

PEOPLE'S DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF ALGERIA
Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research
University of Tlemcen



Faculty of Letters and Languages
Department of English

Aspects of Orientalism in Disney's *Aladdin* Movie (2019)

Dissertation submitted to the department of English as a partial fulfilment
of the requirements for Master's degree in Literature and Civilisation.

Presented by

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Academic Year 2024 - 2025

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Dedication

Praise is to ALLAH, the Most Gracious and the Most Merciful.

I dedicate this humble work to my late father, may Allah have mercy on his soul,

My mom for always having my back,

My brother Merwan for always pushing me,

To ma Nabia and ba Houcine for being the grandparents I never had,

To tonton Krimo for being there!

To all my friends, especially Ahlem for showing me what true friendship is.

Last but not least ,to my dear first year primary school teacher, Mrs MCHERNEN

Zoubida who saved my learning journey throughout primary school.

Acknowledgements

My deepest thanks to my wonderful supervisor Dr. Souad BAGHLI BERBAR for her immense help all throughout my research and writing process. I have no doubt this would have been impossible without her continuous support. Thank you for your kindness, time and efforts. You have made my heavy research journey easier than I would have ever expect.

I would like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Prof. Wassila HAMZA REGUIG MOURO and Dr Omar RAHMOUN, first for being my teachers not just in class but also in life. I feel humbled and grateful for never making me feel like I was a simple student and they were the teacher, not to mention their efforts in reading and examining my work.

I would also like to thank Prof. Faiza SENOUCI for having constantly lectured me on having confidence in my own writing and that what I had to write was important if not to other people, simply to myself, thank you professor.

Additionally, I would like to extend my thanks to every professor that taught me throughout this Master's program. These two years have been the most academically fulfilling time of my life, and are what allowed me to be able to undertake this dissertation.

Abstract

Westerners through their multiple voyages to the Middle Eastern and North African areas, and especially since the Elizabethan era, have incessantly drawn the image of the Eastern world as an uncivilized land, full of primitiveness and backwardness. Through manipulating orientalist discourse and depicting the Eastern world as a timeless desert in which only exotic, mystical and mysterious things occur, westerners encouraged and reinforced the necessity of their intervention, thus expansion, in order to help the East and give it a push forward towards modernity. This research deals with the analysis of the Disney movie adaptation *Aladdin* (2019) through postcolonial lens to reveal its Orientalist features and examine Hollywood's attempt at giving an appropriate recognition for the Middle Eastern, and non-westerner voices in general, a chance to better alternate the world's vision on them, in the case of the remake of "Aladdin" tale. Nonetheless, that was not enough of a successful mission to entirely wipe out the orientalist touch off the movie. In the course of this study, the collection of tales of *One Thousand and One Nights*, and the remake of the *Aladdin* movie are a baseline to showcase how Orientalist westerners are still rummaging around the same areas that portray the Eastern world as still simple and unsophisticated. Moreover, whether in film adaptations or written texts, the image of the "other" is more than often present in illustration of the Orient as characteristically the exotic and inferior place. Supported by the RIZ test and cultural film theory, this research provides an understanding of how the orientalist view of the East still persists till modern days movies about the Orient, deluding with it all what is considered as Eastern civilization.

Key words: *Aladdin* (2019); Orientalism, Postcolonialism; The Orient; Film theory and adaptation; *Arabian Nights*.

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General Introduction



Disney's *Aladdin* movie (2019) came during a critical phase in Hollywood's engagement of presenting itself as a progressive reimagining of both its 1992 animated predecessor and the *Arabian Nights* tradition. Ensuring authenticity through a diverse cast and a stronger role for women, the film is made to respond to decades of academic critiques of Orientalist trends in Western media. However, this memoir argues that beneath its glamorous surface of universalism, this new version remains captive to the same colonial frameworks exposed by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) showing how commercial cinema perpetuates the imaginary geography of the Orient as a timeless and irrational space. Through a dialectical analysis of the history of the troubled reception of *One Thousand and One Nights* and cinematic tools of Disney, this study examines how *Aladdin* reproduces Orientalism through certain interconnected mechanisms.

By applying Said's Orientalist discourse analysis with Laura Mulvey's visual theory and the intersectional RIZ Test, this work examines Disney's remake as a work that gestures toward progress overshadowed by deeper layers of colonial ideology. By tracing how Antoine Galland's 18th century *Arabian Nights* translations first codified these tropes later amplified by Burton's eroticized Victorian editions, the dissertation contextualizes *Aladdin* within a 300 years tradition of Orientalist cultural production. This research work questions whether commercial cinema is truly capable of decolonizing the gaze or just gild its chains.

For this reason, three main research questions are put forward to formulate the centre of this undertaking:


- 1- How have *The Arabian Nights* tales been used to represent the Orient?
- 2- What are the Orientalist aspects of the Disney movie *Aladdin* (2019)?
- 3- To what extent does *Aladdin* deconstruct conventional stereotypes?

The following hypotheses are aimed at answering these questions using the previously mentioned methodology:

- 1- *The Arabian Nights* has historically been used by Orientalists to construct a romanticized and exotic image of the Orient that reinforces colonial beliefs of cultural otherness.
- 2- Disney's *Aladdin* (2019) adaptation maintains Orientalist elements through its visual aesthetics, character representations, and setting, despite attempts at cultural sensitivity and modernization.
- 3- Although the 2019 *Aladdin* tried to include progressive character development and does challenge certain gender and ethnic stereotypes, it still fails to fully deconstruct Orientalist images rooted in its making.

To answer these research questions and verify their hypotheses, the dissertation is divided into two chapters. The first one presents how Westerners constructed the Orient through literature, art, and scholarship, rooted in colonial dominance, by redefining Edward Said's Orientalism and the stereotypes of the "mystical East". It introduces film studies and cinematographic techniques in addition to the Riz Test (2018) to evaluate persistent stereotypes of Muslims in media and Cultural film theory which examines how such power dynamics are cinematically encoded, interrogating the role of Orientalism in deconstructing Eurocentric hegemony. These frameworks will guide the analysis of *Aladdin* (2019) in the next chapter.

The second chapter examines the trajectory of *One Thousand and One Nights* from its multicultural origins to its distortion by Orientalist translations, examining how these legacies manifest in Disney's *Aladdin* (2019). The analysis interrogates whether Disney's commercial priorities reinforce or ruin Orientalist stereotypes, studying Hollywood's struggle to get over the colonial gaze embedded in adaptations of the *Nights* as the movie embodies the tension between postcolonial critique and commercial Orientalism, reflecting broader challenges facing the industry in decolonizing narratives.



Chapter One:

Theoretical Foundations

of Orientalism and Film

Studies

1.1. Introduction

This chapter conveys the theoretical frameworks needed to analyse cultural representations and influence in media, focusing on Orientalism, literary and cinematic traditions, and critical tools to evaluate racial and cultural narratives. The first objective is to make a comprehensive foundation to understand how Western discourses have constructed throughout literature and history the "Orient" as a homogenized, exotic, and inferior counterpart to the "Occident." By using key works by Edward Said, postcolonial scholars, and film theorists, this chapter highlights the evolution of Orientalist thoughts, with colonial mind-set, and its long-term influence on global media. Additionally, it introduces the RIZ Test method and cultural film theory, that offer systematic approaches to examine representation storytelling in movies. While the next chapter will apply these theories to *Aladdin* movie (2019), this one will be conceptual, emphasizing definitions and historical context.

