***Trigger Warning* (2024): Epistemic Violence, Gatekeeping, and the Case of Authentic Arab and Muslim Representation in Anglophone Cultural Production**
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Article Info	Abstract
*Corresponding author: (Inayat Ullah) Corresponding Author email ih.khan@psau.edu.sa **Keywords:** *Trigger Warning, Stereotyping, Essentialist Portrayal, Epistemic Violence*	This paper critically examines the persistent stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims in Hollywood cinema, situating these portrayals within the broader historical, political, and cultural frameworks. Drawing on key concepts such as epistemic violence, Orientalism, and the politics of representation, the study traces how film narratives have long served to construct reductive and dehumanizing images of Arab and Muslim communities. While recent years have witnessed isolated attempts to present more nuanced representations, mainstream media largely continues to reinforce harmful tropes that sustain Islamophobic ideologies and justify foreign interventions. Through an interdisciplinary lens, incorporating media studies and postcolonial analysis, this paper argues that authentic representation requires systemic change within the structures of authorship and narrative authority. Without a deliberate shift toward decolonial storytelling practices and greater inclusion of marginalized voices in the creative process, Hollywood's portrayals may continue to perpetuate real-world social injustices. The findings underscore the urgent need for a media landscape that embraces complexity, resists cultural essentialism, and fosters critical media literacy among audiences.

American Cinema and the Politics of Arabs and Muslim Representation

For more than a century, Hollywood cinema has exerted considerable influence over global cultural imaginaries, shaping public perceptions of diverse communities through the lens of Western hegemony. Among the most persistent and damaging trends within this system of representation is the stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims (Abdelhameed, 2025; Wahid, 2023; Alotaibi, 2024; Hamada, 2001). Rather than offering complex, heterogeneous, and humanized portrayals, filmmakers have routinely relied on reductive tropes that depict these communities as violent extremists, oil-rich oligarchs, or oppressed women - archetypes that not only reflect but also actively construct a dichotomous worldview separating the "civilized" West from the "barbaric" Other. Though some critics suggest that media merely mirrors prevailing societal attitudes, substantial evidence indicates that filmic texts are active sites of ideological production, shaping social consciousness and reinforcing the boundaries between "us" and "them" (Corriou, 2024; Hall, 1997).

Over the past several decades, scholars and activists have increasingly interrogated the ideological work performed by these representations, highlighting the material consequences of cultural stereotyping on public opinion, policymaking, and lived experiences (Corriou, 2024; Abdelhameed, 2025; Wahid, 2023; Alotaibi, 2024; Hamada, 2001; Alsultany, 2012). Although there has been a noticeable shift toward producing more authentic and nuanced narratives, particularly in independent and streaming media spaces, the pervasive influence of Orientalist discourses continues to haunt Hollywood's mainstream productions. Understanding the historical origins, evolution, and enduring persistence of these stereotypes is critical for those invested in advancing media literacy, fostering equitable cultural representation, and pursuing social justice.

This paper, using textual analysis of the subtitles of the movie, explores how stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims have been constructed, circulated, and reinforced through American cinema, tracing their development from early representations to the intensified racialization that followed the September 11 attacks. It focuses particularly on

the emergence of strategies such as "simplified complex representations" (Alsultany, 2012) and the "good Muslim/bad Muslim" framework (Maira, 2016), which appear to complicate but ultimately sustain underlying biases. Additionally, the study considers how structural conditions within the Hollywood industry, ranging from market demands to political pressures, continue to produce these skewed portrayals, even as calls for diversity grow louder. It also highlights efforts by Arab and Muslim American creators to disrupt dominant narratives and offer alternative visions that present Muslim identities in richer, more nuanced ways. Through close analysis of both media texts and production contexts, this paper examines the interplay between race, politics, and popular culture in shaping global perceptions of Arab and Muslim communities.

Stereotyping of Muslims and Arabs in Hollywood Movies

Since the earliest days of American filmmaking, depictions of Arabs and Muslims have been constrained by a limited and often harmful set of tropes. Early cinematic portrayals frequently linked these identities with violence, backwardness, or an exotic otherness that set them apart from Western norms. Jack Shaheen's landmark study *Reel Bad Arabs* (2001) catalogued over a thousand films in which Arabs were depicted through reductive, dehumanizing stereotypes, including terrorists, greedy oil magnates, and submissive women. Shaheen's work demonstrated how these persistent images helped entrench negative perceptions of Arabs in the American imagination. While his research remains foundational, subsequent scholars have noted that these stereotypes have not simply endured but evolved, especially in the complex political climate following 9/11 (Askar and Afsari, 2024).

