

Exploring Cultural Stereotypes In Aladdin (1992) Movie By Disney

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes the cultural stereotypes presented in Disney's Aladdin (1992), focusing on how the film represents Middle Eastern culture through characters, plot, setting, and themes. Using the theoretical framework of Stuart Hall's representation theory, Richard Dyer's concept of stereotypes, and Edward Said's Orientalism, this research applies a qualitative descriptive method through film text analysis. The findings reveal that Aladdin contains strong elements of Orientalism, depicting Arab culture as exotic, irrational, and inferior compared to Western civilization. Characters such as Jafar, the Sultan, and even Aladdin himself are shaped through stereotypical lenses that reinforce Western cultural dominance. The film's narrative and visual elements, from costume design, language, and setting to the theme of freedom versus control, perpetuate Western superiority while diminishing the cultural complexity of the Middle East. This study concludes that Aladdin not only entertains but also functions as a vehicle of cultural misrepresentation, shaping global perceptions of Arab identity.

INTRODUCTION

Film is a powerful medium of cultural expression that not only entertains but also shapes societal perceptions and ideologies. As an artistic form that combines visual, auditory, and narrative elements, film can influence how audiences view the world and interpret cultural differences. Disney's animated movies, in particular, have played a major role in globalizing Western cultural values through stories that reach audiences of all ages. One of the most widely discussed examples in the context of cultural representation and stereotyping is *Aladdin* (1992). While the film remains a beloved classic, it also raises concerns about how Middle Eastern culture and identity are portrayed through the lens of Western imagination.

The original *Aladdin* story, titled *The Story of 'Ala-ed-Din and the Wonderful Lamp*, comes from *One Thousand and One Nights*, a compilation of folktales from the Arab and Persian worlds, compiled in Arabic during the Islamic Golden Age. The tale was later translated into European languages in the early 18th century, which led to several reinterpretations of the original cultural elements. Disney's 1992 adaptation transformed the story into a Westernized fantasy that blends elements of Middle Eastern and South Asian cultures into a fictional setting called Agrabah. However, in the process of global adaptation, significant cultural distortion occurred. The film's visual imagery, character design, and dialogue often reflect Orientalist ideology, an intellectual framework that, as (Said, 1978) explains, positions the East as mysterious, exotic, and inferior in contrast to the rational and civilized West.

Previous studies have examined Disney's *Aladdin* from various perspectives. (Jack Shaheen, 2001) Conducted a comprehensive analysis of Arab representation in Hollywood films, finding that Arabs are often stereotyped as villains, barbarians, or comic figures. Similarly, Ella Shohat (1994) highlights how Western visual culture consistently portrays the Arab world as irrational and dangerous (Shohat & Stam, 1994). Fitramadhana (2022) notes that Disney films

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function as sites of ideological production, subtly embedding messages about race, gender, and power in narratives targeted at children. In the specific case of *Aladdin*, scholars such (Hoffmann 2019) emphasize that the dichotomy between good and evil characters is drawn along racial and cultural lines; the lighter-skinned heroes like Aladdin and Jasmine speak in American accents, while darker-skinned villains like Jafar use heavily accented English. This pattern reveals how racial and cultural stereotypes are normalized through popular animation.

The theoretical foundation of this study is built upon the frameworks of Edward Said's Orientalism (1978), Richard Dyer's theory of stereotypes (1993), and Stuart Hall's representation theory (1997). Said's theory explains how Western media constructs the Orient as an inferior Other, reinforcing colonial hierarchies through cultural representations. (Dyer, 1993) defines stereotypes as simplified and exaggerated representations that reduce entire groups to a set of fixed traits, often serving ideological purposes. Meanwhile, (Hall, 1997) argues that representation is not merely a reflection of reality but a process through which meaning is constructed, and power is exercised. By combining these theories, this research interprets *Aladdin* as a cultural text that participates in the production of meaning about the Arab world and its people.

This study differs from previous research by conducting a detailed analysis of the characters, plot, setting, and themes in *Aladdin* (1992), examining how each element contributes to the perpetuation of cultural stereotypes. The character of Jafar, for instance, embodies the Western notion of the evil Arab, characterized as power-hungry, manipulative, and visually coded with dark colors and exotic features. The Sultan, on the other hand, represents the stereotype of the naive and incompetent Eastern ruler. In contrast, Aladdin and Jasmine are portrayed with Western physical traits and accents, symbolizing virtue and modernity. Genie serves as a humorous Western figure who guides Aladdin's transformation, further emphasizing the West's moral superiority in the narrative. These portrayals collectively reinforce the Orientalist dichotomy between the civilized West and the barbaric East.

