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The Muslim World In Post-9/11 American Cinema: A Critical Study, 2001-2011

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Abstract

This is a book review of Kerem Bayraktaroglu's *The Muslim World In Post-9/11 American Cinema: A Critical Study, 2001-2011* (North Carolina: McFarland and Company, 2018).

Keywords

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How cinema conceives of the "other" is an important line of study for media scholars. Kerem Bayraktaroglu's *The Muslim World in Post-9/11 American Cinema: A critical study, 2001-2011* is an important intervention into the study of the depiction of the Muslim "other." Bayraktaroglu's thorough examination compares films from before and after 9/11 "to show how American cinema re-shapes it material to reflect the changes taking place in the way society looks at itself and the world" (3). Analytically rigorous and materially comprehensive, Bayraktaroglu's book is a timely and critical examination of American cinema in an era where debates about representation, authenticity, and storytelling run high. The book is well organized into thematic chapters that lay out the analytic grounding of the study: exploring Muslim space, male and female characters, children, and normalization. With an extensive filmography, Bayraktaroglu's study provides a thorough analysis of the changes over time to representations of the Muslim world in American cinema.

In his first chapter, "Building a 'Muslim World' for a Large Screen," Bayraktaroglu lays out clearly the analytic framework he employs in his study along with the major theorists he engages with. The broad strokes of Orientalism, feminism, and transnationalism provide the backdrop of his analysis while the contours are shaped by insightful readings of Jacques Lacan, Homi Bhabha, and Chandra T. Mohanty among others. Bayraktaroglu also lays out the tradition of film criticism he builds upon with invocations to Jack Shaheen's magisterial *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. The chapter outlines the parameters of his research and defines the "Muslim world" as "the aspects immediately associated in the Western mind with Islam and

Muslim, and not to a power bloc trying to outweigh the political and economic superiority of the West" (11).

In chapter 2, "Muslim Space Before and After 9/11," Bayraktaroglu examines the landscapes and spaces within which Muslims exist in American cinema. Using a comparative analysis of films from before and after 9/11, Bayraktaroglu traces how films like *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962)*, Hidalgo* (2004)*, The Human Shield* (1991)*, Green Zone* (2010)*,* and *Man Push Cart* (2005) imagine Muslim spaces. Bayraktaroglu effectively traces the change over time in the depictions, analyzing differences in the way the desert, Baghdad, and the immigrant city become representative of the Muslim world. His treatment of Baghdad stands out as the strongest section of the chapter, masterfully pinpointing and explaining the cacophony of Baghdad against the backdrop of the US frustrations and anxieties during the occupation of Iraq. His comparison of the bustle of the souk contrasted with the silence of the city under bombardment in the *Green Zone* puts this into stark relief as he notes, "The commercial activity and frenzy of people is replaced with a chase sequence and aerial attack. Where there was once an abundance of color and commotion, only three solidary figures are seen. The cinematic frame is devoid of light and the color green is used to ominous and desolate effect" (56). The imagery is evocative and the analysis effective.

In his third chapter, "The Muslim Male Character Typology," Bayraktaroglu examines the stereotypes of the Muslim man. Drawing upon the work of scholars like Shaheen, and Peter Morey and Amina Yaqin's *Framing Muslims: Stereotyping and Representation after 9/11*, Bayraktaroglu identifies several Muslim male typologies: The Arab terrorist/villain, Islamic Rage Boy, The Naïve Sympathizer, The Victim of War, the Corrupt Tradesman, the Use Value Muslim, the Feminized Muslim, The Muslim Despot, The Tolerable Muslim, and the Respectable Muslim.

Bayraktaroglu's brief treatment of these stereotypes only brushes the surface, leaving room for further inquiry. For example, he notes that in *Iron Man*, "the Muslim male figure consequently sacrifices himself, so that Stark can escape" (86). He rightly identifies Shaun Taub's character Yinsen as a "Use Value Muslim" as opposed to the "Arab Terrorists" holding them captive, but his analysis goes no further examining how the terrorists are depicted as religious fanatics juxtaposed against a secularized Yinsen, whose religion is not part of his character. Where Bayraktaroglu shines is in his identifying the role of Black Muslims as effective mediators in the typologies depicted.