The attacks of September 11, 2001, marked a significant shift in how Muslims and Arabs were portrayed onscreen. As Alsultany (2012) observes, although overtly hostile depictions continued, Hollywood also introduced a new mode of representation she terms "simplified complex representations." These portrayals gave the appearance of nuance, yet Muslim characters remained largely trapped within narratives of terrorism, victimization, or assimilation. Characters were often depicted as "good Muslims" who renounced their heritage or aided Western interests, set in contrast to "bad Muslims" who embodied extremism - a dichotomy described by Maira (2016) as the "good Muslim/bad Muslim" binary. Despite an appearance of balance, these frameworks served to reinforce the underlying idea that Muslim identity itself was suspect unless domesticated within a Western frame of reference.

In spite of the growing attention to diversity in Hollywood, stereotypical portrayals of Arabs and Muslims continue to dominate popular cinema. A study by Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper (2021) from the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative found that Muslim characters occupied less than 2% of speaking roles across more than 1,200 films examined, and when they did appear, they were frequently associated with violence, oppression, or religious extremism. As Alsultany (2018) further argues, such portrayals contribute to a pervasive "crisis narrative," where the presence of a Muslim character signals conflict, danger, or cultural dysfunction. In this way, Muslims are often positioned as perpetual outsiders, whose very identity is marked by suspicion within the broader American context.

The persistence of these harmful depictions is closely tied to broader political and economic structures that shape Hollywood storytelling. Shaheen (2008) argues that the consistent use of Arab and Muslim villains not only satisfies longstanding audience expectations but also dovetails with American foreign policy goals, making military interventions in the Middle East more palatable by dehumanizing those affected. More recent interventions, such as Khalid's (2021) analysis, suggest that these portrayals are symptomatic of deeper colonial logics, in which the "East" continues to be imagined as backward, dangerous, and in need of Western domination or correction. Media, in this sense, does not simply reflect existing attitudes but actively participates in the reproduction of imperialist frameworks.

At the same time, recent years have seen emerging efforts to counter these narratives. Independent projects led by Muslim-American creators, such as the television shows *Ramy* (2019) and *Mo* (2022), offer alternative perspectives that center the complexity, humor, and everyday experiences of Muslim communities. These shows resist the pressure to render Muslim identity legible only through the lens of terrorism or cultural conflict, instead presenting it as varied, personal, and rooted in real human experiences. While such works represent critical interventions, they remain exceptions in an industry still largely committed to familiar stereotypes (Alsultany, 2022).

Ultimately, the continued misrepresentation of Arabs and Muslims on screen is not simply a failure of imagination but reflects entrenched cultural and political biases that permeate American media production. As Bayoumi (2015) points out, the consequences of these portrayals extend beyond cinema, shaping public perceptions, informing policy decisions, and contributing to everyday acts of discrimination. Without meaningful structural changes, both in terms of who gets to tell stories and how those stories are told, the distortions of Arab and Muslim identities in Hollywood are likely to persist, with profound implications for social justice both within the United States and globally.

Hollywood's depictions of Arabs and Muslims contribute to the shaping of public attitudes, reinforcing xenophobic policies, perpetuating racial profiling, and fueling everyday discrimination against Muslim communities. These media representations do not merely reflect societal beliefs but actively shape them, reinforcing the social

construct of the Muslim as a foreign, dangerous Other. Without a fundamental shift in who controls the production of Hollywood narratives, and without a broader commitment to authentic, diverse storytelling, the misrepresentation of Arabs and Muslims in cinema will likely continue to contribute to the perpetuation of Islamophobia and anti-Arab sentiment across the globe.

Misrepresentation of Arabs and Muslims in *Trigger Warning (2024)* in Focus

In the opening scene of *Trigger Warning*, the narrative unfolds in the Syrian desert, where an aid truck marked "American Relief Organization" is ambushed by armed men wearing keffiyehs—a traditional Arab headdress. In *Trigger Warning*, the individuals attacking the American soldiers are labeled as "terrorists" in the subtitles. The U.S. soldiers, posing as humanitarian workers, respond with lethal force. This depiction reinforces a familiar Hollywood narrative that portrays Arabs as violent aggressors while simultaneously justifying American military actions in the Middle East (Shaheen, 2001).

