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The Representation of Middle Eastern Women in American Cinema:

A Case Study of The Stoning of Suraya M. (Film 2008)

**Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements for Master's
Degree in Literature and Civilization**

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Academic year: 2024/2025

Dedication

We wish to start by saying all praise is to Allah for all of the blessings in our lives.

We would also like to express our gratitude to our families for their constant affection and encouragement over the years.

We dedicate our work to our beloved parents who have given us all we need and surrounded us with love so that we can accomplish our goals in life.

To each of our brothers and sisters by name.

Abir, Mohammed Ali

Acknowledgements

Oh Allah, we are so very thankful that you guided us, illuminated our path, and gave us the courage and optimism we needed to do this work. We have limitless thanks and will always be grateful to you.

We would like to thank our supervisor, **Dr. Ahmed Zellouma**, from the bottom of our hearts. Under his guidance, we gained the adaptability and self-assurance we need to complete this dissertation.

We also thank **Dr. Zahra Mehellou** for helping us with our study by offering invaluable resources and guidance. We would like to thank her for always providing insightful counsel when we needed it.

Finally, we would like to thank the board of examiners for giving freely of their time to provide us with their insightful comments and suggestions on our dissertation.

Abstract

This dissertation examines the representation of Middle Eastern women in American cinema, using *The Stoning of Soraya M.* (2008) as a case study. Through a critical lens combining Edward Said's theory of Orientalism and feminist film theory, the study investigates whether the film supports or resists the Orientalist-constructed stereotypes that are prevalent in American culture, which usually present Middle Eastern women as victims, voiceless, and without agency. The study is guided by the following inquiries: how Middle Eastern women are portrayed in *The Stoning of Soraya M.*; how the film influences Western audiences' perceptions of Middle Eastern women and culture; and if the film challenges or reinforces stereotypes about Middle Eastern women. The research also explores the way that the film shapes Western viewers' perceptions of Middle Eastern culture and women. Although the film raises attention to gender violence and provides a voice to an oppressed female, it is situated within Western cinema codes that may perpetuate Orientalist representation. It personalizes suffering yet lacks cultural nuance, often portraying Middle Eastern society as monolithically oppressive. However, the film raises international awareness about women's rights and triggers vital conversations about justice and resistance. *The Stoning of Soraya M.* both challenges and reinforces stereotypes, reflecting the tension in Western portrayals of Middle Eastern women.

Keywords: American Cinema, Female Oppression, Middle Eastern Women, Representation, *Soraya M.*, Stereotypes.

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General Introduction

1. Background of the Study

Media plays a key role in shaping perceptions of different cultures. In American cinema, Middle Eastern women are often depicted through stereotypes, such as being oppressed, victimized, or exotic, reflecting a broader trend of cultural bias and "Othering". These portrayals frequently fail to capture the complexities of their lives and perpetuate negative images that influence Western audiences' perceptions.

It should be emphasized that media coverage of Muslims and their events has evolved since the early 1970s, particularly from a Western perspective. While more coverage had certain benefits, the disadvantages put the entire religion of Islam at risk, particularly when the media began to portray Muslim women as terrorists simply because of their dress code or the way they presented themselves in the countries where they lived. Women have also received some extra attention in terms of coverage for their own commercial gains.

The language employed in the media to cover Muslim women's activities is critical for understanding how they are referred to in various stories. In order to create an appealing headline for a story, the media often creates catchy headlines to attract the public's attention. However, while doing so, they appear to be misleading the public on a variety of matters, including how they create issues concerning women from an Islamic perspective.

Following the 9/11 attacks and the ongoing War on Terror, a hostile relationship and pattern of suspicion developed between the US government, Arabs, and the Islamic world, contributing to Western countries' negative perceptions of Arabs and Muslims. The rise in Islamophobia and hate crimes against persons thought to be Arabs or Muslims has been well documented. Following 9/11, Hollywood began to portray Arabs as terrorists, transforming

them from "comic villains" to "foreign devils," resulting in the creation of the frightening "Arab Other". Female terrorists have become a popular Hollywood cliché. However, other academics argue that the violent Arab image appeared in Hollywood much earlier, in films such as *Black Sunday* (1977).

The dangerous Arab image has ramifications beyond the portrayal of terrorists since it leads to more general assumptions about Arab morals and belief systems. Psychologists think that people who have pro-violence ideas are more likely to be violent. The portrayal of Arabs as dangerous, violent, and perpetrators of damaging deeds, despite the fact that they believe they serve a worthwhile cause, reveals much about Hollywood's treatment of Arab morals and conscience.

The powerful images of Muslim women in the media today, in which they refuse to tolerate Muslim veil dress, did not arise overnight; they originate from previous media portrayals of Muslims as terrorists. This leads current media practitioners to believe that women always conceal bombs in their veils or niqabs, particularly when they do not remove them, especially in public. One could conclude that the United States' understanding of Muslims as terrorists, as portrayed in the media, is one of the reasons why they are laying siege to many Middle Eastern and Arab countries, believing that they will try to limit the radicalization of Muslims. As a result of this mindset fostered by the Western media, Muslims, particularly women, must be educated to avoid feeling inferior since the issues are simply phrased in such a way that they become victims of Islamophobia.

The Stoning of Soraya M. (2008), based on a true story, offers a striking example of these dynamics. The film depicts the brutal punishment of Soraya, a woman falsely accused of adultery in a patriarchal village in Iran. While the film aims to highlight gender inequality,

its framing raises questions about representation, stereotypes, and the broader portrayal of Middle Eastern women in Western media.

This study examines how *The Stoning of Soraya M.* portrays Middle Eastern women and whether it challenges or reinforces stereotypes. It also explores how these representations impact Western audiences' views, contributing to discussions on gender, culture, and representation in American cinema.

2. Statement of the Problem

Middle Eastern women in American cinema are often portrayed through stereotypes, such as being oppressed or lacking agency. These portrayals, shaped by Western perspectives, can oversimplify their realities and reinforce cultural biases.

In *The Stoning of Soraya M.* (2008), the film highlights gender-based violence but raises questions about whether it challenges stereotypes or reinforces them. This study examines how the film represents Middle Eastern women and its impact on Western audiences' understanding of their culture and experiences.

3. Aims of the Study

This research aims to analyze how the movie portrays Middle Eastern women and check whether it challenges or reinforces stereotypes about them.

4. Research Questions

This study attempts to answer the following questions:

- a. How are Middle Eastern women portrayed in *The Stoning of Soraya M.* (2008)?
- b. How does the film influence Western audiences' perceptions of Middle Eastern women and culture?
- c. Does the film challenge or reinforce stereotypes about Middle Eastern women?

d. What cultural and gender narratives are emphasized through the film's portrayal?

5. Research Hypotheses

In light of the questions cited above, we hypothesize that *The Stoning of Soraya M.* (2008) falsely portrays Middle Eastern women primarily as victims of oppression, reflecting common stereotypes in American cinema.

6. Research Methodology

The methodology opted to study the representation of Middle Eastern women in *The Stoning of Soraya M.* involves a qualitative approach. This includes:

a. Content Analysis

- Conduct a detailed analysis of the film's narrative, characters, dialogues, and visual elements to identify themes, patterns, and stereotypes in the portrayal of Middle Eastern women.
- Examine specific scenes, cinematography, and symbolism to understand how the film constructs cultural and gender narratives.

b. Discourse Analysis

- Analyze the film's language and dialogues to uncover underlying ideologies, power dynamics, and cultural assumptions about Middle Eastern women.
- Study promotional materials, reviews, and critiques of the film to contextualize its reception and framing in Western media.

c. Theoretical Framework

- Use Edward Said's Orientalism as a framework to understand how the film reflects Western cultural biases.

- Incorporate feminist theory to explore gender dynamics and the representation of women.

This methodology provides a comprehensive understanding of how Middle Eastern women are represented in the film and the broader implications of such portrayals.

7. Significance of the Study

This research fills a gap in studying how Middle Eastern women are specifically portrayed in American cinema, focusing on *The Stoning of Soraya M.* While existing studies critique stereotypes of Middle Eastern people in media, few address the unique challenges of representing women and how these portrayals influence Western audiences' perceptions.

- **Academic Contribution:** Adds to the discussion on gender and cultural representation in film studies.
- **Cultural Understanding:** Promotes awareness of biases in how Middle Eastern women are depicted.
- **Advocacy:** Encourages filmmakers to move beyond stereotypes and create authentic portrayals.
- **Audience Impact:** Highlights how films shape Western views of Middle Eastern women and cultures.
- **Practical Use:** Supports educators and activists working to challenge stereotypes in media.

8. Structure of the Study

The dissertation is structured in two chapters: the first provides a theoretical framework, including Orientalism, feminist critique, the male gaze, intersectionality, and the

history of representation in cinema. The second chapter applies these theories to the film, analyzing its characters, themes, and narrative choices.

9. Literature Review

The representation of Middle Eastern women in Western cinema often reinforces stereotypes, with many films depicting them as oppressed or in need of Western intervention. Edward Said (1978) in *Orientalism* argues that Western media constructs the "Orient" as exotic and backward, a perspective that is frequently applied to portrayals of Middle Eastern women. Shohat (1992) further emphasizes how these portrayals reduce complex identities into passive victimhood.

However, scholars like Abu-Lughod (2002) and Mernissi (1991) challenge this, arguing that Western portrayals ignore the agency and diverse experiences of Middle Eastern women. They critique films for presenting women solely as victims of patriarchy, failing to capture the complexity of their lives.