1.2. Orientalism

Orientalism is a vision of the Orient that started in Elizabethan times until the 21st century, focusing on literature, art, history, culture and religion. Orientalism is a description of Asia, the Middle East and North Africa by the lenses of western orientalists. The history of orientalism witnessed many orientalists that use poetry, plays, travel books and captivity narratives such as the famous Elizabethan plays *The Tempest*, *Titus Andronicus*, *Othello* by William Shakespeare, Thomas Shaw's *Travels and Observations*, Lady Montague's *Turkish Letters* and Royal Tyler's *The Algerine Captive or the Life and Adventures of Doctor Updike Underhill*, T.E Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* and even travel fiction such as Paul Bowles' *The Sheltering Sky*.

1.2.1. Definitions of Orientalism

Orientalism is a mixture of concepts that appeared during the European colonial expansion to describe the Western hegemony over the East on all fronts - artistically, intellectually, and politically. It is also defined including the production of knowledge and stereotypes that reduce diverse Asian, Middle Eastern, and North African cultures

to one block "Other" (MacPhie, 2002). Lisa Lowe argues in *Critical Terrains* (1991) that the Othering process is performative, not only descriptive, insisting on the superiority of the west by shaping Eastern societies as unintellectual and in need to be civilized by westerners.

According to the *Cambridge Dictionary*, orientalism is a mixture of Western ideas about the Middle East and East and Southeast Asia, which are too simple or not accurate about these societies being mysterious, never changing, or not able to develop in a modern way without Western help.

Orientalism became a popular term academically in the 19th century in institutions like the Royal Asiatic Society, that uses Orientalist scholarship as a tool for imperial governance (Said, 1978). However, Orientalism also spread in popular culture, in literature, cinema and art where the "Orient" became a landscape, sensual, exotic, mysterious and with dictatorial rulers (Nochlin, 1983). This academic and imaginative combination was used as justification for colonialism by satisfying Western audiences' admiration with the unfamiliar things.

John Mackenzie (1995) has criticized the consistency of Said's Orientalism calling him to have more precise view that acknowledges variations across European nations and time periods. Nevertheless, postcolonial orientalism focuses on imbalance of power through representation.

1.2.2. Orientalism According to Edward Said

Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) made a revolution in postcolonial studies by providing a new definition of the term as a systemic "discourse" that constructs the East through the dominant lenses of the west. For Said, Orientalism is not an objective or innocent study of Eastern cultures but is a "style of thought" and a colonial mind-set that allows and justifies the imperial control by reshaping the Orient as Europe's perspective: emotional, stagnant, chaotic rather than rational, progressive and ordered (p. 2).

Said used Michel Foucault's theories of power-knowledge to argue and prove that Orientalist scholarship, literature, and art are part of colonial goals. The 19th-century European paintings of harems and bazaars, while documenting Eastern life, reinforced the idea of the east as a place of fantasies and sexual decadence and moral

decay (Nochlin, 1983). Similarly, literary works like Gustave Flaubert's *Salammbô* exoticized North Africa as a space of barbaric splendour, justifying and normalizing France's civilizing mission in Algeria (Mitchell, 1988). Critics of Said, such as Robert Irwin (2006), claim that his analysis overlooks genuine scholarly contributions by Orientalists and simplifies East-West interactions. Others, like Aijaz Ahmad (1992), argue that Said's focus on European texts neglects the agency of colonized peoples. Regardless of these critiques, Orientalism remains a cornerstone for analysing how media and art helped colonialism for Edward Said critiqued Orientalism as a symbol of European ideological dominance through a series of stereotypes.

1.2.3. Orientalist Stereotypes

The Western attitude towards the Oriental other reinforced key Orientalist stereotypes starting with exoticism then despotism and hyper sexuality, establishing a framework through which the East was constructed as mystical, authoritarian, and morally ambiguous.

1.2.3.1. The Exotic and Mystical East

In the 18th and 19th centuries, European artists, writers, and scholars focused on transforming the cities of the Middle East and Asia into symbols of exotic fantasy landscape. By highlighting settings like deserts, bazaars, and palaces common in the East, they created an image of the Orient as a timeless place, full of mystery and moral decay. These depictions were not innocent but made to reinforce the idea of an irrational East, chaotic, and in need of European control.

The desert is frequently portrayed as vast, empty spaces by Orientalist art and literature that has never been or will be progressive. Paintings like Eugène Delacroix's *Arab Horseman Attacked by a Lion* (1849) showed deserts as wild, dangerous lands. This image ignored the reality of desert cultures such as the Bedouin tribes who had special complex social systems and trade networks. Instead, deserts became metaphors for the barrenness of Eastern civilizations, treated as if they did not contribute anything to human advancement (Said, 1978).

Moreover, the oriental bazaar was, in reality, a centre of craftsmanship, global trade, and cultural exchange. However, Orientalist obsession of the bazaars made

European paintings and travel writings show it as a crowded, chaotic place full of thieves, haggling merchants, and veiled women. Jean-Léon Gérôme's *The Snake Charmer* (1879), for example, shows a market where a young boy charms a snake. These scenes implied that Eastern economies were corrupt and disorganized, unlike Europe's organized capitalist systems (MacKenzie, 1995).

The history of innovation in Eastern regions was erased by Orientalists by framing Eastern settings as timeless, for example, 19th-century European paintings of Cairo or Istanbul rarely showed modern factories or schools, even if in reality these cities were rapidly industrializing. Artists like David Roberts painted ancient mosques, making it seem like the Islamic world had been stagnant for centuries (Nochlin, 1983). This false timelessness helped Europeans to convince the world that they were bringing progress to societies they viewed as backward.

Deserts, bazaars, and palaces were not considered just as settings, they became tools to show Eastern societies as unhuman and stereotyped, whereas some scholars and artists challenge these stereotypes to show the real diversity and dynamism of the cultures that inspired these stories by highlighting how Arab cities like Baghdad were centers of science and culture during the Islamic Golden Age. Writers like Orhan Pamuk (*My Name is Red*) show bazaars as a place of intellectual debate and creativity. Photographers document modern Middle Eastern cities as a proof against the legend of a timeless Orient (Behdad, 2013).

Orientalist depictions of palaces, such as the ones in the Oriental tales, seem extremely luxurious and full of hidden vice. Stories of sultans laying on silk cushions or harems filled with enslaved women created an idea that Eastern rulers were lazy and morally corrupt. Travellers' accounts added erotic details to the palace life, showing an image that Arab leaders were obsessed with pleasure, not governance (Kabbani, 1986). These tropes justified colonialism by framing local leaders as incapable to rule their own people.

1.2.3.2. Sensuality and Despotism

European Orientalist literature and art reduced the role and the value of Eastern characters to create a harmful stereotype. Two common metaphors of sensuality and despotism created Oriental figures as morally corrupt like tyrannical sultans or

hypersexualized such as seductive belly dancers and houris. These depictions reinforced racist ideas that Eastern societies were either dangerous, backward or decadent, justifying colonial control as a way to fix or civilize them.

The use of sorcerers, sultans, and thieves as evil figures by Orientalist stories often frame Eastern men as untrustworthy or tyrannical. Characters like the evil magician in “Aladdin” added by European translators frame the stereotype of the tricky Oriental. These characters use magic to manipulate others, showing Eastern spirituality as dangerous and fraudulent (Irwin, 2004). King Shahryar, who executes his wives out of paranoia, was translated by westerners using exaggeration in describing him as a cruel king, framing Muslim rulers as despotic, unlike Europe’s enlightened kings (Said, 1978). Stories as “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves” added by European writers pictured Arab societies as lawless, ignoring the original stories’ focus on justice and smartness (Haddawy, 1990).