Mouly Surya's Trigger Warning (2024) is a contemporary action-thriller that situates itself within the ideological landscape of post-9/11 America, where narratives of military heroism, domestic security, and cultural "others" continue to inform the cinematic treatment of violence and identity. At the core of the film is Parker (Jessica Alba), a Special Forces operative who returns to her rural hometown following her father's sudden death. What initially appears to be a personal loss gradually unfolds into a broader revelation of political corruption and the normalization of paramilitary violence.

Although the film does not foreground Muslim or Arab characters directly, its subtext reveals much about their symbolic presence—or absence—within the American cultural imagination. The depiction of domestic militias and anti-government rhetoric echoes real-world extremist narratives that often draw their ideological fuel from Islamophobic fears and the demonization of the "foreign threat." In this way, the film participates in and critiques the post-9/11 security ethos, wherein the figure of the Muslim or Arab is frequently constructed as a latent danger— whether explicitly represented or implicitly invoked through rhetoric and setting.

Parker's military background invites a critical reading of U.S. foreign interventionism and the ethical ambiguity of warfare waged under the banner of national security. The psychological toll of her service, juxtaposed with her confrontation of violence at home, reflects a recursive loop of militarization—where foreign and domestic "enemies" are imagined through similar lenses of suspicion and control. The narrative's choice to relocate conflict from the Middle East to the American heartland does not erase the influence of racialized security discourses; rather, it re-inscribes them in new forms.

Visually, Surya's direction favors stark contrasts and claustrophobic framing, emphasizing the tension between personal agency and systemic entrapment. Jessica Alba's portrayal of Parker—a Latina protagonist navigating traditionally masculine spaces—offers a counterpoint to the racial and religious hierarchies often encoded in the action genre. Her identity, though not Muslim or Arab, operates within a liminal cultural space that prompts questions about belonging, exclusion, and state violence.

Ultimately, Trigger Warning functions not only as an action vehicle but as a cultural artifact through which the persistence of Islamophobic tropes, even in their absence, may be critically interrogated. The film's refusal to name a traditional "other" does not dilute its commentary; instead, it reveals how deeply embedded such figures have become in the architecture of American action cinema.

Scholars have long observed that Hollywood frequently casts Arabs and Muslims as security threats, contributing to a broader discourse that dehumanizes these groups and legitimizes Western interventions abroad (Said, 1978; Alsultany, 2012). In the case of *Trigger Warning*, the film's release, shortly after real-world incidents where military operations were conducted under the guise of humanitarian missions, has only fueled further criticism and debate about its messaging.

Beyond the immediate political implications, the portrayal of Arab characters in the film lacks any meaningful complexity. Rather than being depicted as full individuals with their own perspectives and histories, they are flattened into anonymous villains. Such reductionist representations feed into a broader media culture steeped in Islamophobia and Orientalist thinking (Ahmed, 2018). By continuously casting Arabs and Muslims as adversaries, films like *Trigger Warning* reinforce damaging stereotypes that have tangible effects, including increased discrimination and violence against these communities (Shaheen, 2001; Alsultany, 2012).

The controversy sparked by *Trigger Warning* highlights the urgent need for more thoughtful and authentic portrayals of Arabs and Muslims in mainstream media. As audiences grow more critical of the cultural narratives presented to them, there is increasing pressure on filmmakers to move beyond simplistic stereotypes and tell stories that reflect the rich diversity and humanity of these communities (Molina-Guzmán, 2016).

Viewing Netflix's high-budget action film, *Trigger Warning*, with subtitles enabled, reveals the phrase "terrorist, in Arabic" during the opening sequence. The film's initial setting in the Middle East depicts violence against

Arabic-speaking individuals primarily as a narrative device to showcase the combat prowess of the protagonist, special agent Parker (Jessica Alba). Subsequently, the narrative shifts to the rural American town of Creation, aligning with genres reminiscent of *First Blood* and an underwhelming murder mystery. In this context, Parker employs her exceptional fighting skills to apprehend her father's murderer and dismantle an illegal arms trade operating from a nearby military depot. Notably, the plot bears little relation to the initial Middle Eastern conflict or geopolitical context.