The Stoning of Soraya M. (2008) highlights gender-based violence but has been critiqued for reinforcing stereotypical portrayals of Middle Eastern societies as oppressive (Hammad, 2010). Such films often position the West as the moral superior, a perspective Brah (1996) critiques as promoting a narrative of cultural superiority.

This study draws on these discussions to explore how *The Stoning of Soraya M.* fits into these patterns and its impact on Western perceptions of Middle Eastern women.

CHAPTER ONE

Part one: Introduction to Orientalism

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Introduction

The portrayal of Middle Eastern women in American cinema is a phenomenon of multifaceted complexity. This chapter introduces the main concepts of postcolonial and feminist theories before applying them to American cinema and Middle Eastern stories.

Postcolonial theory sheds light on the historical development of Orientalism, which has dominated Western discourse about the Middle East. Orientalism, with its preconceived images, not only creates ‘the other’ but also reinforces the reality of Western dominance. By examining the gendered layers of these representations, especially through intersectionality and the male gaze, feminist theory argues that women are doubly victimized: as Middle Eastern subjects and as women living under the patriarchy. These two theories help to analyze films such as "The Stoning of Soraya M." and broader Hollywood practices, which have played a significant role in shaping worldwide perceptions of the Middle East.

This chapter advances the argument that visual stories help to perpetuate stereotypes and undermine genuine narratives. Above all, it seeks to expose how the cinema of the region constructs, and at times, caricatures the selfhood and self-determination of the Middle Eastern people.

1.1. Introduction to Orientation

1.1.1. Biography of Edward Said

Edward William Said is an influential Palestinian American academic, political activist, writer, and one of the most prominent critics of the last quarter of the twentieth century who was born on November 1st, 1935, in Jerusalem, Palestine, in a Christian Palestinian family. He was the son of a rich businessman named Rabie William Ibrahim, who originated from Jerusalem, whereas his mother was from Nazareth. In Cairo, Said received his first education in English. His parents sent him to a British school, Gezira Preparatory School, and then to an

American one called Saint George's School and Victoria College. Said was expelled from Victoria College for disciplinary reasons and was redirected to an American high school in Mount Hermon, Massachusetts. Said was a smart kid who showed a huge interest in reading and music. After graduating from Princeton, he attended Harvard University, where he obtained his PhD. Said's career started as a professor of comparative literature at Columbia University, and he spent most of his academic life there, traveling and lecturing at different universities like Cairo University, Yale University, Johns Hopkins University, Toronto University, Oxford University, Birzeit University, and Stanford University. In 1992, he surprisingly developed a fatal disease, leukemia, which inspired him to write his memoir, *Out of Place*; nevertheless, he could continue his life fighting on behalf of his principles and lecturing about them all over the world. On September 25th, 2003, Said passed away after a long struggle against his disease in New York, leaving a legacy of paramount importance on various fronts, mainly in literary studies (Gadi et al. 2023).

1.1.2. Definition of Orientalism

One of Said's most significant works is *Orientalism*, which he views as the collection of ideas and behaviors associated with the "Orient" that stand in contrast to those of the "Occident" and how they have been misrepresented and misconstrued. Said divides the book into three sections. In the first section, he explores the importance of Orientalism and its discourse throughout history while also examining questions related to its representation. In the second section, Said analyzes the idea of "*Modern Orientalism*" by illustrating how the French and British traditions of Orientalism were carried over to the United States, which was authentically reflected in U.S. foreign policy (Ben Mansour et al. 2018).

In *Orientalism* (1978), Said provides three interconnected definitions of Orientalism. The first definition of Orientalism is Orientalism as an academic discipline primarily

conducted by Western scholars, focused on the Orient's languages, cultures, histories, and religions. He argues that Orientalist scholars' knowledge was Eurocentric, often portraying the Orient as exotic, irrational, primitive, or inferior. This knowledge justified colonial control over Eastern lands, reinforcing the West's sense of superiority. Said states,

By Orientalism I mean several things, all of them, in my opinion, interdependent. The most readily accepted designation for Orientalism is an academic one, and indeed the label still serves in a number of academic institutions. Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient—and that applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist—either in its specific or its general aspect, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism (p. 2).

Second, Said provides a cultural/philosophical definition of Orientalism:

Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and the 'Occident.' Thus, a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on" (p. 2).

It is a Western style of thought that creates a binary opposition between the East and the West, often depicted as mysterious, irrational, and feminine, while the West is rational and progressive. This binary opposition is used in literature, art, philosophy, and political thought to justify colonialism and reinforce Western cultural dominance. Orientalism reduces Eastern cultures to fixed traits, perpetuating stereotypes and justifying Western intervention (Said, 1978).

With the third definition, Said defines Orientalism as a system of power and domination linked with imperialism and colonialism. Said argues that Orientalism functions as a political tool used by Western powers to justify their control over Eastern societies by portraying them

as disorganized, weak, and uncivilized. This constructed image legitimizes colonial rule, military occupations, and economic exploitation, reinforcing Western dominance. These representations serve to naturalize Western hegemony by depicting the East as a passive object to be governed and transformed. Modern depictions of the Middle East in Western media continue to frame the region as violent and unstable, perpetuating the notion that it requires Western intervention: “Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 1978, p. 3).

1.2. Historical Evolution

1.2.1. Orientalism in Pre-Enlightenment

The Pre-Enlightenment Orientalist discourse was mainly established by the influence of travel literature, art, and religious texts (Said, 1979). The idea of these far Eastern lands exotically portrayed by the orientalist writers served as a window into an unknown and interesting world. Works such as Marco Polo's *Il Milione* and, even though the latter was not an Orientalist, Ibn Battuta's *Rihla* captivated readers with stories of faraway places with exotic wonders and peoples with unusual customs (Irwin, 2006). Exoticism refers to something appearing unusual or interesting, often because of associations with a distant country. However, these narratives were mainly applied for dramatic effect; they played a crucial role in shaping Western perceptions of the Orient as a land of endless wonders and mysteries.

Also, art played a crucial role in reinforcing these perceptions. Art depicted in the exotic representations of the *Arabian Nights* in European paintings and the intricate designs garnishing Oriental carpets and ceramics—these artistic depictions embodied Western fantasies, desires, and even fears about the Orient. Through the lens of aesthetic representation, the East became synonymous with sensuality and exoticism, propagating persevering stereotypes that continue to live within the contemporary imagination.

Additionally, exploration and colonial expansion further contributed to these early views of the Orient. European explorers, driven by the search for new trade routes and territories, encountered diverse Eastern cultures and peoples. However, these encounters were often interpreted through a lens of cultural superiority and ethnocentrism, leading to the creation of simplistic and reductive stereotypes. Through travel accounts and storytelling, the notion of the Oriental "Other" as primitive, irrational, inferior, and unfit for self-governance began to take root in the Western mindset (Medellel et al. 2024).

Ultimately, the pre-Enlightenment era established the foundation for Orientalism as both a broader discourse and an academic discipline, permeating the Western mind with images and narratives that continue to influence their perception of the East.

1.2.2. The Enlightenment Era and the Emergence of Academic Orientalism

The Enlightenment period, crossing the 17th and 18th centuries, marked a significant change in intellectual and philosophical thought in Western societies. This era significantly influenced the development of Orientalist discourse, transforming the perception of the Orient from a fantastical and exotic subject to a subject of scholarly study and examination. Edward Said refers to this shift as the rise of "academic Orientalism" (Said, 1978, p. 146).

Academic Orientalism in the 18th and 19th centuries was characterized by a precise and scholarly approach to examining the East. Orientalists aimed to classify, document, and analyze Eastern societies, cultures, and languages. This was facilitated by the establishment of institutions devoted to Oriental studies and the publication of various scholarly works on the subject. Be that as it may, as Said points out, this scholarly interest was mostly driven by a craving to assert Western predominance and legitimize colonial rule (Said, 1978).

Many key Orientalist scholars had risen amid this period, each contributing to forming the Western understanding of the East. For instance, Silvestre de Sacy, a French linguist and the first modern and institutional European Orientalist, worked on Arabic literature, Islam, and Middle Eastern religions and was instrumental in establishing Oriental studies as a regarded scholastic discipline in Europe. Additionally, Edward William Lane, the English researcher and the author of *Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1860), is known for his detailed and comprehensive works on Arabic literature and Egyptian society. While their work contributed valuable insights, it also reinforced stereotypes and oversimplified representations of the East (Said, 1978).

The rise of academic Orientalism in the late 18th century played a crucial role in shaping Western attitudes toward the East. While it introduced a more systematic and scholarly approach to the study of Eastern societies, it also reinforced a binary opposition between the East and West, often to the detriment of the former.

1.3. Characteristics of Orientalism

Traditional Orientalism is primarily defined by its elements of hostility and exoticism. When studying Orientalism, Western scholars tend to take a Eurocentric perspective to understand the Eastern world. They have a strong bias towards Eastern culture. Consequently, the Westerners would use the West as a reference when studying Eastern culture and Orientalism. They tend to objectify, essentialize, and stereotype the life of Western societies while comparing the development of Eastern and Western culture; they would highlight the advantages and superiority of their own development. In the process of development, the West holds strong hostility towards the Eastern culture. They follow the threatening of the “other.” In other words, they believe that if the Orient were fully developed, it would markedly influence the economic, social, cultural, and other development of the West. At the

same time, in the process of research, the West is rather interested in the exoticism in Eastern culture. Some Eastern cultures have strongly captured the attention of Westerners (Yuanchun, 2020).