Eastern women were presented as objects of erotic desire in Orientalist art and literature such as belly dancers, Houris, and harems. Harems was considered as spaces of endless sexual immersion according to European artists, ignoring their historical role as private family places. Paintings like Delacroix’s *Women of Algiers* (1834) framed Muslim women as victims or temptresses (Yeazell, 2000). These depictions dehumanized Eastern women, that they were made for European male consumption and pleasure rather than independence.

Said mentioned that Hollywood movies such as *The Sheik* (1921) and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), exposed Arab deserts as a place of sensual adventure, also positioned Western heroes as saviours of a chaotic Arab world. This kind of narratives are not innocent or neutral amusement but an imaginative geography that reinforces colonial power plan by mixing different cultures from MENA and Asia as one place named the Orient (Said 1978, p. 55)

1.2.3.3. Strangeness and Fantasy

In Romantic Orientalist literature, literary works were full of stereotypes related to the supernatural, magic and mystery, reinforcing the image of the Orient as alien and otherworldly such as William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786), which framed Eastern rulers as corrupt seekers of unnatural power and the Orient as a place of esoteric danger,

making a stereotype of Satanic Pacts and the east as a realm of dark magic. As an example, The Caliph Vathek seeks forbidden knowledge and makes a Faustian deal with demonic forces, leading him into an underground world of fire and damnation. (Hawley, 2002, p. 131-148).

Lord Byron's "*The Giaour*" (1813), shaped the Eastern characters and settings as doomed, mysterious, and entangled with supernatural revenge; also morally ambiguous, magical, and fatalistic. For example, The Giaour is cursed after killing Leila's captor and is implied to become a vampire, a figure often associated with Eastern European folklore in addition to the Eastern figures of Monkir and ghouls. This is a stereotype of Eastern landscapes filled with curses, vampires, and supernatural vengeance (Leask, 1997, p16-25).

Thomas Moore in *Lalla Rookh* (1817) made the stereotype of mystical lands filled with prophecy, paradise-like imagery, and otherworldly beauty. The poems described enchanted Eastern cities, magical disguises, and spiritual transformations, disconnected from rational modernity, and suitable only for fantasy (Leask, p.111-130).

In James Ridley's *The Tales of the Genii* (1764), Genies give wishes or punishments in moral tales set in an imagined Middle East as a stereotype of Easterners governed by magical forces and irrational fate, that reinforces the idea that Eastern societies lack reason and are dominated by magical thinking (Ballaster, Ros p211-229)

These stereotypes have crossed media and moved from print tales to movies. Film studies and Cultural Film Theory provide methodologies to dissect how such Orientalist tropes are cinematically encoded.

1.3. Film Studies

Film study is a multidisciplinary academic discipline, which investigates the aesthetics, theory, history, and cultural influence of motion pictures. According to Robert Stam's observation in *Film Theory: An Introduction*, the study of films considers them "as complex cultural artefacts that are both shaped by and reflective of societal ideologies, technological advancements, and artistic innovation" (2000, p.4). To understand how movies convey meaning and sway viewers involves examining narrative structures, cinematic techniques, and the interaction of visual and aural components. According to

Richard Barsam and Dave Monahan, film studies are “the exploration of film as both an art form and a medium of communication, focusing on its aesthetic, cultural, and industrial dimensions” (2019, p.11). These definitions highlight the discipline’s diversity by fusing viewpoints from art, history, sociology, and technology.

Film is a medium of visual storytelling that combines moving images, sound, and narrative to convey ideas and emotions. While film itself is not a genre, it includes different genres such as drama, comedy, horror. Genres provide audiences with expectations about characters, narrative structure, settings, sounds and music and visual aesthetics and Cinematographic Techniques (Bordwell & Thompson, 2020, p. 98).

1.3.1. Characters / Actors

The characters act as the emotional anchors of the film, driving the narrative forward through their goals, struggles, and transformation. Joseph Campbell’s monomyth, or the Hero’s Journey, identifies archetypal figures like the Hero, Mentor, and Threshold Guardian that resonate across cultures, offering audiences familiar yet adaptable frameworks for connection and meaning (Campbell, 2008, p.23–35). These archetypes are linked with structured character development, which often follows a three-act dramatic arc: the setup establishes motivations and stakes, the confrontation escalates challenges and inner growth, and the resolution delivers transformation or closure, ensuring characters evolve dynamically while anchoring the audience’s emotional investment (Field 9–12). These elements create narratives that balance between universal relatability and individualized depth.

1.3.2. Narrative Structure

Narrative structure organizes the plot’s progression, shaping how a story unfolds in time and perspective. There are foundational theories and frameworks that reveal key information and build emotional or thematic resonance. The three-act structure, popularized by screenwriting theorist Syd Field (2005), divides narratives into phases: Act 1 (Setup) introduces characters, settings, and the protagonist’s initial conflict, as seen in *The Godfather* when Michael Corleone resists joining the mafia (Field, p 9-12). Act 2 (Confrontation) escalates tension through obstacles, such as the prolonged shark hunt in *Jaws* (Bordwell and Thompson p89). Act 3 (Resolution) resolves the central conflict, exemplified by *Casablanca*’s climactic farewell (McKeep 214).

Chapter One: Theoretical Foundations of Orientalism and Film Studies

In contrast, non-linear narratives disrupt chronology to emphasize themes or psychology, with David Bordwell (2006) noting that fragmented timelines “invite audiences to actively reconstruct causality” (p74) while episodic films such as *Slacker* reflect life’s unpredictability through vignettes (Thompson p133).

1.3.2. Settings

The term setting refers to the time, place, and social context of a story that shape's mood and themes. *Mise-en-Scène* is French term that means placing on stage that refers to the arrangement of visual elements in a frame, including costumes, lighting, and set design, that reinforces thematic subtext (Bordwell, Thompson 2020 p. 112). Concerning the symbolic setting, it is represented as a dystopian cityscape which reflects societal decay, while isolated locations such as the *Shining* amplify psychological tension (Gibbs 2002 p. 67).

1.3.3. Visual Aesthetics

Visual effects reinforce storytelling by constructing scenes that are difficult or impossible to achieve in reality or impractical to film physically, blending digital techniques in order to immerse the audiences in cinematic worlds. Practical effects, such as miniatures and animatronics, ground fantastical elements in tangible realism, fostering a visceral connection to the narrative (Rickitt, 2000, p22). Digital effects such as CGI (computer-generated imagery), enable the creation of expansive environments and combine live-action footage with animated elements, enlarging the boundaries of visual storytelling (Prince, 2012, p104). By combining these approaches, filmmakers balance authenticity with imagination.

1.3.5. Sound and Music:

Diegetic sound is like dialogue, footsteps exist within the story world but non-diegetic sound is like score, voiceover exists outside it (Chion,1994, p73). Additionally, soundscapes are layered effects such as ambience that creates realism or surrealism. Walter Murch likens sound editing to painting with sound (Murch, 2001, p. 18).

1.3.6. Cinematographic Techniques:

Cinematography transforms the script into visual language via camera work, lighting, and composition. First, Shot Types such as close-ups emphasize emotion, while wide shots establish scale or scope (Brown, 2016, p. 45). Secondly, camera movement in tracking shots dynamically follow action, while static shots evoke stillness or tension (Mascelli, 1965, p. 78) Finally, high-key lighting creates optimism and low-key lighting evokes mystery or danger (Bordwell & Thompson, 2020, p. 130). These techniques are also used to reflect the culture and context of the film.

