like the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), and the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), have ramped up their efforts to challenge the slanderous stereotypes as they fear the negative repercussions of these movies on Arab American communities, particularly racial prejudice and hate crimes. Movies like *The Siege, Rules of Engagement,* and *American Sniper* were denounced, and letters were sent to their directors asking for clarification and making actions to de-escalate the situation and prevent it from deteriorating further. Many initiatives were introduced to educate Americans about Islam and Arabs that were atrociously distorted and demonized by Hollywood industry.

Arab American independent producers and directors, including Hesham Issawi and Cherein Dabis, started to tell their own narratives to authentically depict the struggles of their communities in post 9/11 America, and represent the real Arab and Muslim people beyond Hollywood's stereotypes. *American East* (2008) and *Amreeka* (2009), which are considered as the most influential independent movies produced by Arab Americans, managed to provide a comprehensive picture about the diverse Arab American communities who were showcased as ordinary citizens who were navigating their lives in the wake of the 9/11 trauma. Indeed, those counter-narratives played a pivotal role in dispelling the terrorist picture of Arab and Muslim Americans. The proliferation of international festivals has significantly boosted both the reach and mainstream recognition of independent movies, and enabled the complex and rich cultural heritage of Arab and Muslim Americans to gain wider world recognition. Thereafter, it is crucial for Arab and Muslim Americans to invest heavily in increasing independent movie production, and create more international festivals to showcase their works. This offers more opportunities to compete with Hollywood or at least to fight the spread of its established stereotypes. Additionally, creating more social media platforms can assist in attracting large numbers of spectators and supporters.

Eventually, each in his place contributed to promoting the truth and dismantling long-standing stereotypes that have exhausted Arab Americans and their descendants, and Muslims around the world. Actors, poets, novelists, journalists, and others were committed to redefining themselves as a respected ethnic minority, and emphasizing their noteworthy contributions to the building and development of the United States, of which they are an integral part. Nowadays, the stereotype should dissipate and the truth must come out, an appeal every Arab and Muslim American makes.

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