

Aladdin's Orientalism and its Effects on Children

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Contrary to popular belief, Orientalism is still evident in many popular movies created in this modern world. Many young adults that grew up in my generation began their early years of life while being exposed to Orientalism, whether they believe it or not. Disney movies, like *Aladdin*, were always a favorite amongst my friends and I, but what was never realized was that these movies portrayed certain areas of the world in a stereotypical way. After watching these movies over and over again, one would really start to believe that the Arabs are all exactly like the characters in *Aladdin*. This unknown sense of Orientalism in a child's head is then reinforced when actually visiting Disneyworld, which makes it possible for that same way of thinking to carry on when that child grows into an adult.

In Edward Said's book *Orientalism* that talks on the topic of Orientalism in great detail, he says that while on a trip to Beirut, he noticed that "the main thing for the European visitor was a European representation of the Orient and its contemporary fate" (Said 1). In the Disney film *Aladdin*, all the characters are from Arabia, but only the villains, like Jaffar, have foreign accents. Although Aladdin and Jasmine are also from Arabia, they have standard American accents, making them more relatable and sympathetic to the European people watching the movie. In only the second scene, the thief that gave Jaffar his new trinket admits that he "had to slit a few throats" to get it, immediately making both Jaffar and this thief terrifying to the audience (*Aladdin*). Having the characters of Aladdin and Jasmine depicted in this way against characters like Jaffar and the thief sets up the film's own "European representation of the Orient." Samuel Scurry in "Orientalism in American Cinema: Providing Historical and Geographical Context for Post-Colonial Theory" also remarks how Alan Nadel first recognized

“that virtually all of the characters play dual roles; their identities shift and they casually step in and out of good/evil and meek/powerful personas, representing the uncertainty and unreliability of the East itself” (Scurry 28).

However, having American-Arabic protagonist characters and “traditionally” Arabic antagonists wasn’t the first noticeable adjustment Disney made to this film created for a child’s enjoyment. In the opening scene, a man with a large nose, beard, and an oversized turban is shown riding the back of a camel while singing the famous Disney song, “Arabian Nights,” that begins:

Oh I come from a land, from a faraway place
Where the caravan camels roam
Where they cut off your ear
If they don’t like your face
It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home (Ashman).

After the film came out in 1992, “American Muslims were irate that the opening song talked about cutting off an ear...The music was changed” (Kincheloe 86). The new verse sang:

Oh I come from a land, from a faraway place
Where the caravan camels roam
Where it’s flat and immense
And the heat is intense
It’s barbaric, but hey, it’s home (Ashman).

Although the gruesome lyrics about people cutting off your ear if they don’t like they way you look were changed, the reference to Arabia being “barbaric” was still kept in its same place. Even in the altered first verse, this song paints a really artificial picture for the viewers of

Aladdin's homeland, making it seem that his home is just about impossible to live in and almost imaginary, since it is referred to as "a faraway place." In general, the "traditional" Arabs are shown to have "bad teeth, large hooked noses, and unclean tunics and caftans, and headgear that are just a tad too exaggerated" (Kincheloe 86). For western children who are watching *Aladdin* and are just beginning to understand the world, they may be more able to easily identify with Aladdin and Jasmine because of their clean-cut appearance and American accents, while the "traditional" Arabs have Arabic accents, look different, and are sometimes villains. Because of just these few things, western children may also start stereotyping against Arabs, truly believing that all Arabs are dirty, bad, have bad teeth, and have big noses, possibly creating Islamophobia.

The third verse of "Arabian Nights" goes:

Arabian nights

Like Arabian days

More often than not

Are hotter than hot

In a lotta good ways (Ashman).

It is at this time that the man riding the camel grabs the camel's face and pulls it close towards his own, and the camel gives him an "alarmed look" (Scurry 30). Scurry believes this to be "the underlying implication [that] western sexual mores do not apply here; the men are sexually depraved and the women are sexually available" (Scurry 30). Early in the film, Aladdin is seen running away from guards and passing through a "harem" inhabited by "barely-clothed dancing girls" (Scurry 30). Jasmine herself is also never once seen fully clothed, as typical western women would normally be seen. She "even adopts the role of a sexual temptress to fool Jaffar later in the film, wearing even less [clothes] than usual" (Scurry 30). Because all women in the

film were only dressed sexually, it gives westerners the idea that all Arabian women both dress and act in a sexual manner all the time.