1.4. The Self and the Other

Orientalism is deeply connected to the concept of the Self and the Other because, as Said highlights in his second definition of Orientalism. He explains that Orientalism establishes a distinction between the Occident (the self) and the Orient (the Other). Since postcolonialism fundamentally revolves around analyzing the relationship between the 'self' and the 'other,' many define postcolonialism in terms of the relationship of the self and the other. For instance, Boehmer notes that 'postcolonial theories shift the traditional perspective on interactions between the colonizer and the colonized, or the Self and the Other.' (Moosavinia et al., 2011)

According to Ashcroft, Orientalism is a Western construct that portrays the East as the "Other." Therefore, in Said's view, it is principally a way of defining and 'locating' Europe's others. The result of Orientalism is the building of a binary opposition between Occident and Orient. The Orient is depicted as everything that the West is not: exotic, alien, dangerous, unreliable, and in need of control or display, often seen as a threat to the West (Ashcroft et al., 1995).

Western thought is structured around binary oppositions, which establish hierarchies where one side is privileged over the other. These binaries range from general binaries like light/dark, white/black to some more complicated and culturally weighted as man/woman, the colonizer/ the colonized and in the case under consideration the self/other. This binary opposition is prominent in feminist, psychoanalysis, postcolonial and queer theory. The Self –

whether it is associated with being male, white, European — is represented as positive term. While, the Other — be it female, black, non-European — is represented as its negative reflections (Childs & Fowler, 2006). For Loomba, as a postcolonial critic, describes the Self as the colonialist and the Other as the colonized. The Other is everything that lies outside of the self. Said (1978) further emphasizes that the Self is familiar (Europe, the West, "us"), while the Other is strange (the Orient, the East, "them") (Loomba, 1998).

The Self and the Other dichotomy manifests in various forms, such as the Occident / Orient, us /them, The West /the rest, center/margin, metropolitan/colonial subjects, vocal/silent. In all these cases, Western literature and cultural narratives defines "its other" in relation to himself, the other is an alien and alter ego, to and of the self, as the inferior reflection of Europe. Through the process of Othering, colonizers dehumanize the colonized, treating them as less than fully human. Othering codifies and fixes the self as the true human and the other as other than human. This dehumanization allows the colonizers to see themselves as the embodiment of “proper self” while label the colonized as “savages” (Moosavinia; et al, 2011).

1.5. Orientalism and its Evolution in Films

1.5.1. Pre-World War II

During Hollywood’s silent era, American women were typically portrayed as dutiful and virtuous sidekicks, with few exceptions like Greta Garbo, who played seductive foreign women. D.W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916) depicted Middle Eastern women as exotic dancers and commodities, reinforcing Western stereotypes. Hollywood's depiction of Arab women was shaped more by colonial-era Orientalist fantasies than by reality. Early films such as *Fatima’s Dance* (1907) and *Cleopatra* (1917) contributed to the image of Arab women as seductive and submissive, frequently shown as silent belly dancers or femme fatales. *The*

Hays Code (1934) further influenced representations by restricting overt sexuality in American women but permitting it in exoticized foreign women. American actresses, like Katharine Hepburn and Rosalind Russell, were depicted as intelligent and witty, but their sexuality was restrained and often required male approval. Films like *Gone with the Wind* (1939) featured powerful American women, but their independence was ultimately restrained. In contrast, Arab women on screen were largely inspired by mythological or biblical figures, reinforcing Western fantasies rather than reflecting real Middle Eastern societies. Meanwhile, as the Arab film industry emerged in the 1930s, it presented Arab women as strong and multifaceted, challenging Hollywood's distorted portrayals (Yunis & Duthler, 2011).

1.5.2. After WW2

Melani McAlister (2005) sheds light on how Hollywood has played a crucial role in shaping American views of the Middle East, particularly through Biblical narratives. Films like *The Ten Commandments* (1956), *Exodus* (1960), and *Ben-Hur* (1959) blended religious and political themes, reinforcing Western connections to the region while countering Soviet influence. Hollywood became an instrument of U.S. propaganda, using biblical and historical epics to legitimize American involvement and support for Israel (McAlister, 2005).

The U.S. sought to detach the Middle East from European imperialism, aiming for influence over oil resources and supporting Israel as a key ally (McAlister, 2005). The Suez Crisis (1956) exemplified this shift, with President Eisenhower opposing British and French military intervention in Egypt, solidifying America's dominance in the region (Lenczowski, 1990).

Hollywood's portrayals maintained Orientalist stereotypes, depicting Arabs as inferior and backward while presenting the West as dominant. However, as U.S. geopolitical interests

in the Middle East expanded, films increasingly incorporated political themes reflecting these concerns (Arti, 2007).

1.5.3. The 1980s to 11 September 2001: The Acceleration of the Terrorist and the Retreat of the Feminist

Hollywood's portrayal of Arabs and Muslims became increasingly negative after the Iranian Revolution, influenced by political events such as the Iranian hostage crisis, the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, and terrorist attacks targeting the U.S. Arab men were depicted as terrorists in movies like *True Lies* (1994), while Arab women became invisible or reduced to mere symbols, described by Shaheen (2003) as “Bundles of Black.” When they did appear, they were often either seductive terrorists (*Nighthawk*, 1981) or passive victims. During the Reagan era, American culture emphasized economic stability and nationalism, reinforcing Hollywood's portrayal of Arabs as threats. Simultaneously, Hollywood romantic comedies revived the sweet, all-American woman, as seen in *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) and *You've Got Mail* (1998), where female leads prioritized love and marriage. Unlike their earlier depictions as independent women, they now accepted flawed men and played supporting roles in male-driven narratives. Arab women remained largely invisible or disposable, as seen in *Rules of Engagement* (2000), where they were depicted as threats to American soldiers. However, *Three Kings* (1999) was viewed as a slight shift, humanizing Arab women to some extent, though critics argue it still perpetuated stereotypes of Arab men as either helpless victims or violent aggressors. One of the most notable Arab female characters in the 1990s was Jasmine in Disney's *Aladdin* (1992). Although inspired by *The 1001 Arabian Nights*, which originally portrayed women as sexually powerful figures, the film reimagined her as a Westernized, oppressed Arab woman seeking escape. The film was widely criticized for portraying Arabs

as barbaric. Hollywood's representation of Arab women remained deeply limited. While American women in romantic films found love and acceptance, Arab women were either depicted as victims in need of Western male saviors or were entirely absent. Ironically, while the U.S. criticized Middle Eastern gender inequalities, its film industry largely erased Arab women from its stories (Yunis & Duthler, 2011).

1.5.4. Post-11 September and Beyond

Following the 9/11 events, Hollywood increasingly depicted Middle Eastern terrorism, frequently depicting Arab men as antagonists in films such as *The Kingdom* (2007) and *The Hurt Locker* (2008). However, some films, including *Munich* (2005) and *Rendition* (2007), provided more complex perspectives. Arab women remained largely invisible, though exceptions like *Babel* (2006), *The Visitor* (2007), and *Amreeka* (2009) featured more developed portrayals. At the same time, American women in Hollywood also experienced a decline in well-developed roles, with films such as *He's Just Not That Into You* (2009) reflecting a decline in strong female representation (Yunis & Duthler, 2011).

1.6. Hollywood's Political and Cultural Impact on Global Perceptions

American imperialism has contributed to the global spread of American culture. The film industry serves as the cornerstone of these cultural exports. The American film industry is based in Hollywood and has a significant global influence. American imperialism also enabled the U.S. to dominate both Hollywood and the world's film industry. Every country in the world will not leave the film industry when formulating cultural policies. Even governments will invest money to maintain their film industries. Films hold immense cultural value. However, the growth of cultural industries in each country must be carried out under the background that the culture of the American cultural industries occupies a central position.

The United States holds a leadership role in the world's cultural sector and is actively shaping the world's cultural industry, especially in the film industry. Movies serve as one of the principal means for exporting American culture, with the Hollywood system establishing a worldwide industrial framework for film industry, distribution, and marketing. Thus, making a movie requires a high cost. Additionally, American imperialism has generated much money for the United States, which has become a good guarantee for the American film industry. As a result, the United States controls and dominates the global film industry with Hollywood as the center and exports its culture to the world (Crane,2014).

The Hollywood cinema serves as a key component of America's soft power, distinguishing itself from other film industries in terms of discussing a subject as well as technologically and technically compared to other cinemas. Hollywood mirrors contemporary life and the advancements that they represent between the countries in the world cinema. Hollywood, which involves creativity on its own in terms of visual storytelling and business, acts like a protector of the USA government's politics. This is especially true in the movies that are about the military and historical events that took place; the topics of the movies carry the characteristics of the USA's foreign policy. Furthermore, Hollywood is vital for public diplomacy, in which the culture of America is introduced, America is admired, and which has open, mobile, anti-individual institution, pluralist, populist, and free American values. Hollywood's global influence is widely recognized by many people in foreign countries. Most people respect Hollywood movies as a witness to mobile and creative culture and admire Hollywood's success. Many people associate the United States with power. Hollywood's high-quality productions reach every corner of the world. Combining Hollywood movies with the target audience on various TV channels eases the telling of America, and it is seen as a foreign policy activity that represents the country's interests (Aydemir; 2017).

Part Two: Feminist Theory and the Representation of Women in Cinema

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1.7. The Male Gaze and the Objectification of Women in Cinema

1.7.1. Feminist Theory

Feminist theory is a multidisciplinary framework that critiques systemic gender inequalities while interrogating intersecting structures of power, including race, class, sexuality, and colonialism (Crenshaw, 1989; Hooks, 2000; Mohanty, 1984). It examines:

- **The Male Gaze and Objectification:** how visual and narrative media (e.g., cinema) reinforce patriarchal power by depicting women as passive objects of desire rather than autonomous subjects (Mulvey, 1975).
- **Intersectionality:** how overlapping systems of oppression—such as racism, capitalism, and colonial legacies—shape women's lived experiences differently (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 2000).
- **Agency and Voice:** how marginalized groups resist erasure by reclaiming representation and self-expression, challenging dominant narratives (Spivak, 1988; Lorde, 1984).