1.4 Cultural Film Theory:

Mark Emmons and Audra Bellmore mentioned in *A Critical List of Books* (2013) that “Cultural film theory focuses on how films reflect the culture in which they are made with a goal of understanding how meaning is constructed in a society’s social, historical, political, economic, and religious context” (p.01). It examines cinema as a reflection of societal values and a tool for ideological reproduction. This field interrogates how films normalize hierarchies of race, gender, and class.

1.3.4. Key Theorists

The field of cultural film theory has been defined by a number of scholars of cinematography to highlight key elements in analysing films based on culture.

1.3.4.1. Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding Model (1980)

Hall argued that media texts are encoded with ideologies by producers and decoded by audiences in different ways, depending on their backgrounds and cultural contexts (p. 128 p.138). This framework shows cinema’s role and effect in naturalizing power structures, such as Orientalist narratives.

1.3.4.2. Laura Mulvey’s Gaze Theory (1975)

Mulvey’s concept of the “male gaze” highlighted how classical Hollywood cinema shows women as an object for heterosexual male pleasure (p11). This idea has been

expanded to analyse the colonial gaze, where other cultures that do not belong to western culture are framed as exotic spectacles for Western consumption.

1.3.4.3. Postcolonial Film Theory

Postcolonialism is a critical academic framework that examines the legacies of colonialism and imperialism in terms of culture, politics, social, and psychology. Edward Said clarifies that colonial power structures produced and continue to reinforce the Euro-centric idea in narratives that framed any non-Western cultures as inferior and exotic (p.2, 3, 21, 28). Themes like resistance in central postcolonial critique are exemplified by Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity in "the blending of cultural practices" and mimicry in "subversive imitation of colonial authority in *The Location of Culture*" (p.121, 31). Also, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak challenges the exclusion of oppressed groups, particularly colonized women, from dominant historical and cultural discourses via interrogation of silenced "subaltern voices" in "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" (p.271). these scholars work to advocate for decolonial modes of representation and deconstruct colonial hierarchies.

By analysing representations of race, gender, and power, in depictions of colonized peoples and cultures, postcolonial film theory interrogates how cinema reflects and reinforces colonial ideologies. This framework is the concept of Othering, defined by Shohat and Stam in their book *Unthinking Eurocentrism* as cinematic depictions that alienate or dehumanize non-Western societies, like Hollywood's perpetuation of "savage, brutal" stereotypes (p1-34, p178-220). Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture* theorized the term hybridity describing films that blend colonial and indigenous aesthetics or narratives to destabilize notions of cultural purity and presenting subversive alternatives to Eurocentric hegemony (p.121-31). Finally, Subaltern agency, a concept rooted in Gayatri Spivak's critique of silenced marginalized voices in her book "*Can the Subaltern Speak?*" (p271), highlights works that center colonized perspectives, reclaiming history and identity from colonial hegemony. These concepts dismantle oppressive visual regimes and advocate for decolonized cinematic representation.

1.3.5. The RIZ Test

Cultural film studies provide critical tools to detect and analyse how cinema encodes cultural ideologies. One of these is a contemporary evaluation called the Riz Test. “Taking inspiration from Riz Ahmed's 2017 speech in the House of Commons on diversity on screen, the Riz Test is five criteria to measure how Muslims are portrayed on Film and TV” (Riztest.com 2018).

The Test: If the film stars at least one character that is identifiably Muslim (by ethnicity, language or clothing) - is the character...

1. Talking about, the victim of, or the perpetrator of terrorism?
2. Presented as irrationally angry?
3. Presented as superstitious, culturally backwards or anti-modern?
4. Presented as a threat to a Western way of life?
5. If the character is male, is he presented as misogynistic? or if female, is she presented as oppressed by her male counterparts?

If the answer for any of the above is Yes, then the Film/ TV Show fails the test (Riztest.com 2018).

The Riz Test offers a structured approach to evaluate racial representation (Smith & Erigha, 2015). The test's criteria focus on racial integration and intersectionality, examining whether the characters embody layered identities (race, gender, class) beyond stereotypes and if the film under study contextualizes racial dynamics within broader systemic inequities.

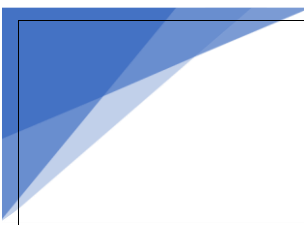
Media texts are sites of ideological struggle. By applying the Riz Test that works with broader movements in critical race theory, scholars can interrogate how films reinforce or ruin dominant power structures.

1.4. Conclusion

This chapter dealt with the key theories and tools needed to study how different cultures are shown in movies and media by westerners. Orientalism was criticized by Edward Said as a way of thinking that shaped how Europe and America view the Orient like the

Chapter One: Theoretical Foundations of Orientalism and Film Studies

Middle East and Asia as exotic, strange, and uncivilized, sensual and erotic as well as mysterious and fantastic; these ideas were used to justify and normalize control over other parts of the world. They found their way into the cinema, where Cultural Film theory and its critical tools and test help to investigate how visual narratives reflect social and ideological perceptions of the other. These frameworks will be applied in the next chapter to analyse Orientalist aspects in the 2019 movie *Aladdin* drawn from the *Arabian Nights*.



Chapter Two:
Orientalism in *Aladdin*
(2019)

2.1. Introduction:

Starting from the long journey that the *Arabian Nights* had from its multicultural origins to its distortion through Orientalist translations, this chapter examines how these legacies are reflected in Disney's *Aladdin* movie (2019). Applying Edward Said's critique and the Riz Test to examine whether Disney's commercial priorities are reinforcing the stereotypes of the orient or erasing it, this chapter discusses how the film embodies Hollywood's struggle to overcome the colonial gaze embedded in adaptations of the Nights.

2.2. *The Arabian Nights*

One Thousand and One Nights known as *Arabian Nights*, is a collection of North African, Middle Eastern and South Asian folktales, fables, and examples gathered over centuries, starting during the Islamic Golden Age (8th-13th centuries CE). The stories originated from different oral traditions across Persia, India, Mesopotamia, and the Arab world, later added in Arabic manuscripts such as the 14th-century Syrian recension and the expansive Egyptian editions (Mahdi, 1994, Marzolph, 2004). The frame narrative of Scheherazade "the queen" that saved herself from execution by telling stories, reflects the performative nature of oral storytelling and the power of narrative as survival (Gerhardt, 1963).

2.2.1. European Translations

The Nights became popular in Europe through Antoine Galland's "Les Mille et Une Nuits", a French translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* (1704–1717), which featured tales such as "Aladdin" and "Ali Baba" to suit to European audiences' thirsts for the exotic (Seale, 2019). These stories were absent from early Arabic manuscripts. Galland used the Syrian storyteller Hanna Diyab as a source for these stories, adding them to his canon (Haddawi, 1990; Sell, 2019). Galland's adaptations, which focused on European Enlightenment sensibilities, emphasized moral clarity and rationality that mitigated the ambiguity and eroticism of the original texts (Irwin, 2004). His version

became a model for later translations and shaped Western perceptions of the “Orient” as a place of eroticism and despotism.

Later translators, such as Richard Burton (1885–1888), amplified the Orientalist metaphors, combining his version with ethnographic footnotes and sensational prose that catered to the Victorian fascination with the exotic Orient (Kabbani, 1986). These interpretations highlighted and reinforced stereotypes of Arab-Islamic societies as irrational, emphasizing the Enlightenment in European self-image as progressive (Makdisi, 2002). Richard Burton’s 19th-century English translation focused on eroticism, sculpting Arab cultures as hypersexualized (Kabbani, 1986). This Orientalist reinterpretation erased the origins of the tales’ cultural diversity, reducing them to a homogenized identity that served Western fantasies (Marzolph, 2004).