The film's depiction of Arab characters as mere cannon fodder for violent spectacle is particularly surprising given director Mouly Surya's Indonesian background. Considering Indonesia's status as the world's most populous Muslim-majority nation, one might anticipate a more nuanced portrayal of Middle Eastern characters, perhaps questioning the stereotypical "reel bad Arab" trope, originally discussed by Jack Shaheen (Shaheen, 2001), which perpetuates negative stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims in Hollywood cinema. It is important to recognize that Indonesia is neither Arab nor Muslim exclusively, and that not all Arabs are Muslim; these distinctions are critical in deconstructing simplistic representations (Shaheen, 2001). Nonetheless, Surya's approach appears to reinforce the stereotype of Arabs as terrorists. For instance, the film features a jarring scene in which Parker reprimands a fellow soldier for killing captured Arab terrorists, arguing not from a concern for the Geneva Conventions but on the basis that dead terrorists cannot be interrogated, thus implying that torture of live prisoners remains a viable option. This scene exemplifies how *Trigger Warning* constructs its "hero" figure within a framework that normalizes violence and stereotypes (Shaheen, 2001).

Similar patterns are visible in Disney's live-action remake of *Aladdin* (2019). Although marketed as a celebration of Middle Eastern folklore, the film drew criticism for its cultural inconsistencies and the casting of predominantly non-Arab actors in Arab roles (Wikipedia, 2019). Furthermore, the production allegedly used brownface makeup for background characters to create an "authentic" desert aesthetic, a move that many commentators described as a tone-deaf perpetuation of ethnic stereotypes. The blending of various Middle Eastern and South Asian elements without cultural specificity also reflects a homogenized and exoticized view of the "East," rather than a respectful representation of Arab culture.

Among the most persistent and damaging trends within this system of representation is the stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims (Abdelhameed, 2025; Wahid, 2023; Alotaibi, 2024; Hamada, 2001). Rather than offering complex, heterogeneous, and humanized portrayals, filmmakers have routinely relied on reductive tropes that depict these communities as violent extremists, oil-rich oligarchs, or oppressed women - archetypes that not only reflect but also actively construct a dichotomous worldview separating the "civilized" West from the "barbaric" Other.

Genre-wise, in the realm of political satire too, *The Dictator* (2012) pushed boundaries with its depiction of a fictional Arab despot from the country of Wadiya. Although intended as comedy, the film relies heavily on crude stereotypes of Arabs as tyrannical, sexually deviant, and backward (Wikipedia, 2012). Sacha Baron Cohen's portrayal of General Aladeen merges several harmful clichés into a single caricature, inadvertently reinforcing the idea that Arab leadership is synonymous with cruelty and absurdity. While some defended the film as satire, others pointed out that, even under the guise of humor, such depictions contribute to real-world biases against Arab and Muslim communities.

In the same vein, *Gods of Egypt* (2016) also attracted widespread criticism for its casting decisions, which overwhelmingly favored white actors in a story set in ancient Africa. Although the film does not directly depict Arabs or Muslims, its erasure of Middle Eastern and North African identity continues a Hollywood pattern of sidelining Arab presence even in stories rooted in their own geography. This form of cultural exclusion reinforces stereotypes by denying Arabs and Muslims the opportunity to portray themselves authentically on the global screen. Clearly, the persistence of these stereotypes in mainstream cinema highlights the urgent need for more accurate and respectful portrayals. Films hold enormous power to shape public perception, and continuing to present Arabs and Muslims as villains, caricatures, or invisible figures does real damage, both socially and politically.

In recent years, Netflix's original action productions have been widely critiqued for their superficiality and lack of cultural sensitivity. Many of these blockbuster efforts, despite substantial budgets, fail to engage with meaningful discourses around race, politics, or representation (Johnson, 2022). From this perspective, viewers are unlikely to find sophisticated or compelling content beyond Jessica Alba's consistent mediocrity and a handful of action sequences that oscillate between gritty and polished, maintaining a superficial level of engagement. However, these sequences are undermined by a narrative and visual context that diminish their impact. Parker's rarely visible close-up combat sequences, coupled with antagonists lacking sufficient narrative presence, result in fight scenes that feel like inferior iterations of what could be more impactful moments in superior films. Consequently, each confrontation seems to represent the third or fourth best sequence in a more accomplished action film, leaving audiences yearning for higher-caliber spectacle that ultimately remains elusive.