Judith Butler defines feminism theory as «*Gender is not a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts* » (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, 1990) According to her perspective, gender is not an intrinsic characteristic but rather a performance that is created via repeated behaviors. This implies that by highlighting the flexibility and performative nature of gender identities, cinematic representations have the power to either support or contradict cultural gender norms.

Bell Hooks explains it as "Feminism is for everybody." (*Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics*, 2000) Her assertion emphasizes how inclusive and universal feminism is.

By highlighting the equal importance of Middle Eastern women's voices and tales in film storylines, this point of view promotes wider involvement in the fight for genuine and respectful depictions of these women.

Simone de Beauvoir sees feminism as «*One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.*» (The Second Sex, 1949) Her concept emphasizes that being a woman is a taught trait that is influenced by society rather than something that is innate. Understanding this makes it easier to dispel stereotypes that depict Middle Eastern women as essentially repressed or docile, creating room for stories that are complicated and full of action.

1.7.2. The Male Gaze and Objectification

Mulvey's concept of the male gaze suggests that cinematic language is typically framed from the standpoint of male viewers. This perspective shapes how women are portrayed on TV. In traditional narrative film, women are usually objectified, which means they are shown as objects of male desire. The female characters' visual presence is accentuated for its sexual impact, causing the narrative to pause for reflection. Mulvey contends that this objectification is more than simply a surface feature of film; it is profoundly embedded in the cinematic language. The way films are filmed, edited, and narrated frequently appeals to the male gaze, portraying the male spectator as the active subject gazing at the passive, female object (Mulvey, p. 2,3,4).

1.7.3. Role of Patriarchal Structures

Mulvey argues that the masculine gaze reflects patriarchal societal institutions. Male-dominated power structures shape cultural norms and expectations. This patriarchal mindset displays itself in film by depicting women as essentially existing to satisfy male needs and roles. Women's identities are typically shaped by their relationships with males, physical

beauty, and sexual attraction. The patriarchal systems that create cinematic representations of women perpetuate these cultural standards. It reinforces the notion that a woman's worth is determined by her physical attractiveness and capacity to arouse male desire (Mulvey, p. 3,4).

1.7.4. Reinforcement of Power Dynamics

The male gaze perpetuates power relations by portraying men as active participants and women as passive objects. Male viewers exercise influence over the female image on TV by just gazing at it. This dynamic is reflected in a variety of cinematic styles. For instance, the camera may focus on a woman's bodily parts, portraying her as an object of desire. Furthermore, the narrative frequently focuses on male characters, with women playing supporting roles that serve the male protagonist's plot. This narrative framework perpetuates the notion that males are the driving forces of action and women are minor characters in their stories (Mulvey, p. 4,5).

1.8. Intersectionality: Gender, Culture, and Colonial Power in Feminist Theory

Intersectionality is a term that emphasizes how many dimensions of identity, such as gender, ethnicity, and culture, interact to produce distinct experiences of discrimination and oppression. When addressing Middle Eastern women, it is critical to note that the group is not uniform. A variety of elements influence their experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). Gender, for example, has a considerable impact on defining the duties and expectations put on women in Middle Eastern civilizations, which can range from old patriarchal standards to more progressive perspectives. Race and ethnicity further distinguish their experiences, since the Middle East is home to a diverse ethnic and racial population, each with its own set of cultural traditions and social structures. Cultural and religious traditions have a profound effect on their lives, affecting issues from family relationships and social interactions to legal rights and

personal liberties. The intersection of these variables can result in particular difficulties and types of discrimination that women from other groups do not face. Immigrant Middle Eastern women in Western nations may struggle to balance their cultural traditions with new societal norms, leading to errors of judgment and stereotypes from both sides.

1.8.1. Critique of Western Feminism

Western feminism frequently makes the mistake of homogenizing Muslim women in its examination of the Middle East, depicting them as a single group lacking personal autonomy and a range of experiences. This method ignores the complex reality of Middle Eastern women, including their varied educational backgrounds, professional activity, and the various ways that Islam is interpreted and practiced in their daily lives (Abu-Lughod, L. 2013). The lives of women in urban areas such as Cairo or Beirut, where many have access to higher education and are actively employed, for example, differ greatly from those of women in more conservative rural areas where traditional roles may be more prevalent. Furthermore, there is a great deal of variation among Islamic customs and beliefs; some women may decide to dress modestly as a way to express their identity and faith, while others may choose to embrace more liberal interpretations. Western feminist rhetoric often essentializes Middle Eastern women by concentrating on single problems like the veil, ignoring the many interactions between cultural, social, political, and economic elements that shape their life experiences and choices. This limited focus prevents a more realistic and nuanced understanding of Middle Eastern women's lives by undervaluing their distinctiveness and perpetuating a skewed power dynamic in which Western viewpoints are given precedence over the voices and self-representations of these women.

1.8.2. Colonial and Postcolonial Power Dynamics

The way that Middle Eastern women are portrayed and understood in Western media is still significantly shaped by historical power disparities that were created during times of Western colonization and maintained by neocolonial influence (Said, 1978). The persistence of Orientalist clichés, which frequently present these women through a Western lens and emphasize themes of veiled mystery, subjugation, or exoticism, is indicative of this. By neglecting the agency, complexity, and varying social, political, and cultural settings of Middle Eastern women, these representations—which have their roots in centuries of Western rule and the idea that the "Orient" is fundamentally different and inferior—tend to homogenize their unique experiences. As a result, Middle Eastern women are frequently portrayed in Western media as either passive victims in need of Western liberation or as representing a sensualized and Othered femininity. This perpetuates the historical power dynamic in which the West claims to be the informed and superior observer, while the East—including its women—continues to be the focus of its analysis and interpretation. Because of Orientalism's lasting influence, modern depictions frequently fall short of offering complex and realistic interpretations, instead reinforcing preconceived notions that uphold established hierarchies of power.

1.9. Agency and Voice: Feminist Critiques of Representation

The portrayal of Middle Eastern women is deeply influenced by the milieu of complexity and interactions of gender, race, and culture that forms a tensive and shaky ground on which to challenge and deconstruct a singular narrative (Spivak, 1988). Within this construct, the ideological construction of gender, especially within specific historical contexts

like the context of colonial production and the continued legacy of its agentive and structural forms, often renders women invisible as subjects in the historical narrative while leaving their heterogeneity in geography, role, experience, and agency invisible even within the subaltern, marginalized, or other spatial formations. The profound and widespread impacts of imperialism, which can impede the natural growth of subaltern societies, control female agency to further the strategic objectives of colonizers, and leave a legacy of distorted power dynamics that still shapes modern representations, exacerbate this marginalization even more. The modern world's perception and representation of Middle Eastern women are shaped by a complex network of social, political, and economic issues, all of which are influenced by this historical background. Consequently, Middle Eastern women's diverse and complex experiences and identities are frequently, sadly, ignored or homogenized, perpetuating negative stereotypes and oversimplified narratives that disregard their uniqueness, agency, and the vital contributions they make to their communities.

Hooks highlights the important role pictures have in influencing views and self-perception, especially for oppressed groups, while talking about the obligations of filmmakers to represent "other" women in an authentic and morally responsible manner (Hooks, 1992). She contends that in order to combat the "white supremacist gaze" and advance an inclusive cinematic environment, filmmakers need to go beyond clichéd depictions. Filmmakers can promote a greater awareness and appreciation of the varied experiences of "other" women by producing visuals that challenge preconceived notions. Hooks goes on to say that this strategy is necessary for Black people and their allies to recover from the harm caused by false representation and to actively participate in changing the image-making industry.

Filmmakers have a crucial role to play in how they depict "other" women, according to C. Bainbridge's (1990) "The Politics of Representation" in *Cinema and Cultural Identity*

(Bainbridge, 1990). According to this viewpoint, authenticity probably necessitates a deliberate attempt to transcend prevailing, frequently stereotyped depictions that fall short of capturing the many realities and lived experiences of women who are marginalized or viewed as deviating from accepted social norms. In terms of ethics, this duty also includes making sure that the people and groups being portrayed are respected for their agency and dignity, are not exploited, and do not reinforce negative stereotypes. The power dynamics present in cinematic representation are probably highlighted in Bainbridge's work, which also urges filmmakers to critically consider how their stories may either perpetuate current injustices or advance a more complex and equitable understanding of "other" women in the larger framework of cinema and cultural identity.

1.10. Visual and Narrative Representation of Middle Eastern Women

Middle Eastern women are frequently portrayed in Western films using a variety of clichés that fall under common categories including the oppressed victim, the exotic seductress, and the silent bystander. The varied realities of women in Middle Eastern civilizations are frequently oversimplified and homogenized in these representations.