Burton’s translation deepened this Orientalist reshaping. His analysis and footnote shaped Arab-Islamic societies as sensual and irrational, while his eroticized portrayal of figures like Scheherazade eroticized Eastern women as both seductive and submissive (Kabbani, 1986). Such interpretations prepared the readers of the idea that the Orient lacked the intellectual capacity to govern itself, to justify colonial domination (Makdisi, 2002). *The Nights’* magical elements, detached from their original narrative, function as an image of the chaos and backwardness of Eastern societies, in contrast to Europeans that proclaimed themselves as enlightened.

The linguist and colonial explorer Burton translates it with exaggerated sexual descriptions, and a curious tone that framed Arab societies as immoral. For instance, in “*The Porter and the Three Ladies*”, Burton expanded the party scenes into erotic depictions of sexual indulgence, while the role of women and the moral solutions of the story are minimized (Kabbani, 1986). Equally, his treatment of King Shahryar as women-hater and Scheherazade was sensationalized to sculpt the king as a symbol of Oriental despotism, reinforcing the stereotype of the nature of Muslims as tyrannical and hypersexual (Makdisi, 2002). His footnotes claimed anthropological authority and contrasted eroticism with pseudo-scientific judgments such as his assertion that Arab culture was drawn in sensuality (Burton, 1885). His portrayal of Shahryar’s brutality

that depicted Muslim rulers as incapable to rule their own people resulted in legitimizing European intervention (Ahmed, 1992).

The Arabian Nights became a treasure for Orientalist imagination, inspiring writers and artists to shape an image of the East as a realm of magic, sensuality, and despotism. The fantastical magnificent elements of *One Thousand and One Nights* such as genies, flying carpets, enchanted lamps, and magicians fuelled the main European imagination of the “Orient” as a place of illogical wonders and timeless place. While these motifs existed in pre-Islamic Arabian folklore and Persian legend, their prominence in European translations of the *Nights* was exaggerated to match with Orientalist trends that framed the East as a counterpoint to Western modernity (Marzolph, 2004).

Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) criticized this European self-centric lens, arguing that such depictions constituted a style of thinking that infantilized Eastern cultures, reducing them to stagnant realms of fantasy. The *Nights*’ magical metaphors, detached from their original cultural and moral contexts, became tools to reinforce the West’s self-image as advanced. For example, the jinns in Arabic tradition are a complex figure from the Islamic roots and pre-Islamic spiritualism, often symbolizing moral tests or divine punishment (El-Zein, 2009). However, European retellings flattened the jinn into wish-granting creature, reflecting a colonialist view of Eastern spirituality as primitive (Haddawy, 1990). Similarly, the flying carpet, a motif absent from early Arabic manuscripts, was romanticized as a symbol of Oriental escapism, which leads to the separation of stories from their historical social (Mahdi, 1994).

2.2.2. Cultural Homogenization and Colonial Justification

The Arabian Nights is a collection of stories that came from many different places and cultures over hundreds of years. Its tales were first told in India, Persia, Mesopotamia (Iraq), and the Arab world, mixing together folktales and lessons from these regions (Marzolph, 2004). However, European translators like Antoine Galland and Richard Burton ignored the historical diversity of all tales and they showed *The Arabian Nights* as if it came from one mysterious exotic place they called the “Orient.” This made

Western audiences think that the Middle East, India, and Persia as a one land of magic and deserts, rather than different countries each with its own history and culture (Macfie, 2002).

The original stories of *The Arabian Nights* were like a patchwork quilt. For example, tales like “The Fisherman and the Jinni” have roots in ancient Arab folklore while “The Enchanted Horse” came from Persian legends and “The Merchant and the Demon” includes Indian themes. These stories came from a long historical trip, shared and adapted by Arab scholars between the 8th and 13th centuries, blending ideas from different religions (Mahdi, 1994).

However, European translators in the 18th and 19th centuries ignored these differences. They transformed every story as “Arabian,” even when they were not from Arab countries and they did not know about the real Arabic culture. For example, Galland added the famous tale of “Aladdin”, that he heard from a Syrian storyteller, but he presented it as Oriental world tale (Seale, 2019). This made it easier for Western readers to imagine the Orient as a timeless place, full of genies, dictator sultans, and harems. Mixing all these cultures into one “Oriental” identity had harmful effects (Said, 1978); such as a loss of History as Persian or Indian contributions to the *Arabian Nights* were ignored. Indeed, the frame story of Scheherazade saving her life through storytelling to the sultan came from Persian roots; however, later it was seen as “Arab” (Gerhardt, 1963). Instead of searching the reality of the orient in terms of science, art, literature and lifestyle and culture the west ignored the entire civilization and replace it with superficial details such as magic lamp, tyrannical sultans and flying carpet. By shaping the “Orient” as irrational, barbaric, chaotic place, the west could pretend its colonization as helpful action, not exploitative (Makdisi, 2002).

Britain and France were expanding their empires during that time. To justify their colonization and make it acceptable, they spread the idea of non-Western societies as backward and violent. *The Arabian Nights* magic tales was perfect for this. Translators, artists, and writers exaggerated in using these elements by creating an image and turning it into a proof that Eastern cultures could not govern themselves. For example, British Imperialists put the spots on the *Arabian Nights*’ image of corrupt

kings to argue that Indian and Middle Eastern people needed European leadership. They claimed that local rulers were like the story's tyrannical Shahryar: too brutal, weak and foolish to lead their own lands (Said, 1978).

French Orientalist artists like Jean-Léon Gérôme created works such as *The Snake Charmer* (1879), which showed the Orient as a place of exotic danger and mystery. These images inspired from *Arabian Nights* motifs and symbols were used to make colonialism seem as a romantic adventure rather than violent occupation (Nochlin, 1983).

Orientalists divided Europe and the Orient, showing Europe as rational, progressive, civilized and the Middle East as irrational, stuck in the past, barbaric. This binary ignored the fact that many Eastern ideas had shaped European culture for centuries like mathematics, medicine. However, the colonial powers erased this reality. Also, they used the *Arabian Nights* as tool to spread stereotypes, such as showing Muslim men as violent and dangerous or Arab women as victims (Said, 1978).

2.2.3. Critiques and Counter-Narratives

Postcolonial scholars highlight how this reception ignores the *Nights*' engagement with themes like justice, cunning, and survival. For example, Scheherazade's storytelling is not just escapism but an act of resistance against patriarchal tyranny, a theme often ignored in Western readings (Naddaff, 1991). But also, the original Arabic tales frequently blend the supernatural with pragmatic moral lessons, such as the cautionary fate of greedy merchants in "The City of Brass" (Gerhardt, 1963). European translators, even when they picked elements that fit Orientalist stereotypes, also ignored stories that talk about human experiences or profound intellect.

Scholars note that the fact that *The Nights* lack a definitive manuscript allowed it to be reimagined continually. Postcolonial critiques showed its dual legacy, the link between cultures and a tool of colonial discourse (Naddaff, 1991). Modern scholarship, however, reclaims the *Nights* as a dynamic, multicultural text, with contemporary authors like Salman Rushdie and Hanan al-Shaykh reworking its themes to challenge Orientalist narratives (Yamanaka & Nishio, 2006).