As is the case with many other movies mentioned here, *Trigger Warning* also presents a politically ambiguous or potentially confusing stance. The film's creative team, a female Indonesian director, a female director of photography, and a woman of color in the lead role, may initially appear to challenge conservative narratives; however, the film's setting and symbolism evoke a conservative undertone. The depiction of corrupt local officials, the portrayal of Muslims as terrorists, and scenes in which Parker defends small businesses suggest underlying conservative themes. Additionally, the character of Senator Ezekiel Swann (Anthony Michael Hall), characterized as a Christian nationalist, introduces explicit political messaging that aligns with right-wing discourses. The narrative focus on systemic corruption within the police force and the depiction of a small-town environment further complicate interpretations of the film's political stance. While some may attribute these elements to Surya's outsider perspective on American politics, the screenwriters—John Brancato, Josh Olson, and Halley Gross, also bear responsibility for embedding these themes, whether intentionally or inadvertently.

Alternatively, the film's visual and thematic symbols, such as the military depot, police precinct, Hispanic minority community, and firearms, are laden with cultural and political connotations within American society. The deliberate or accidental employment of such imagery influences audience reception and interpretation. The film's title, *Trigger Warning*, exemplifies this ambiguity; the phrase may evoke aversion among conservative viewers wary of triggers associated with violence, while the emphasis on guns and violence risks alienating liberal audiences, who may interpret these symbols through a lens of critique. As such, the film ultimately functions as a mediating space where political and cultural signifiers intersect yet fails to coalesce into a coherent or compelling message. It is, therefore, a mediocre action film, characterized by forgettable characters and muddled political undertones—that offers little appeal to viewers across ideological divides.

The stereotyping of Arabs and Muslims in Hollywood continues to be a pressing concern, even in more recent productions. A clear example can be seen in *Trigger Warning* (2024), where the opening scene unfolds in the Syrian desert. Here, Arab men, identifiable by their traditional keffiyeh scarves, attack a humanitarian aid truck marked "American Relief Organization." These men are immediately labeled "terrorists" in the subtitles, while American soldiers, disguised as aid workers, quickly retaliate with deadly force (Middle East Eye, 2024). The scene not only reinforces the enduring stereotype of Arabs as violent aggressors but also subtly legitimizes military violence under the guise of humanitarian intervention. Critics argue that such depictions sustain the Orientalist tradition of portraying Arab lands as inherently chaotic and dangerous, a motif that has long served Western political agendas.

Conclusion

The representation of Arabs and Muslims in Hollywood cinema has been profoundly shaped by a legacy of geopolitical tensions, cultural essentialism, and persistent Orientalist frameworks. Despite growing critical discourse around issues of stereotyping and media responsibility, mainstream film narratives continue to rely heavily on reductive and monolithic portrayals of these communities. While recent interventions by independent filmmakers and progressive media platforms have led to a modest emergence of more multidimensional and humanized Arab and Muslim characters, such efforts remain marginal within the broader industrial apparatus of Hollywood (Alsultany, 2012; Shaheen, 2001).

Achieving meaningful change requires more than simply increasing the visibility of Arab and Muslim characters; it necessitates a structural transformation of the cultural production process itself. This involves reconfiguring authorship, gatekeeping practices, and narrative authority to ensure that authentic voices from historically marginalized communities are not merely included, but are empowered to tell their own stories on their own terms (Molina-Guzmán, 2016; Ahmed, 2018). Without such systemic shifts, Hollywood will continue to reproduce epistemic violence, misrepresentations that not only distort public understanding but also contribute to the maintenance of Islamophobia and racialized social hierarchies beyond the cinematic sphere.

The ongoing misrepresentation of Arabs and Muslims in American film is not simply a matter of aesthetic failure but a manifestation of deeper ideological structures within Western cultural industries. Addressing this issue demands a critical engagement with media literacy, anti-racist praxis, and decolonial approaches to storytelling. Until Hollywood fully commits to dismantling entrenched power dynamics and fostering truly equitable representational practices, the harms inflicted by stereotypical portrayals will persist, both on and off the screen.

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