Moreover, the film's plot and setting also play a crucial role in constructing these stereotypes. The fictional city of Agrabah is depicted as a land of danger and mysticism, a desert filled with thieves, sorcery, and palaces, which mirrors Orientalist fantasies of the Middle East. The opening song *Arabian Nights* initially described Agrabah as a barbaric land "*where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face*," a lyric that was later changed after protests from Arab-American communities. Such textual and visual representations reveal how Disney's adaptation reshapes Arab culture through Western fantasy, reducing it to a spectacle of exoticism and otherness.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze how *Aladdin* (1992) represents cultural stereotypes of the Middle East through its characters, plot, and setting, and how these elements reflect the influence of Orientalist ideology in Western media. The research employs a qualitative descriptive method using film text analysis, focusing on dialogues, visual depictions, and character interactions as the primary data sources. By interpreting these elements through the theoretical lens of Hall, Dyer, and Said, this paper aims to uncover the subtle mechanisms of cultural stereotyping embedded within Disney's narrative structure.

In essence, this research seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on cultural representation in global media. By dissecting the Orientalist elements in *Aladdin* (1992), this study not only reveals how the film distorts Middle Eastern culture but also demonstrates how popular entertainment can shape public perceptions about cultural identity, race, and power. Ultimately, this analysis underscores the importance of developing critical awareness of media

representations, particularly in children's films, where ideological messages are often internalized unconsciously.

METHOD

This study applies a qualitative descriptive method to analyze cultural stereotypes embedded in Disney's *Aladdin* (1992). The process is suitable for uncovering meanings, symbolic structures, and representational strategies used in film. The primary data consist of scenes, dialogues, visuals, character behaviors, and narrative structures that reflect cultural stereotyping. Data were collected through repeated viewing, documentation, and thematic categorization based on intrinsic elements, including character, plot, setting, and theme.

The analysis begins with examining intrinsic elements, as they function as narrative components through which cultural meaning is constructed. According to (BordwellThompson, 2013) Intrinsic elements shape a film's internal structure and guide the audience's interpretation of events and characters. By analyzing these elements, this study identifies how stereotypes are embedded within the film's storytelling mechanisms.

The first intrinsic element explored is characterization. Characters serve as carriers of representational meaning, as described by Stuart Hall (1997) and Richard Dyer (1993). Each major character, Aladdin, Jasmine, Jafar, the Sultan, and the Genie, was analyzed through their visual depiction, dialogue, actions, and narrative roles. Special attention was given to how physical features, accents, behaviors, and moral positioning reflect stereotypical portrayals of Middle Eastern identity. This step allowed the researcher to identify dichotomies between Western-coded and Eastern-coded characters.

The second intrinsic element analyzed is the plot, including its stages of exposition, rising action, climax, and resolution. Plot analysis reveals how stereotypes develop through conflict and narrative progression. Certain scenes, such as the chaotic marketplace, Jafar's magical manipulation, and the depiction of law enforcement, were examined to uncover Orientalist messages and cultural distortions. This aligns with Hall (1997) emphasis on representation as a process of meaning-making through narrative choices.

The third intrinsic element is setting, viewed both as physical space and cultural environment. The fictional city of Agrabah was analyzed through its architecture, clothing style, music, market scenes, and palace environment. Because the setting merges multiple Middle Eastern and South Asian cultural motifs, it becomes a site of exoticization, reflecting Said's (1978) notion of the East as a constructed fantasy shaped by Western imagination. This analysis highlights how setting functions as more than an aesthetic background, and it reinforces cultural misrepresentation.

Lastly, the theme was examined to understand the ideological messages conveyed by the film. Themes of freedom, deception, power, and identity were interpreted through the theoretical frameworks of Hall, Dyer, and Said. Although the film promotes universal values such as honesty and self-discovery, the underlying themes reveal a contrast between Western ideals and stereotyped portrayals of Eastern culture.

Together, the analysis of intrinsic elements provides a systematic approach to uncovering cultural stereotypes within the film's narrative and visual construction.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study investigates cultural stereotypes in Disney's *Aladdin* (1992) by analyzing its intrinsic elements: character, plot, setting, and theme, using the theories of Stuart Hall (1997), Richard Dyer (1993), and Edward Said (1978). The findings reveal that the film constructs and

reinforces Orientalist images of Middle Eastern culture through various narrative and visual strategies. These findings are categorized into three major areas: (1) stereotyping in character representation, (2) Orientalist construction within the plot, and (3) exoticized and inaccurate depictions embedded in the setting and thematic structure.