Scholars like Srinivas Aravamudan (2012) claimed that the Nights' flexibility allowed it to be used as both a cultural bridge and a battleground for colonial discourse. Modern authors, such as Salman Rushdie in *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), reclaim the Nights' magical realism to critique Western domination by transforming genies and flying carpets into symbols of postcolonial resilience. Lebanese writer Hanan al-Shaykh's *One Thousand and One Nights* (2011) re-centers female role and Arab narrative traditions, challenging the European exoticism in earlier translations (Yamanaka & Nishio, 2006).

“The Porter and the Three Ladies” and the frame narrative of “The Tale of King Shahryar and His Brother” have been a major reinterpretation in European translations of *One Thousand and One Nights*. These stories, which in their original Arabic contexts explored themes of social satire, moral ambiguity, and the negotiation of power, were reframed by Western translators to accentuate tropes of sexual excess and despotic rule. That reshaping and editing reinforced Orientalist stereotype of Arab-Islamic societies as chaotic and barbaric, matching with Europe's colonial-era ideologies (Said, 1978). In the Arabic manuscripts, “The Porter and the Three Ladies” is a layered tale set in Baghdad, blending humour and mystery. The story speaks about a porter who stumbles into a gathering of three women, each with a unique, tragic, backstory. The narrative which contains sensual elements such as the women's characters' playful teasing and the porter's comic adventures also critiques societal hypocrisy and explores gender dynamics (Mahdi, 1994). The hyper sexuality of female characters like the three ladies that in the original narratives often cantered as resilient and smart, is evidence of how they reduced Arab women to objects of exotic desire (Yeazell, 2000).

Similarly, the frame story when King Shahryar has rage over women and Scheherazade uses storytelling as a tool to reduce the king's anger against them gradually, functions as a transformative power of art and reason over violence (Gerhardt, 1963). The balance between sensuality and intellectual and ethical depth, reflects the ethical variety of the original tales of medieval Islamic storytelling.

Postcolonial scholars and writers have critiqued these disfigured changes while reclaiming the *Nights*' original themes. For instance, Egyptian novelist Naguib Mahfouz's *Arabian Nights and Days* (1979) reimagines Shahryar as a ruler who struggles with guilt, and returns to the psychological and moral dimensions of the story. Similarly, feminist readings highlight Scheherazade's intelligence, countering Burton's eroticized caricatures (Malti-Douglas, 1991). Contemporary translators like Yasmine Seale (2021) have produced gender-sensitive retellings that reformulate the tales, balancing the sensuality and social critique and challenging Orientalist stereotypes.

Postcolonial theorists like Aamir Mufti (2016) argue that the tales' origins resist monolithic interpretation, reflecting the pre-colonial trade and cultural exchange across Asia and the Mediterranean. The concept of intersectionality is how race, gender, class, and other identities are mixed to shape lived experiences. While the original tales often portrayed characters with differences and layered identities, European adaptations transformed these complexities into Orientalist stereotypes.

In Arabic original manuscripts, characters often embody intersecting identities that reflect the diversity of medieval Islamic societies. Indeed, Scheherazade, a Persian queen, scholar, and storyteller, challenged gender patriarchal violence, in terms of class royal authority, and intellect by her mastery of literature and philosophy. She showed the importance of education across social classes challenging the hate of the king towards women (Gerhardt, 1963). The story of "The Merchant in The City of Brass" critiques classism and greed through the tale of a wealthy merchant who learns humility after encountering the ruins of a crumbling civilization. In that journey he linked both economic privilege and moral accountability (Mahdi, 1994).

Stories such as "The Porter and the Three Ladies" deal with working-class women whose gender and professions shape their resilience on societal exploitation. Enslaved characters, such as the clever maid in "The Hunchback's Tale" use their intelligence to navigate power imbalances. These narratives reject one-dimensionality, depicting individuals whose identities are shaped by their cultural, economic, and social contexts. (Malti-Douglas, 1991)

In the first Arabic versions of the *Arabian Nights* non-white characters were central. Characters like Scheherazade, the Persian queen that saved her life by storytelling, and protagonists such as Sinbad the Sailor rooted in Mesopotamian or Indian heritage give narratives rich in intellectual and cultural differences. For example, Scheherazade is a scholar and strategist who uses her intelligence to challenge patriarchal violence, symbolizing the power of storytelling as resistance, far from being a victim (Gerhardt 1963). Tales such as “The Tale of the Merchant and the Devil” depict Arab and Persian merchants as complex characters facing moral dilemmas, reflecting the universality of medieval Islamic trade networks. These figures were products of cultural contexts, embodying morals such as wisdom, and resilience (Mahdi1994).

Like European translations, cinematographic adaptations, especially those produced in the West, have historically failed to contextualize the tales, instead reducing *One Thousand and One Nights* to a depoliticized fantasy. However, many recent works are challenging this trend by connecting racial depictions to real-world power structures.

2.3. The Visual Adaptations of *The One Thousand and One Nights*

When analysing adaptations of *One Thousand and One Nights*, whether in films, television series, or visual media, it is essential to question whether they depict racial dynamics as isolated features of “exotic” cultures or whether they link them to systemic inequalities such as colonialism, economic exploitation, and social hierarchies.

Early adaptations such as *One Thousand- and One-Night's* film (1942) used Oriental landscapes as a stage for European heroism, erasing the violence of empire. For example, brown-faced British actors portrayed Arab characters as comic opposites to white heroes, reinforcing the legend of the “civilizing mission” (Shohat & Stam, 1994). *The Thief of Bagdad* (1940) also shows a Western vision of the Orient and presents Orientals as thieves, or violent and evil characters.

2.3.1. Disney's *Aladdin* (1992)

“Aladdin” is the timeless tale inspired from the *Arabian Nights* tales that presents a charming street thief named Aladdin, who became a prince named Ali with the help of

a phenomenal Genie to win princess Jasmine's heart, while battling Jaffar, a treacherous sorcerer. In the end Aladdin discovered his true self was more valuable than any magic.

The genre of the movie is "Animated Musical Fantasy Adventure" considered as part of the Disney Renaissance. The setting is the fictional, vibrant Arabian city of Agrabah. The movie contains many characters such as the Protagonist Aladdin, a kind but impoverished "street rat" with a loyal monkey companion called Abu. Also, Princess Jasmine, the strong Sultan's daughter, tired of palace confinement and refusing to marry someone only for status or to rule the Agrabah kingdom. Jafar is the antagonist of the story, known as the Sultan's power-hungry and sinister Grand Vizier, aided by his sarcastic parrot named Iago. The magical Genie, voiced by Robin Williams, stuck in a lamp, grants Aladdin three wishes as reward for freeing him.

The movie *Aladdin* (1992) was Famous for Robin Williams' legendary performance as the Genie, full of improvisation, impressions and humour; Academy Award-winning music by Alan Menken, Howard Ashman, and Tim Rice, including hits like "A Whole New World" Best Original Song and "Friend Like Me" (Menken et al, 1992) It is a stunning animation by blending traditional techniques with early CGI (computer generated images) such as the magic carpet ride, becoming one of Disney's most beloved and successful classics.

2.3.2. *Aladdin* (2019)

Aladdin film (2019), the visually musical adventure that retells the classic tale under Guy Ritchie's direction, is a new version of *Aladdin* (1992) with new story elements. Becoming the most beloved songs and core message of authenticity, it was a massive box office success, grossing over \$1 billion worldwide (Box Office Mojo, 2019). Directed by the Ritchie known for *Sherlock Holmes*, *Snatch*, *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*, it is a mixture of music and visual effects to bring the magic carpet ride for the new generation while expanding on certain characters and themes.