The discourse around the representation of Muslim women frequently entails dismantling prevailing preconceptions. The idea that Muslim women are innately oppressed, especially by the headscarf, is one prevalent misconception. Nonetheless, it is maintained that wearing a hijab is often a statement of empowerment and a personal choice. By highlighting their autonomy and strength, many Muslim women consciously reject the notion that they are coerced into submission (Sands, 2014). By offering varied and nuanced representations of Muslim women as people with complex identities rather than objects of sexualization, the "exotic seductress" cliché is, on the other hand, challenged, albeit not always directly. By elevating Muslim women's voices through interviews and first-person accounts, the concept

of the "silent bystander" is also contested. This demonstrates their tenacity and proactive involvement in directing their own lives and clearing up misunderstandings. It is emphasized that by depicting Muslim women in narrow ways, such as downtrodden or terrorists, Western media frequently fuel misconceptions and discrimination. It is demonstrated that the choice to veil or not is a complicated and individual one that is impacted by a number of elements, such as social influences, religious convictions, and cultural identity. In order to present a more realistic and nuanced picture, it is stressed how crucial it is to comprehend the historical and cultural background of the veil.

The way Arab and Muslim women are portrayed in Western media is greatly influenced by visual elements like lighting, frame, and costume selections, which frequently reinforce prejudices and false information. When depicting these ladies, Western artists usually rely more on their imagination and preconceptions than on empirical data, which results in inaccurate and distorted representations (Al-Sibai, 2022). For example, costumes are employed to exoticize characters by reducing them to basic and frequently incorrect visual clichés, in addition to serving as a symbol of cultural identity. One example is the veil, also known as the hijab; it is often depicted in a negative light, linked to ideas of oppression, a lack of freedom, or even as a sign of concealment, as in films when it is used to imply that a woman is concealing a weapon. This limited and unfavorable representation of the hijab disregards the variety of motivations behind women's hijab wearing, such as religious expression, self-identification, or navigating public areas. Moreover, lighting and framing techniques can further contribute to these misrepresentations. For example, darker lighting may be used to create an atmosphere of mystery or danger around Arab and Muslim women, while specific camera angles and framing can emphasize certain features or create a sense of vulnerability or otherness. These visual elements combine to construct a distorted image in

Western media that frequently strips Arab and Muslim women of their individuality and complexity.

Western media frequently use narrative structures that perpetuate restrictive preconceptions when depicting Middle Eastern women. One recurring motif is the portrayal of these women in shallow and uncomplicated positions, often portraying them as submissive and repressed. The image of the veiled Arab woman, which is frequently used by Western media to symbolize the alleged oppression of women in Middle Eastern society, is a perfect example of this stereotype. Furthermore, rather than being key characters with agency, these women are often cast as marginalized players on the edges of storylines (Saloom, 2006). The notion of "rescue" or "salvation," in which Middle Eastern women are shown as defenseless victims who can only be freed by Western assistance, is another prevalent narrative structure. This narrative reinforces a power dynamic that undercuts these women's agency by frequently portraying the West as the hero who rescues them from their own culture. The importance and empowerment of Middle Eastern women in these narratives are often linked to their relationships with Western characters, suggesting that they lack the capacity to take the initiative or exercise autonomy independently. Some stories, however, subvert these clichés by showing Middle Eastern women as complex people with unique goals, aspirations, and difficulties. These counter-narratives highlight the variety of roles that women play in Middle Eastern civilizations, going beyond the stereotypical portrayal of the oppressed woman. These tales emphasize women's agency and empowerment by concentrating on their viewpoints and experiences, demonstrating their capability to make decisions and influence their own lives.

1.11. Agency and Victimhood: The Politics of Representation

The way Middle Eastern women are portrayed in movies frequently highlights the stark conflict between giving them agency and portraying them as victims. Muslim women

are frequently portrayed as helpless victims in Western politics and media, which presents moral questions. Muslim women are dehumanized by this type of portrayal, which ignores the complexity of their lives and reduces them to symbols of oppression. This presents a negative image of dependency by implying that Muslim women cannot overcome their obstacles without outside help, usually from the West. These representations fail to recognize Muslim women's many roles and hardships within their communities, obscuring their autonomy and resiliency (Abu-Lughod, L., 2013). Furthermore, by portraying political and military interventions in the Middle East and South Asia as essential to "save" Muslim women from their own cultures, this deception may be used to legitimize unethical behavior. Other important problems that these women suffer, such as poverty, illiteracy, and political disenfranchisement, may be obscured by the emphasis on certain customs, like veiling. It is stated that in order to comprehend and handle the multifaceted issues Muslim women confront, a more nuanced approach is required, one that acknowledges the uniqueness of their experiences and pays attention to their voices.

The idea of agency is central to how women are portrayed in movies and television shows, and it has a big impact on how much these depictions reinforce or challenge preexisting preconceptions. The ability of female characters to act on their own initiative, make their own decisions, and significantly impact the plot's direction is referred to as agency in this context (Ren, 2024). The tradition of objectified or passive representations that have often defined the representation of women in film history is actively disrupted when stories give them agency. Instead of being restricted to supporting roles or characterized primarily by their relationships to male characters, women with agency become the primary force of their own narrative. A more thorough and genuine portrayal of the female experience is achieved by films that highlight women's tenacity in the face of hardship, their cleverness in resolving challenging issues, and their steadfast capacity for self-determination. These stories provide a

deeper and more nuanced examination of female identity, recognizing the complex character of womanhood by showcasing women who resolve difficult moral quandaries, overcome great challenges, and tenaciously pursue their goals. In turn, this level of characterization develops a deeper bond with viewers, fostering empathy and advancing a more sophisticated comprehension that goes beyond the bounds of crude and frequently harmful stereotypes. In the end, agency enables female characters to become fully formed people with a variety of motivations, aspirations, and experiences that reflect the complexity and realities of women's lives off-screen. A significant turning point in the continuous development of cinematic representation, this move towards agentic depictions challenges long-held social stereotypes and opens the door for a more fair and genuine representation of women in movies and television.

Many contend that Western tales frequently present the West as a kind savior by depicting Middle Eastern women as innately oppressed and in need of outside help (Abu-Lughod, L., 2013). However, because it ignores the many and intricate difficulties these women confront, this viewpoint is usually condemned for being condescending and unduly simplistic. By ignoring the internal dynamics of power and resistance, as well as the proactive steps women take to manage and modify their situations, such a perspective obscures the agency, resilience, and varied experiences of women within their cultures. By concentrating only on the idea of "rescue," these stories ignore the complex interactions between social, political, and economic elements that influence these women's lives, so eliminating their contributions and stifling their voices. A more complex and thorough understanding of the problems at hand and the various roles women play in their societies is impeded by this, which not only essentializes a whole group of women but also perpetuates a lopsided power dynamic in which the West takes on a position of moral authority. Additionally, it ignores the past and present initiatives taken by women in these nations to promote their rights and better

their circumstances.

1.12. The Impact of Stereotypes on Societal and Global Perceptions

The way that Middle Eastern women are portrayed in movies has a significant impact on how society and the world view them and their cultures. To elaborate on how movies influence popular perceptions of Middle Eastern women, it's critical to acknowledge the complex effects that these visual portrayals have on viewers. Because of their dependence on easily assimilated plots and characters, movies, a potent medium, frequently reinforce stereotypes by oversimplifying the nuanced realities of Middle Eastern women (Abu-Lughod, L., 2013). These stereotypes can include the exoticized and sexualized representations that disregard women's individuality and agency or the representation of women as silent and subjugated victims who are reliant on male family members. A distorted and homogenized perception of Middle Eastern women may result from the frequent use of such imagery in movies, ignoring their varied backgrounds, occupations, and personal goals. This becomes especially problematic when viewers accept these fictional representations as fact, influencing how they regard and engage with Middle Eastern women in real life. As a result, bias is frequently strengthened, cultural misconceptions are maintained, and sincere cross-cultural communication and respect are impeded.

Cinema has a special kind of "magic," which allows it to change the real into something else in front of our eyes. This "magic" frequently presents a reimagined version of reality rather than a direct mirror of it. Movies can unintentionally influence how we perceive race, sex, and class, but this transformational potential is also part of what makes them so captivating. Studies actually show that a lot of individuals learn more about these intricate societal concerns from movies than from scholarly books, underscoring the important educational function that movies play in society (Hooks, 2009). When movies reinforce negative stereotypes, which can minimize the complexity and diversity of people and groups,

they become problematic because they reinforce discriminatory narratives and may even incite xenophobia. Stereotypes are frequently used in movies, which helps to create a narrative that ignores the diversity and depth of people and communities. Even well-meaning movies might convey contradictory messages by fusing conservative and progressive viewpoints, making it more difficult for viewers to evaluate the movie's overall meaning. Films use persuasive techniques to gently ingrain specific visions into our minds, even though viewers are not completely passive and have the capacity to deliberately interact with content. This "overt or covert seduction" is a significant issue that leads to a more thorough analysis of the messages and strategies used by movies to sway audiences.

It is stated that films have a strong impact on our perceptions and understandings of the world; hence, it is extremely important for filmmakers to represent a variety of groups with realism and care. This is especially crucial when it comes to how underrepresented groups are portrayed in movies, such as Middle Eastern women, who are frequently misrepresented and stereotyped (Hooks, 2009). Therefore, movies have the power to significantly promote cultural awareness and understanding. But only if filmmakers actively seek to confront and demolish damaging prejudices can this promise be fulfilled. This calls for a shift away from flat, one-dimensional characters and stories that reinforce antiquated biases. Rather, filmmakers ought to endeavor to provide intricate and subtle depictions that mirror the unique and diverse lives of women in the Middle East. By assuming this responsibility, filmmakers may contribute significantly to the advancement of a more truthful and considerate perception of Middle Eastern women, bridging cultural gaps and eradicating damaging stereotypes. In addition to enhancing the film industry, this strategy promotes social justice and inclusivity.