1. Character-Based Findings: Reinforcement of Middle Eastern Stereotypes

The portrayal of characters in *Aladdin* demonstrates clear patterns of cultural stereotyping. Characters are constructed using exaggerated traits that align with Western perceptions of the Middle East. Jafar, the main antagonist, is depicted as dark-skinned, sharp-featured, manipulative, and deeply associated with magic traits historically used in Western media to represent the evil Oriental (Said, 1978). His clothing, voice, and posture all amplify his villainous framing. This aligns with Dyer's argument that stereotypes simplify and fix identities, especially those belonging to marginalized cultures.

The Sultan, on the other hand, is portrayed as childish, foolish, and incapable of ruling effectively. His lack of political awareness and susceptibility to manipulation reflect stereotypes of Eastern rulers as irrational and incompetent. This representation suggests that Middle Eastern political structures are fundamentally flawed or easily corrupted.

In contrast, Aladdin himself is Western-coded as lighter-skinned, American-accented, and embodying Western values such as honesty, bravery, and self-determination. Although he is presented as a member of Agrabah's society, his behaviors and attributes align more closely with Western ideals, creating a hierarchy in which Westernized characters are more moral and intelligent.

Jasmine is portrayed as both exotic and oppressed, reinforcing two common stereotypes applied to Middle Eastern women. While she verbally demands independence, her physical depiction large eyes and, highly defined body, reveals clothing, reflects the Western male gaze. Her desire to escape patriarchal traditions is framed in a way that implies Middle Eastern culture is inherently oppressive.

Genie represents the most Westernized character, embodying humor, musicality, and pop culture references. His exaggerated comedic style contrasts sharply with the rest of Agrabah's characters, reinforcing the idea that Western values bring positivity and progress.

2. Plot-Based Findings: Narrative Structures Supporting Orientalism

The plot of *Aladdin* functions as a narrative tool, reinforcing Orientalist ideologies. The film begins with the song *Arabian Nights*, which describes the region as barbaric, immediately framing the Middle East as a dangerous and uncivilized space. This introduction constructs a Western gaze that shapes the audience's expectations throughout the film.

The narrative progression emphasizes political instability, chaos, and violence. Scenes such as Aladdin being chased through the marketplace, the threat of hand-cutting, and Jafar's attempt to overthrow the monarchy all depict Agrabah as lawless and morally ambiguous. These plot elements align with Hall's argument that media constructs meaning through repeated symbolic patterns.

Aladdin's rise to heroism is framed around Western characteristics, suggesting that moral clarity and courage originate from Western values rather than from within Middle Eastern culture. Jafar's reliance on dark magic further establishes a binary between Western rationality and Eastern mysticism.

3. Setting-Based Findings: Exoticism and Cultural Inaccuracy

Agrabah, the fictional setting, is a hybrid mixture of Arab, Persian, and South Asian elements. This blending of cultures is characteristic of Orientalism, where the East is treated as a single, monolithic entity rather than a diverse set of cultures (Said, 1978). Architectural styles,

clothing patterns, and musical influences are intentionally exoticized to create a fantastical version of the Middle East, reinforcing the concept of the mysterious Orient.

The marketplace is portrayed as chaotic and dangerous, filled with poverty, aggression, and irrational legal systems. The palace, while grand, is depicted as politically unstable. These settings contribute to constructing the East as simultaneously enchanting and barbaric.

Overall, the findings show that *Aladdin* constructs a version of Middle Eastern culture that reinforces Western superiority through character stereotypes, Orientalist narratives, and exoticized settings.

DISCUSSION

The findings reveal significant patterns that reflect broader ideological structures described by Hall, Dyer, and Said. The discussion section synthesizes these findings to explain how *Aladdin* participates in and perpetuates cultural stereotyping within Western media.

1. Representation and Meaning-Making

According to Hall (1997) Representation is not about reflecting reality but constructing meaning. In *Aladdin*, meaning is produced through signs, clothing, accents, physical features, music, and spatial design, which frame Middle Eastern characters in contrast to Western norms. The exaggerated physical traits of Jafar and the foolishness of the Sultan support Hall's argument that stereotypes reduce complex identities into simplified, repetitive symbols. The film's representations embed cultural assumptions so deeply that they appear natural rather than constructed.