As far as the story of the movie is concerned, it remained faithful to the core story of the original but with certain embellishments. In the city of Agrabah, the thief Aladdin meets the spirited Princess Jasmine, who feels tired by her royal duties and the law requiring her to marry a prince to save the kingdom. The evil Jafar, seeking a

magical lamp hidden in the Cave of Wonders shaped as a lion head to get more power and become the new sultan of Agrabah, manipulates Aladdin by promising him wealth. Aladdin discovers the lamp and accidentally releases the charismatic Genie that gives him three wishes to realize. Aladdin uses his first wish to become "Prince Ali" in order to impress Jasmine, he goes to the palace and lives there hoping to marry her, while hiding his true identity and keeping the lamp safe from Jafar.

The film expands Jasmine's role, showing her desire to rule Agrabah herself and introducing her defiant new song "Speechless". New details are added to the plot such as involving Jasmine's handmaiden Dalia and the Genie's wishing for freedom and having a normal life. The central conflict remains which is that Aladdin must stop Jaffar from stealing the lamp from him and conquering Agrabah, while learning that honesty and being himself is more valuable than any wish or wealth. His journey ends by winning Jasmine's heart genuinely and helping the Genie achieve his freedom.

The main cast of this movie includes:

- Mena Massoud as Aladdin, the charismatic street thief and Prince Ali.
 - Naomi Scott as Princess Jasmine, the independent, speechless Sultan's daughter, given a more prominent arc.
 - Will Smith as Genie, bringing his own comedic and charismatic flair to the iconic role, often appearing in a blue CGI form.
 - Marwan Kenzari as Jafar, the antagonist and the power-hungry Grand Vizier.
 - Nasim Pedrad as Dalia, Jasmine's handmaiden and friend, a new character that did not exist in the 1992 version.
 - Navid Negahban as The Sultan and the father of Jasmine.
 - Billy Magnussen as Prince Anders, the only white character, a new comedic suitor for Jasmine.
 - Alan Tudyk as the voice of Iago, Jafar's parrot
- (Walt Disney Studios, 2019).

In terms of nominations and awards, the movie has received several including:

- Teen Choice Awards: Choice Summer Movie, Choice Summer Movie Actor (Will Smith)
- People's Choice Awards: Favourite Movie, favourite Family Movie, favourite Movie Actor (Will Smith), favourite Movie Actress (Naomi Scott)
- Saturn Awards: Best Fantasy Film, Best Costume Design
- NAACP Image Awards: Outstanding Supporting Actor (Will Smith)
- Critics' Choice Super Awards: Best Actor in a Superhero Movie Will Smith (Hipes, 2021)

Despite the new elements introduced to give the movie a more inclusive and progressive representation of the Orient, it remains a reflection of Orientalism in cinematographic form.

2.4. Orientalist Aspects in *Aladdin* (2019)

While marketed as a progressive remake with diverse casting and enhanced female agency, the film is still linked within the Orientalist frameworks of exoticism, strangeness and cultural reductionism.

2.4.1. Agrabah and the Construction of the “Orient”

The fictional city in *Aladdin* is a mixture of Arab, South Asian, and Persian aesthetics transformed into a timeless place, called the Orient, devoid of history. The film's opening words “Where they cut off your ear if they don't like your face” shows the place as barbaric, ignoring the impact of colonialism and real-world conflicts (Shaheen, 2001).



Figure 01: Screenshot of the city of Agrabah (*Aladdin*, 2019, in 00.06.22)

The fictional city of Agrabah as place and architecture represents a microcosm of the Orientalist imagination, mixing motifs from Persian, Mughal and Ottoman architecture to create a homogenized “East.” This cultural mixture exposes the city as a place, timeless and exotic, that constructs the idea of the “Other” (minutes 2.30-4.30). It matches Edward Said’s critique of the idea of Orientalism as a Western construct.

The market is represented as chaotic place with vibrant silks, spices, flowers and decoration that do not belong to any era in history (mnt 4.48-5.35). The market is overloaded in exoticism that frames the East as a place of chaotic allure. The walls are painted with pale colours while, in contrast, the Sultan’s palace, with its golden arches, big halls, golden decoration and the fancy furniture, embodies despotic opulence. This image reinforces the colonial fantasies of Eastern excess (mnt18.57-19.25).

Moreover, Agrabah also symbolizes danger and emptiness for characters like Aladdin and Jasmine while the cave in the heart of the desert with the treasure, magma and fallen rocks (mnt 33.27-40), is a wild space to be conquered and a metaphor for Western narratives of civilizing the Orient.

Director Guy Ritchie used saturated golds and blues in the colour palette of Agrabah to give the feeling of mystery, while wide-angle shots above the city emphasize its isolation from the modern world. These visual choices work on the myth of pre-modern East that does not change and that is not connected with historical reality.

2.4.2. Characterization and Stereotypes: Between Subversion and Reinforcement

Aladdin embodies the smart boy archetype, whose moral purity exceeds his uncivilized origins but he was considered as a thief who steals to live (mnts 5.40-6.20).

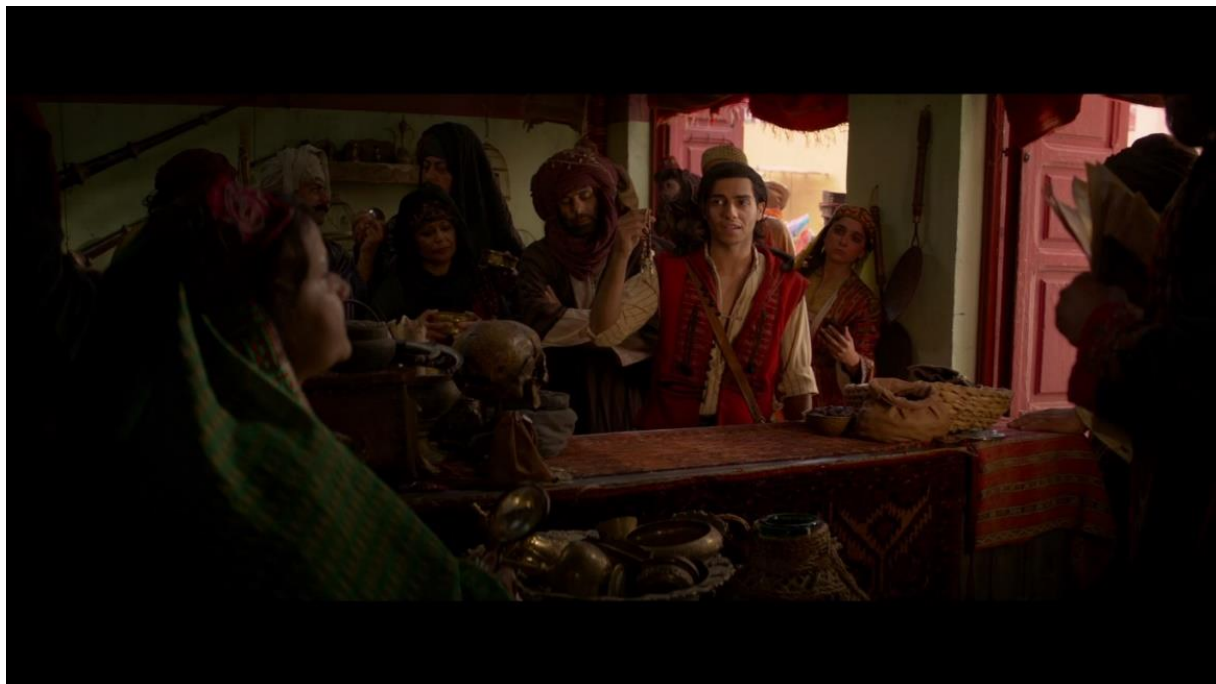


Figure 02: Screenshot of the character of the Aladdin (*Aladdin*, 2019, in 00.05.44)

His transformation into a “rich Prince” Ali that no one will recognize because of the Genie’s magic, uses the Indian culture, such as the elephants, the costumes style and the Indian flowers as decoration for the camel (mnts 52.40-58.45).