Bayraktaroglu's chapter on "White Female and Muslim Male Characters" builds upon his taxonomy of typologies by analyzing the relationship between male characters from the Muslim world and female characters from the non-Muslim world. He examines films that portray how "female character exercises her own form of power to varying degrees over the hapless Muslim male" (101). Once more, Bayraktaroglu provides a taxonomy of several typology of female characters: The Femme Fatale, The Action Woman, and The Superrat each with its own unique relationship with the Arab or Muslim man. Exploring these stereotypes in *Sorry, Haters* (2005)*, Rendition* (2007)*,* and *The Kingdom* (2007), Bayraktaroglu effectively provides an analysis of the shifting and complex power-relations depicted in American cinema between Muslim men and Euro-American women.

In chapter 5, "From Stereotype to 'New' Muslim Woman," he traces the change in depictions of Muslim women with more nuanced and complex portrayals. Bayraktaroglu's comparative approach provides a stark relief between the older depictions in *A Café in Cairo* (1925) and *The Thief of Baghdad* (1978) and the far more fully fleshed out characters in *House of Sand and Fog* (2003), *Rendition*, and *Body of Lies* (2008). The author notes the change in the

depiction of Muslim women as a process of normalization, or humanization, arguing, "this can be described as a metamorphosis, in which the Muslim female character is changed from a monolithic existence to an entity with a body and soul; from being the object of the gaze to being a subject gazing at others; and from a submissive follower to an individual who recognizes her own importance and is someone to be reckoned with" (147-8).

Bayraktaroglu's chapter "Muslim Children" rounds out his analysis of the various depictions of Muslims by exploring a type of representation that rarely gets scholarly attention. Drawing heavily on the theoretical framework and scholarship on children in cinema, Bayraktaroglu provides critical analysis on the way that Muslim children are depicted. Linking to the history of the portrayal of African American and Hispanic children, he analyzes the way Muslim children are represented in *Pretty Persuasion* (2005), *The Kite Runner* (2007), and *Babel* (2006). Bayraktaroglu tracks the changes of Muslim children in cinema from silent characters and "rescue figures" to representatives of assimilation and loyalty to US ideologies, while still maintaining links to their heritage. For Bayraktaroglu, Muslim children in cinema are transnational figures with "hybrid Otherness" (163). Here, the author provides necessary ground for further studies on Muslim children in cinema.

Finally, Bayraktaroglu concludes his study with some comments on the reasons for the changes seen in American cinema post-9/11. He identifies several major factors: the political atmosphere of 2001-2011, the desire to raise sympathies for the US, the internet's revolution in communication and access to knowledge, the role of NGO's and experts in helping Muslims raise their own profiles, and increased input from Muslim professionals in the film industry. His comments here are brief and while he rightly notes the multiple factors that contribute to a more nuanced and normalized depiction of Muslims, his analysis misses an opportunity to further

contextualize American cinema in 2001-2011 against the backdrop of American imperial exploits in the Middle East. Given the role of the US State Department and military branches in funding and advising on movies, an opportunity to further explore the relationship between cinema and empire would have lived up to the critique of Edward Said the book builds upon. Additionally, key texts in the study of Muslims in American cinema are absent, both Evelyn Alsultany's *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11* and Sophia Arjana's *Muslims in the Western Imagination*, which would have been constructive conversation partners with Bayraktaroglu's analysis. While Bayraktaroglu draws heavily from a wide breadth of theorists, the lack of engagement with Alusltany and Arjana is notable.

Despite these minor weaknesses, Bayraktaroglu's book is a crucial and timely intervention into the study of American cinema and its relationship to the Muslim world. Its taxonomy of the various typology of characters along with its chapter on Muslim children alone make the book a worthwhile and important contribution to media studies both in the classroom and for interested parties.