Conclusion

Within the scope of this chapter, the intersection of postcolonial and feminist theories

regarding Middle Eastern narratives in American films was studied. The Orientalist viewpoint has considered the Middle East as the “Other,” reinforcing colonization and dominance by the West. Feminist theory emphasizes the marginalized and often objectified Eastern women whose voices are often silenced in prevailing cinematic discourse. "The Stoning of Soraya M." analyzes the politics of representation and moral responsibilities of filmmakers employed in violence-motivated narrative frameworks depicting women as both agents and victims. Moreover, Hollywood's global reach underscores its importance as a center of cultural and political influence, constructing audience attitudes toward the Middle East and shaping policy towards the region.

In this chapter, the focus was on elevating the discourse around Middle Eastern women. These women are not just subjects at the receiving end of action but rather active participants with the agency to construct their own realities. It is the responsibility of scholars and activists that are sensitive regarding the imbalance in control exercised through visuals and narratives in hopes of creating equal societies.

CHAPTER TWO

The Analysis of "The Stoning of Suraya. M"

CHAPTER TWO

The Analysis of "The Stoning of Soraya. M"

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Introduction

The first chapter established the theoretical foundation of this study by exploring Orientalism, feminist theory, representation, and agency. These frameworks exposed how Western discourses throughout history formed orientalist images of Middle Eastern women as silent and passive beings, and in some instances as exotic and dehumanized. This theoretical backdrop provides essential tools for analyzing how these discourses are still affecting the cinematic portrayals of Middle Eastern women, particularly in Western-produced films.

This chapter applies these frameworks to *The Stoning of Soraya M.* (2008), the story of an Iranian woman falsely accused of adultery and stoned to death. The analysis begins with a brief overview of the film's plot, followed by an in-depth discussion of the main characters.

In this analysis, this chapter explores the ways in which the film challenges systems of oppression as well as navigates the risk of reinforcing Orientalist stereotypes in addressing Western audiences. This is by examining how the film represents male dominance, female powerlessness, religious authority, resistance, storytelling, and the influence of the Western gaze. In summary, this chapter fills the gap between theory and film representation, showing how cinematic media both reflect and shape global perceptions of Middle Eastern women.

2.1. Summary of the Film

When Ali, Soraya Manutchehri's violent husband, decides he wants to wed a younger girl in 1986, her life in a secluded Iranian town takes a terrible turn. He devises a cunning scheme to get rid of Soraya because he cannot afford a divorce and is unwilling to give up her dowry. Ali creates a fake accusation of adultery against Soraya with the assistance of a morally reprehensible local mullah who has his own secrets to keep safe. They take advantage of the village's strongly embedded patriarchal system, which gives a man's word more weight

than a woman's, and they manipulate witnesses. There is a hasty and unfair "trial" that is made up of only males who are willing to believe Ali's falsehoods and ignore Soraya's mute protestations of innocence because they think her terror is guilt. Sadly, Soraya's own father is also tricked and coerced into accepting the false charges. The repercussions are terrible: Soraya is sentenced to be stoned to death. With the help of manipulative religious fervor and mob mentality, the men of the village—including her own sons, who are forced to throw stones at their mother—participate in the savage deed, which is depicted in the film without hesitation. But Zahra, Soraya's brave aunt, sees the whole situation and realizes how unfair it is. In order to make sure that Soraya's murder is not in vain and that the truth is known, Zahra courageously tracks down Freidoune Sahebjam, a French-Iranian journalist who gets stuck in their hamlet. Zahra shares the tragic tale of Soraya's false accusation, the phony trial, and the cruel execution—all at great risk of dire consequences. Her testimonies serve as the impetus for bringing the horrifying reality to the public's attention, emphasizing the subjugation of women and the disastrous effects of unbridled authority and social manipulation in Hamlet. The tragic destiny of Soraya and Zahra's valiant struggle to tell her narrative is at the heart of the plot.

2.2. Major Characters

2.2.1. Soraya

In "The Stoning of Soraya M. (2008)," Soraya Manutchehri is depicted as a courageous and resilient woman whose tragic fate represents the impact of systemic patriarchy. Despite her gentle and nurturing nature, Soraya becomes a victim of a corrupt and male-dominated judicial system that manipulates religious and cultural morals to silence the voices of women. Soraya's character condemns the suppression of women's voices in communities where religious and cultural customs are used against women.

2.2.2. Ali

Ali, the husband of Soraya and the antagonist of the film embodies patriarchal privilege and moral corruption. His desire to divorce Soraya in order to marry a younger woman leads him to fabricate charges of adultery, knowing that the system will do as he wishes without much evidence. From the character of Ali, the film exposes the point at which individual desires and social power relations intersect to produce male domination and dehumanization of women. Ali's actions reflect the toxic intersection of misogyny and power, as he leverages religious authority and communal complicity to destroy Soraya. His lack of remorse highlights the film's condemnation of men who exploit tradition for personal gain.

2.2.3. The Mullah

The Mullah in the film represents the complicity of religious authorities in perpetuating injustice. He invokes Islamic law to justify Soraya's execution and accepts bribes from Ali, proving his bankruptcy of morality. His sermons, delivered with performative piety, conceal an appetite for using religion as a tool for wielding power. The mullah's collaboration with Ali proves how religious authority is abused in order to legitimize gendered violence, condemning systems based on male superiority over justice. His personality is a severe satire of leaders who employ spirituality as a tool to oppress and dominate.

2.2.4. Zahra

The moral core of the movie is Soraya's aunt, Zahra. Fiercely courageous and outspoken, she confronts Ali's lies and the village's complicity, risking exclusion to reveal the truth. Her confrontational encounter with the mullah and brash recounting of events to reporter Freidoune Sahebjam make her a voice of resistance against injustice within a culture that discourages female agency. Zahra's unbreakable commitment to Soraya—despite the

danger—humanizes the cost of disobedience within oppressive societies. She thus stands for female resilience as well as the potential of narrative for seeking justice.

2.2.5. Freidoune Sahebjam

Freidoune Sahebjam, the Iranian-French journalist, is an outside witness and medium by which Soraya's story can be heard by the world. His curiosity and determination to uncover the truth are a fundamental story device, representing the power of journalism and international attention in exposing human rights violations. Through his dialogue with Zahra and his recording of what happens, the film emphasizes the significance of witnessing and testifying on behalf of the oppressed.

2.3. Major Themes

The Stoning of Soraya M. film exposes a myriad of sociocultural and political matters through its narrative and cinematic strategies. The film revolves around four overarching themes that articulate the brutal realities of Eastern women living under systems of patriarchal domination. These comprise primary male control and female ineptitude – which reflect on the dominant gender discrimination social order, religion and authority, which focuses on the intersection of patriarchal power and religious subservience; female resistance and retelling, which demonstrate the role of women in raising their voices against injustice, and, The Western gaze and cultural preconceptions – which focus on the manner in which the movie depicts Middle Eastern culture conditioned by Western thought. Each theme adds depth and complexity to the way the film examines the issues of gender, power dynamics, and representation.

2.3.1. Male Power and Female Powerlessness

In *The Stoning of Soraya M.*, male dominance is absolute and brutal. Women are placed in a subservient role within a strict patriarchal society. Men not only control economic and political power but also dominate personal and moral narratives — deciding who is pure, who is guilty, and who deserves punishment. Women's voices are silenced; even their lives are disposable to maintain male pride and power.

The film shows that women like Soraya are powerless legally and socially. They cannot testify on their own behalf without a man to support their words, and the judicial system is rigged entirely against them. Soraya is not victimized because of a crime she committed, but because of her husband's greed and brutality, and because the institutions of the community support him.

The theme of male power and female powerlessness is woven throughout *The Stoning of Soraya M.*, with key scenes highlighting the brutal inequality embedded within the social structure of the village.

Scene 1: Soraya Negotiates to Work for the Widow

After the death of Suriya's friend, the Mayor asked Zahra to ask Soraya to work for the widow as a domestic helper, he said: Could you talk to Soraya? We thought she could help when she was done with her duties at home. (Later approximately 42–47 minutes), Soraya agrees to work to earn money for her children after Ali refuses to support them financially, yet no authority punishes him. He has the freedom to neglect his family without consequences, that reinforces female powerlessness. Men in the village, particularly Ali and the religious

leaders, use her modest employment as a pretext for accusing her of adultery. This scene illustrates the impossibility of female agency: any attempt by Soraya to assert independence is interpreted as deviant behavior. This scene shows that women's survival is at the mercy of men's approval and social perceptions.

From a feminist viewpoint, this scene highlights Soraya's attempt to reclaim economic agency in a society that does not give her legal or financial protection. Nevertheless, this autonomy is perceived as a threat to patriarchal dominance. This reflects how patriarchal societies weaponize female independence, especially when it disrupts male ownership or honor structures.

Through an Orientalist lens, this scene contributes to the Western gaze that views Middle Eastern women as trapped in culturally regressive systems. Soraya's struggle to gain basic rights (like working or feeding her children) is used to contrast the supposed "backwardness" of Islamic traditions against the West's "liberated" women. The film positions her suffering as both gendered and cultural, subtly inviting the Western viewer to interpret her oppression as typical of the region — a hallmark of Orientalist discourse.

Scene2: The Mayor Silences Zahra

When Zahra learned that the mullah, the mayor, and Ali were conspiring against Soraya, she tried to question the accusation against Soraya, but the mayor — a figure of local political authority — sharply silences her, asserting that she had no place in the conversation. He said, "This is not your business. What do you understand, woman?" (48 minutes). The statement presumes that Zahra, as a woman, lacks rationality and moral judgment when it comes to public affairs, particularly those governed by male religious and legal power. Her exclusion from the decision-making process suggests a broader structure in which women lack agency, authority, and credibility, even where issues directly affect their lives and

families. Zahra's silencing presents real-world realities where women are excluded from political discourse, reinforcing the feminist critique of gendered power dynamics in both public and private spheres.