As these western children are now growing up, they are never exploring or researching enough to understand that these enormous turbans, giant noses, and crooked teeth are anything but racial stereotypes created by Disney. This can be related to Timothy Mitchell's book, *Colonising Egypt* in which he speaks of how the Europeans created their own image of Egypt during the colonial period and ended up being represented as an object to the Europeans. Mitchell quotes one European's writing saying, "Bona fide Orientalists' were stared at as in a Barnum's all-world show: the good Scandinavian people seemed to think that it was a collection of Orientals, not of Orientalists" (Mitchell 2). Frenchmen were instructed to dress and act as Egyptians, as this one European then claims them to be "bona fide" Egyptians, even though they are not even remotely close to that. Despite the fact that they didn't have true Egyptians stationed in the exhibit, the Frenchmen stood on the incredibly crowded imitation street of Cairo and "sold perfumes, pastries, and tarbrushes" (Mitchell 1). Because of this swarming street of vendors, Europeans thought that the exhibit was all about the "things" of Egyptian culture, not the people or actual culture itself. If the people were even noticed, they often be stared at, "like an object on exhibit" (Mitchell 4).

Mitchell's idea of "world-as-exhibition" still continues today and can be seen in Disneyworld, Florida. Visitors, or "spectators," walk around this magical land that they've never really seen before in awe. Disneyworld allows these spectators to roam around while looking at different buildings, decorations, and people to learn more about them, which is perhaps why Disneyworld has interactive rides that takes its spectators on a different journey for each ride. Just as the Europeans created a falsified Egyptian exhibit and its spectators looked at the "true"

Egyptians as “things,” Disneyworld’s spectators now see Disney characters, such as Aladdin, Jasmine, and Jaffar, as things. Children who go to Disneyworld most likely have already seen many Disney movies, such as *Aladdin*, and once they see Aladdin and Jasmine in person, they now are convinced that these are real people, reinforcing their mistaken ideas of Arabia. Children may now run up to Aladdin or Jasmine to give them a hug and take a picture because they identified with them more in the film from their European qualities. However, they may also run and hide behind their parents when Jaffar comes near them because he was portrayed as an evil, scary Arabian.

Mitchell also brings up how the Europeans raised an income from their Egyptian exhibit by, firstly, charging an entrance fee and then strategically placing shops and stalls around the attractions. Eventually, larger shops, such as shopping arcades and department stores, overran the small stalls. Because of their large size and architecture, these stores seemed “almost [like] an exhibition in itself” (Mitchell 10). Since Europeans felt their “natural curiosity” taking over whenever they came around new places or things, commercialism benefited because other Europeans profited from their curiosity. These big department stores had mirrors placed all around, making it difficult to realize one has entered the store and just as difficult to leave. Exits were almost hidden, requiring that customers walk all around and look at everything before leaving. Gift shops became a revelation, allowing the Europeans to also gain proceeds off of “authentic” Egyptian items.

Once again, Disneyworld created something similar to this. Coming off of each ride or attraction, spectators are forced to go through a gift shop that went along with the theme of that journey. For example, if a spectator just finished riding Aladdin’s Magic Carpet Ride in Disneyworld, the exit from the ride would lead right to the entrance of Aladdin’s Gift Shop with

no alternative route to the final exit back to the park. Children would be offered to purchase an “authentic” Jasmine outfit, Aladdin’s “authentic” magic lamp, or possibly even their own magic carpet toy. Although a place that was once possibly created for the pleasure of viewing a mystical environment of a new land, it is now known for its amusement park rides, shops, and “real” Disney characters; just as Mitchell quotes one European saying how people believed they were staring at “Orientals not Orientalists” (Mitchell 2). Children, who grow up and sometimes still believe as adults, are convinced that Disney holds true to everything that they show, so both children and adults in this day and age are accustomed to accept that, for example, all Arabian women dress in the scandalous clothes that Jasmine does, Arabian men are as mean and scary as Jaffar, and they live in a place that is hardly inhabitable.

Nina Jenson in her article “Children’s Perceptions of Their Museum Experiences: A Contextual Perspective” explains a study done on the theory of event memories researched by Nelson and Gruendel in 1981. The theory states that

...there are two kinds of interrelated event memories: general scripts, and specific or autobiographic memories about a specific occurrence of a kind of event. Scripts, also called ‘general event representations’, provide a framework and general set of expectations for recurring events... What begins as a novel event will, with repeated occurrences over time, become fused into a script... Thus ‘what happened’ on a [specific] trip to a museum is informed and remembered in relationship to ‘what happens’ when one goes to a museum (Jenson 301).

Both Disney films and Disneyworld can be looked at as a “museum trip” in this way. The more a child watches *Aladdin*, the more he or she will be able to remember what is going to happen in

that film. When he or she visits Disneyworld, that child will know what to expect when riding Aladdin's Magic Carpet and meeting Jasmine or Jaffar in person. With that, the more times the movie is watched or Disneyland is visited, the Orientalist ideas of the Arabian world are embedded into his or her mind, reinforcing these unrealistic ideas. As that child grows up, he or she will now truly believe that Arabia is just like everything in the movie *Aladdin* and would expect nothing different because they, more likely than not, have not visited a real Arabian country before or been shown films that depict true Arabian life and culture. Orientalism is still alive and well in the film industry today, and although most of the time it's not as noticeable as older films, like *Aladdin*, children are still watching these Disney classics and exposed to Orientalism at its finest, creating unrealistic expectations of Eastern countries later in life.

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