Aladdin's Western-coded traits and Genie's alignment with Western humor illustrate how representation is used to reinforce cultural hierarchies. Western behavior becomes associated with morality and intelligence, whereas Eastern behavior is linked to irrationality and danger. Through these portrayals, the film constructs cultural difference in a way that positions the West as superior.

2. Stereotypes as Ideological Tools

Richard Dyer (1993) emphasizes that stereotypes serve power structures by reinforcing social hierarchies. In *Aladdin*, Western values are always framed positively, while Eastern-coded characters are associated with negative qualities. This reflects the power imbalance between Western media creators and the cultures they portray.

For example, Jasmine's representation mixes exoticism and feminist rebellion, presenting Middle Eastern women as oppressed and hypersexualized simultaneously. This dual stereotype supports Western narratives that cast Middle Eastern women as in need of Western liberation.

Jafar's villainy strengthens another Western stereotype: the dangerous, power-hungry Arab. These portrayals function as ideological tools that justify Western assumptions about Eastern backwardness or authoritarianism.

3. Orientalism and Cultural Distortion

Said's concept of Orientalism is crucial to understanding the depth of distortion present in *Aladdin*. Orientalism frames the East as static, mysterious, irrational, and inferior. Disney's construction of Agrabah reflects this completely. The merging of different Eastern cultures into an invented city reinforces the Orientalist idea that the East is fundamentally unknowable and interchangeable.

The plot's emphasis on danger, violence, and magic further supports the Western fantasy of the exotic East. These narrative choices shape global perceptions of Arab identity, especially because *Aladdin* is widely consumed by Western children whose early impressions are shaped by media.

The setting functions not merely as background but as a narrative device, reinforcing exoticism. By presenting Agrabah as a chaotic, mystical, and culturally confused city, the film helps normalize misrepresentation within Western media.

4. Broader Cultural Implications

The findings suggest that *Aladdin* participates in a larger historical pattern in Western cinema, where Arab cultures are portrayed through negative or exoticized lenses. This contributes to cultural prejudice and strengthens Orientalist ideologies that influence political and social attitudes toward the Middle East.

Because *Aladdin* is an animated film intended for a family audience, its stereotypes are more easily internalized. Children who grow up watching these portrayals may adopt simplified or inaccurate beliefs about Arab identity. As Hall argues, the media is a powerful site of meaning-making that shapes social knowledge and cultural understanding.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that Disney's *Aladdin* (1992) constructs and reinforces cultural stereotypes of the Middle East through its intrinsic elements: character, plot, setting, and theme. By applying Stuart Hall's Representation theory, Richard Dyer's Stereotype theory, and Edward Said's Orientalism, the analysis demonstrates that the film presents a distorted portrayal of Middle Eastern culture shaped largely by Western imagination. Rather than reflecting authentic cultural realities, the film relies on simplification, exaggeration, and exoticization that align with long-standing Orientalist narratives.

The character analysis shows that major figures such as Jafar, the Sultan, and Jasmine embody stereotypical traits associated with Western depictions of Arabs. Jafar's villainy is framed through dark physical features, magical associations, and manipulative behavior, reinforcing the trope of the dangerous and irrational Arab man. The Sultan's incompetence suggests that Middle Eastern leadership is unstable or easily corrupted. Meanwhile, Jasmine is represented through a mixture of exoticism and victimhood, implying that Middle Eastern women are oppressed yet sexually objectified. In contrast, Aladdin and the Genie embody Western-coded values of courage, humor, and rationality, which positions Western traits as morally superior.

The plot also supports Orientalist ideology by depicting Agrabah as chaotic, violent, and culturally backward. Scenes involving aggressive law enforcement, public punishments, and political instability contribute to an image of the Middle East as barbaric and disorderly. The narrative resolution further promotes Western ideals as the solution to Eastern dysfunction.

The setting reinforces these distortions through its hybrid, inaccurate representation of Middle Eastern culture. Agrabah is constructed as an exotic fantasy combining Arab, Persian, and South Asian elements, suggesting that the East is a monolithic, mysterious realm rather than a diverse cultural landscape.

Overall, this study concludes that *Aladdin* functions not merely as entertainment but as a cultural text that shapes global perceptions of the Middle East. Through its intrinsic elements, the film perpetuates Orientalist stereotypes that maintain Western cultural dominance and contribute to a misunderstanding of Arab identity.

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