Through an Orientalist lens, the scene serves to depict Middle Eastern political systems as inherently patriarchal, where dissent is not tolerated. To a Western viewer, the image of an older woman being forcefully silenced by a male official reinforces the notion that in "the East," female voices are unvalued, this may be considered as evidence of the "backwardness" of non-Western cultures. Her silencing becomes symbolic of the "East's" alleged failure to recognize the moral and political rights of women.

Scene 3. Soraya Tries to Defend Herself

Confronted with false accusations of adultery, Soraya attempts to prove her innocence, by claiming she worked only to support her family. Soraya stands before the mayor, pleading her innocence after being unfairly accused of adultery. Despite her calm and articulate explanation, she is repeatedly interrupted and ultimately ignored (60 minutes). This scene is the portrayal of how a woman's voice is rendered invisible within patriarchal and theocratic systems. Soraya's attempt to defend herself is met not with fair inquiry, but with hostility and presumption of guilt, despite the complete absence of evidence.

This scene encapsulates the gendered injustice at the core of patriarchal systems. Soraya's defense is rational, emotional, and truthful — yet completely dismissed because it comes from a woman. Her lack of institutional support reflects how the male legal-religious alliance systematically invalidates women's autonomy and credibility. Feminist theory here highlights the mechanisms through which female voices are disempowered in public spaces.

Soraya's helplessness is portrayed in a way that appeals to a Western audience's perception of Muslim women as voiceless victims. The absence of due process, the barbarity of the punishment, and the village's submission to religious authority reinforce the Orientalist binary of the civilized West versus the barbaric East.

2.3.2. Patriarchy and Religious Power

The corruption of religion and authority is another dominant theme in *The Stoning of Soraya M.*, vividly portrayed through the manipulation of sacred laws to serve patriarchal interests. The film presents religion as being used as *a tool of oppression*. While Islam itself is not inherently oppressive, in the village it becomes twisted to serve patriarchal authority. Religious figures, like the Mullah, are not shown as sources of mercy or truth, but as enforcers of male power. They manipulate religious teachings to justify injustice, blurring the lines between divine law and human corruption.

Scene 1: Ali Attempts to Divorce Soraya

Ali, seeking to marry a 14-year-old girl, asked the mullah to convince Soraya to accept a divorce, he said: you must convince her (15 minutes). Soraya refuses, knowing that accepting it would leave her and her children destitute. The Mullah agrees with Ali's seeking a divorce, illustrating how religious authority is usually aligned with male interests while neglecting justice. This scene illustrates the collusion between male figures of authority—Ali, Soraya's husband, and the village mullah—to utilize religious doctrine to their benefit. The mullah's willingness to "persuade" Soraya illustrates how religious authority is manipulated. Here, the sacred is distorted into an instrument of oppression, demonstrating how religion, when combined with corrupt authority, creates systemic injustice to women.

This scene demonstrates how religious institutions are commandeered by men to assert patriarchal goals. The mullah, instead of acting as a moral and spiritual leader, becomes an accomplice to Ali's selfish desires. Soraya has no recourse — she cannot appeal to religion for protection because it is wielded against her.

Feminist theory critiques the system of male authority and religious power as an instrument for controlling women's autonomy and punishing defiance.

The film situates this abuse of religious power as a distinctly "Eastern" concern, suggesting that Islamic traditions excuse female oppression. The scene may reinforce Western stereotypes of Islamic societies as inherently oppressive to women, where religious leaders are depicted as complicit in upholding patriarchal norms.

Scene 2: The Conspiracy Against Soraya

Ali, the Mullah, and the Mayor plot to accuse Soraya of adultery, deliberately distorting religious laws—such as the requirement for four witnesses—to construct a false accusation, showing how "religious law" becomes a tool for personal revenge (60–68 minutes). The Mullah and the Mayor abandon the rigorous evidentiary requirements of Islamic law in order to orchestrate Soraya's execution, revealing the use of religious rhetoric is manipulated to mask individual ambition and communal complicity. The fabrication of adultery charges against Soraya further exemplifies the corruption of religious principles; the village leaders openly violate the strict evidentiary requirements of Islamic law to justify personal vendettas. Their distortion of sacred legal procedures exposes a profound betrayal of religious ethics in favor of maintaining male. This scene powerfully illustrates how religious texts and judicial systems are selectively interpreted and exploited by those in power. The authority of religious law, instead of ensuring justice, becomes a facade used to legitimize

personal vendettas and further entrench the oppression of women.

Across these scenes, the film critiques how religious and political authority, when corrupted, perpetuates systemic violence against women. Through these scenes, the film delivers a scathing critique of how religion, when fused with corrupted authority, can become a terrifying tool of oppression rather than a source of compassion and justice.

Soraya's attempts to speak are disregarded, and no legal protections are extended to her. Feminist theory reveals how systems of religious law can institutionalize gender inequality, making justice inaccessible to women when men are both the accusers and the judges.

The image of an all-male religious court reinforces Orientalist tropes; it portrays Islamic society as primitive, and anti-woman. This depiction reinforces notions of Islamic legal systems as unjust and biased against women, perpetuating a narrative of Eastern societies as inherently patriarchal and oppressive.

Scene 3: The Stoning Scene

The culmination of the film presents a harrowing portrayal of communal violence sanctioned by religious authority. The ritualistic nature of the execution, as a lawful and sacred act under Islamic principles, with participation from Soraya's relatives, emphasizes the deep-rooted societal complicity in perpetuating gender-based violence.

Soraya, silenced and stripped of identity, becomes a symbol of how female bodies are controlled, punished, and erased under patriarchal religious authority. Feminist analysis sees this scene as a literal and symbolic destruction of female voice, presence, and autonomy — an act justified not by truth, but by social control.

The film presents the stoning as a brutal, archaic ritual unique to Islamic societies. The emphasis on public spectacle, male-led violence, and the crowd's complicity plays into Orientalist assumptions of Islamic law as savage, irrational, and in need of reform. While the film seeks to expose injustice, it risks reducing Muslim cultures to a monolith of cruelty and misogyny, reinforcing Western superiority.

2.3.3. Female Resistance and Storytelling

Scene 1

Zahra gives the journalist the tape (1:49:30), a final move that symbolizes rebellion against the repressive powers that silenced Soraya, in a crucial scene that highlights female resistance and the power of storytelling. The fact that Zahra intentionally puts herself in significant danger by giving the journalist this important piece of evidence shows how far she is prepared to go in order to prevent the truth from being suppressed.

The tape itself turns into a powerful symbol that stands for the influence of testimonies and narratives. It is the physical manifestation of Soraya's voice, which the community tried to silence due to patriarchal motives. By turning over this evidence, Zahra takes charge of the story and becomes the truth-bearer rather than a witness. This scene is a potent declaration of female autonomy and evidence of the eternal essence of truth that goes beyond simple reporting. Additionally, there is optimism throughout the sequence. Zahra's actions ensure that Soraya's narrative and the severe injustice she endured will live on, despite her untimely death. Proving that the truth can triumph even in the most dire situations creates a legacy of resistance and motivates future struggles against oppression.

Scene 2

In "The Stoning of Soraya M.," the scene in which Zahra tries to alert Soraya about

Ali and the Mullah's scheme against her (0:48:35) is crucial in highlighting the topic of female resistance and the terrible results of silenced voices. Zahra's courageous attempt to reveal the injustice and defend Soraya is a blatant act of resistance against the repressive patriarchal forces at work. This scene is a perfect example of female solidarity since Zahra risks speaking up even if her thoughts might not be welcomed because she understands the danger Soraya is in. But Soraya's rejection of Zahra's warning draws attention to the terrible silence of women's voices in this society, where their worries are frequently ignored, finally leading to the disastrous result.

The underlying power dynamics at work and the disastrous outcomes that arise when women's stories are not heard or believed—not just by the males in their lives but also by other women who have internalized patriarchal norms—are highlighted by Soraya's unwillingness to believe or follow Zahra's advice. The catastrophic consequences of rejecting women's realities and the systematic oppression that silences them are starkly brought to light by this moment.

Scene 3

Despite its apparent insignificance, the scene in which Zahra keeps Soraya's money (0:39:00) secure conveys a lot about female resistance and the potency of narrative in the oppressive frame of the movie. In a culture where women have little autonomy, Soraya's capacity to make money—however little—often through hard work is a hard-won degree of freedom, a minor win in a system that keeps them reliant.

Therefore, Zahra's action to protect these profits is a silent protest against patriarchal control over resources, an act of solidarity, and a testament to the trust and collaboration among women, who frequently have to rely on one another for help when there are no social or legal safeguards. The money itself turns into a representation of Soraya's story, her

struggles, her efforts, and her hopes for a brighter future for her children as well as for herself.

In addition to giving Zahra her earnings, Soraya is giving her a piece of her story, thereby empowering her to guard her truth and take part in the collective female resistance to systemic injustice—a resistance that frequently takes place in private through small acts of defiance and mutual support.

2.3.4. Western Gaze and Cultural Stereotypes

Scene 1

A complex issue pertaining to cultural stereotypes and the Western gaze is presented in the scene where characters pronounce the word 'Sigheh' (0:19:50)." The movie presents the idea of temporary marriage, which may be strange and even divisive to viewers in the West. It is important to consider how 'Sigheh' is portrayed, whether as a neutral explanation of a cultural practice or as something more unusual or ethically dubious. The scene runs the risk of depicting Middle Eastern civilizations as "other" and feeding preconceived notions about their alleged departure from Western ideals if it highlights the contrasts between this custom and Western marital standards without giving sufficient cultural background. To ascertain if the movie is truly examining a cultural nuance or unintentionally fostering prejudice and cultural distance, it is necessary to closely examine the language and visual framing of this scenario. Furthermore, the audience's perception of 'Sigheh' as a weapon for male exploitation may be influenced by the scene's placement within the narrative, particularly its association with Ali's wish to leave Soraya. This could potentially reinforce negative stereotypes.

Scene 2

In terms of cultural interpretation, the scenario where ladies congregate at Hashem's wife's funeral and participate in what might be seen as stealing or looting (0:32:58) poses a serious problem. Viewers in the West may find the women's behavior surprising and impolite, which could lead to a generalization about Middle Eastern women's "irrationality" or lack of manners. Alternative readings must be taken into account, though. This conduct may be the result of particular cultural customs or grieving processes that are difficult for outsiders to comprehend. Women expressing their annoyance or rage within a constrained sphere of influence may also be a form of social commentary or even rebellion. Whether the film promotes a stereotype of 'irrational' behavior or provides a more nuanced picture of complicated cultural dynamics will be greatly influenced by how this scenario is portrayed, including the visual style, the women's faces, and the entire context of the funeral. Instead of imposing Western-centric norms on this picture, a critical analysis should aim to comprehend its possible meanings within its particular cultural context.

Scene 3

Regarding the Western gaze and cultural prejudices, the scene in which Ibrahim informs the journalist that the community has no private property (1:48:28) is important. There are several ways to read this sentence, which was written with a Western audience in mind. First of all, by depicting the village as functioning under a system that is drastically different from Western standards, it may be interpreted as exoticizing a cultural practice and therefore strengthening the notion of the "Other." Second, it may be interpreted as a critique of Western individualism or even a remark on community living. But in the absence of more thorough information, there's a chance that this remark oversimplifies a complicated social system in order to fit it into a stereotype about Middle Eastern civilizations. Western audiences' interpretation of this occurrence would also be influenced by the journalist's

response and the way the movie frames this particular moment.

2.4. Orientalism in The Stoning of Soraya M.

The Stoning of Soraya M. powerfully portrays the brutal reality of gender-based violence in Iran, particularly the misuse of Sharia law to justify stoning. The film reflects feminist perspectives that critique patriarchal systems in the Middle East, shedding light on the systemic injustices faced by women. the film denounces the legal and societal structures that perpetuate such violence. Through the story of Soraya's wrongful accusation and the involvement of village authorities in her death (Mojab, 2001).

Western media, according to many scholars, can be extremely important in elevating the silenced voices (Spivak, 1988). As a result, the film serves as a form of political critique, challenging both local and international audiences to confront gender violence.

The Stoning of Soraya M. exhibits elements of Orientalism, as theorized by Edward Said (1978). The film tends to portray Middle Eastern societies —particularly Iranian culture—as inherently backward, violent, and incapable of self-reform, reinforcing Western stereotypes that perpetuate foreign intervention and moral superiority (Dabashi, 2012).

The story centers on a Western journalist who acts as the voice of reason. His role as a witness and narrator reinforces the trope of the Western outsider exposing Eastern brutality. This narrative structure aligns with what scholars describe as the “White Savior Complex,” where Western figures are depicted as the necessary agents of justice in non-Western settings (Cole, 2012).

For Western audiences, the film perpetuates a division between the 'civilized' and the 'barbaric,' strengthening the perception that the West is a protector of human rights while the Middle East is defined by oppression. These representations have the power to shape public opinion and policy, fostering Islamophobia and defending interventionist approaches in

Middle Eastern affairs (Alsultany, 2012).

On the other hand, Middle Eastern audiences might perceive the film as a reductionist depiction of their culture that ignores the diversity and complexity of their societies. Scholars argue that such representations risk alienating local reformers who seek change from within, as they might be linked to Western objectives (Abu-Lughod, 2013).

Conclusion

In conclusion, *The Stoning of Soraya M.* provides an effectively resonant portrayal of gender oppression in the Middle East. With its characters and stories, the film explains how male dominance and religion can be exploited to justify the oppression of women. The film gives voice to a woman who has been silenced and highlights the harsh effects of systemic misogyny. At the same time, it also reinforces Western stereotypes about Islamic societies by depicting the Middle Eastern culture as violence and victimhood. Therefore, when interpreting the film through an Orientalist and feminist lens, it shows both its strengths and its weaknesses.

General Conclusion

This dissertation analyzed the portrayal of Middle Eastern women in American cinema, with *The Stoning of Soraya M.* (2008) as a case study. Drawing on Edward Said's theory of Orientalism and feminist theories of representation, this research attempted to evaluate whether the film reinforces or challenges dominant Western stereotypes. Through detailed analysis of the film's content and discourse analysis, this research has identified the nuanced and sometimes contradictory ways in which Middle Eastern women are constructed on screen.

The film *The Stoning of Soraya M.* is a true story and attempts to reveal the brutal injustice of stoning as gender violence. It portrays Soraya, a wrongly accused woman of adultery, who later becomes the victim of a patriarchal and religiously motivated justice system. In the beginning, the film seems to be a powerful criticism of misogyny and power, and it certainly offers good insight into the structural oppression faced by a lot of women. By giving voice to Soraya, more importantly by her story being narrated by the female characters as well as the French-Iranian journalist, the film emphasizes resistance and resilience, but also the power of narrative.

Nevertheless, despite its apparent feminist intentions, the film employs Western cinematic conventions of filmmaking and narratives that will in fact perpetuate Orientalist stereotypes about the Middle East as being backward, violent, and fundamentally anti-women. Soraya is framed as a victim, and while her inner strength is emphasized, she lacks real agency within the narrative. The religious and cultural context appears to the Western audience to be potentially strange, and even difficult to identify with, which can easily be reduced to a simple moral message that Islam and Middle Eastern societies are homogenous and naturally patriarchal. This approach risks overshadowing the diversity of experiences and voices of Middle Eastern women and can feed into Western narratives of cultural superiority.

The study's hypotheses addressed three interpretations of the film: that it challenges stereotypes through complex female representation, that it reinforces Orientalist views by emphasizing victimhood, and that it presents a more neutral, individualized narrative. The findings suggest that all three perspectives hold some truth.

Furthermore, the application of feminist film theory and the male gaze introduces other features of complexity. The camera often lingers on scenes of suffering, which may evoke sympathy but also risks aestheticizing violence. Despite the way the film attempts to make Soraya's pain a metaphor for injustice, the visual means by which the film tells this story further risk trivializing an experience of individual suffering for sentimental effect. This reflects a larger problem in the way marginalized women are represented in film — how to show trauma without exploiting it or reducing the subject to her pain.

In the end, Middle Eastern women are portrayed in a complex and multifaceted way in *The Stoning of Soraya M.* It is a sign of the continuing fight within global cinema to raise awareness. The film both challenges and reinforces stereotypes, providing its share of moments of agency while also drawing on the language of victimhood and cultural backwardness familiar to the Western genre. This tension underscores the necessity of more diverse narratives produced by or in collaboration with Middle Eastern women themselves—stories that reflect the multiplicity of their experiences, strengths, and identities without filtering them through a Western gaze.

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ملخص

تبحث هذه الأطروحة في تمثيل المرأة الشرق أوسطية في السينما الأمريكية، باستخدام فيلم رجم ثريا م. (2008) كدراسة حالة. ومن خلال عدسة نقدية تجمع بين نظرية إدوارد سعيد في الاستشراق ونظرية الفيلم النسوي، تبحث الدراسة ما إذا كان الفيلم يدعم أو يقاوم الصور النمطية التي بناها المستشرقون والتي تسود الثقافة الأمريكية، والتي عادة ما تقدم النساء في الشرق الأوسط كضحايا، بلا صوت، وبدون وكالة. وتسترشد الدراسة بالأسئلة التالية: كيف تم تصوير المرأة الشرق أوسطية في رجم ثريا م. (2008)؟ كيف يؤثر الفيلم على تصورات الجمهور الغربي عن المرأة والثقافة في الشرق الأوسط؟ هل يتحدى الفيلم أو يعزز الصور النمطية عن المرأة في الشرق الأوسط؟ يستكشف البحث أيضاً الطريقة التي يشكل بها الفيلم تصورات المشاهدين الغربيين 'لثقافة الشرق الأوسط والمرأة. ورغم أن الفيلم يسلط الضوء على العنف القائم على النوع الاجتماعي ويعطي صوتاً للأنثى المضطهدة، إلا أنه يقع ضمن قواعد السينما الغربية التي قد تؤدي إلى إدامة التمثيل الاستشراقي. إنه يضيف طابعاً شخصياً على المعاناة ولكنه يفتقر إلى الفروق الثقافية الدقيقة، وغالباً ما يصور مجتمع الشرق الأوسط على أنه قمعي متجانس. ومع ذلك، فإن الفيلم يرفع أيضاً الوعي الدولي بحقوق المرأة ويثير محادثات حيوية حول العدالة والمقاومة. يتحدى رجم ثريا م. الصور النمطية ويعززها، مما يعكس التوتر في التصوير الغربي لنساء الشرق الأوسط.

الكلمات المفتاحية: السينما الأمريكية، قمع النساء، نساء الشرق الأوسط، تمثيل، ثريا م.، الصور النمطية.