Figure 03: Screenshot of the character of Prince Ali (*Aladdin*, 2019, in 00.59.22)

Also, prince Ali belongs to an unreal kingdom called “Ababwa” that is not found in the maps (mnts1.13.16-1.14.00), mirroring colonial narratives of assimilation, otherness and timelessness.

Jasmine is exposed as a beautiful smart princess; the movie shows frequently her political ambitions. However, she is speechless because of patriarchal constraints (mnts21.35-22.40) and is not even allowed to go outside of the palace (mnts 1.14.06-1.14.55).



Figure 04: Screenshot of the character of the Jasmine (*Aladdin*, 2019, in 00.23.10)

Jasmine has a pet called Rajah which is a tiger and symbol of Jasmine's independence. Rajah's represents Jasmine's strength and a challenge of traditional expectations. Her protective instincts align with her determination to challenge Agrabah's patriarchal laws. In one scene, Rajah stands next to her to protect her from Jafar's danger (mnt 21.50 and 22.56), reflecting Jasmine's initial wariness of outsiders.

Yet her empowerment remains contingent on Western feminist ideals. Her costuming in the party as a harem pant that reminds the audience of the harem pants of the previous versions of *Aladdin* movies, shows exoticism allure with palatable modernity. Even in the party, the place is crowded by women more than men, reflecting the stereotype of the "sultan's harem" (mnt1.03.50-1.04.40).

In *Aladdin* 2019 movie, the Sultan is a layered character starting as a loving parent that adores Jasmine but is restricting her because of the traditions of the Old Kingdom that women cannot lead (mnts 21.50-22.15).



Figure 05: Screenshot of the character of the Sultan (*Aladdin*, 2019, in 00.22.34)

He is also presented as a just ruler that is unable to lead his kingdom anymore, a symbol of the weakness of the Oriental leaders as a justification for the West to invade the orient. Jafar's manipulation tests with the use of magic the Sultan's decisions.

Jafar, with his serpentine staff and tyrannical ambitions that he refused to be in the second position in the palace and the anger in his facial expression, represents danger and mystery (mnts 12.25-13.03), epitomizing the Oriental despot trope.



Figure 06: Screenshot of the character of the Jaffar (*Aladdin*, 2019, in 00.12.39)

In contrast to the nuanced evil in Disney's antagonists, the evil character embodied by Jafar perpetuates the reductive binary of the "civilized" West versus the "barbaric" East.

The Genie embodies postcolonial tension. He is a hyper charismatic, modern figure whose magical prowess is bound by slavery. His blue form literalizes the "magical Negro" trope, representing him as a Middle Eastern caricature.



Figure 07: Screenshot of the character of the Genie (*Aladdin*, 2019, in 00.46.30)

While his friendship with Aladdin softens the power imbalance, his liberation narrative gaining freedom through loyalty to a worthy master (mnts 41.05-42.42) reinforces colonial hierarchies. The Genie is represented as a flamboyant character that reinforces Orientalist stereotypes of the Middle East as a place of mysticism and otherness.

2.4.3. The Cinematic Gaze: Framing, Music, and the Exotic Other

The film's camera works between romanticizing and scrutinizing the Orient. In the movie the camera's sweeping aerial shots of Agrabah's noisy streets invite viewers to wonder at its exotic beauty (mnt 6.22-11.40) while close-ups of Aladdin's dirty hands (mnt 7.17 and 7.35) or Jafar's threatening gaze (mnt 12.39 and 1.23.30) fetishize difference. Jasmine, generally framed on cascading fabrics of golden decoration and

fancy clothes and jewels (mnt 19.12-20.03) becomes an object of admiration and a spectacle of otherness.

Alan Menken's score further entrenches Orientalist tropes, blending *maqam* scales and *darbuka* rhythms with Broadway-style bombast. The film's soundtrack's fusion of Bollywood-inspired dance and Western popular music reflects commercial multiculturalism and the commodification of Eastern aesthetics for a global audience (mnt 55.30-58.43 and 1.7.40-1.9.00).

2.4.4. Cultural Sensitivity and the Limits of Representation

The *Aladdin* movie (2019) is a live-action remake as a corrective version of the 1992 animated one and its Orientalist legacy by foregrounding Middle Eastern representation in its casting choices. Mena Massoud and Naomi Scott, actors of Egyptian and Indian descent, take the lead roles, instead of the original film's reliance on white voice actors. With these changes, the critiques of Hollywood's historical erasure of Middle Eastern voices were reduced. In addition, Jasmine's character is expanded beyond her earlier role as a passive love interest. In the new 2019 version, she is presented as a princess with political ambitions, vocalizing a desire to lead as Sultan and delivering a song to express herself, no longer speechless (mnts 23.32 - 24.30). These reviews indicate the intention to match the film with contemporary discourses on gender equality.

Such efforts are paradoxically diluted by the film that is not devoid of orientalist visual and narrative decorations. Agrabah remains a caricature image, blending Asian and Arabic motifs, towering minarets, noisy bazaars, and extraordinary places into a historical fantasy (mnts 04.56-11.40). This setting avoids being related to any specific cultural context; instead, they created a new exoticized aesthetics popularized by 19th-century Orientalist art, which imagined the East as a mystical space for Western audiences.

Will Smith as the Genie, though updated with a touch of hip-hop, shows the tradition of old-school Western humour and its pop-cultural jokes and references unlike the film's cultural authenticity (mnts 43.25- 54.45). This choice prioritizes commercial

appeal over meaningful engagement with the narrative's roots in *One Thousand and One Nights*, where jinn are complex entities tied to regional folklore.

The film's superficial approach to empowerment highlights its limitations. Jasmine's pursuit of the throne ignores a substantive critique of monarchy or patriarchy. Her victory appears individual that is framed as personal courage rather than systemic change, leaving Agrabah's power structures as it is. Meanwhile, Aladdin's "oil lamp" reduces class struggle to a fairy-tale. The story ignores real-world issues such as colonialism or resource inequality, instead having a feel-good resolution that matches with Disney's brand of apolitical optimism.

Even the soundtrack in (mnts 58.08-58.43), was made by Middle Eastern instrumentation, still mixed with Broadway and pop style. In this way, the new version embodies the tension between modern representation and commercial rigidity. It is a smart step to show the new version of the movie by mixing two types of music. However, the producer could not risk the Disney's narrative style and the orientalist fantasy. The movie updates some superficial elements but does not change the serious deeper issues of exoticism and unequal power that had shaped the original. This mirrors Hollywood's attempt to include diverse voices while still failing to transform the stories narratives.

2.4.5. Applying the Riz Test to *Aladdin* (2019)

The Riz Test assesses if a work keeps the harmful stereotypes about Muslim, Middle Eastern, South Asian characters or not. This test was inspired by actor Riz Ahmed's critique of the representation of Muslims in the media. To pass the test, the film must avoid the following stereotypes:

- **Terrorism Link: Are Muslim/MESA characters depicted as terrorists or threats?**

There is no direct image of terrorism in the film. However, Jafar embodies Orientalist fears of the power-thirst of Middle Eastern figures. His desire to replace the Sultan and conquer Agrabah mirrors Western anxieties about despotic Eastern rulers. However, his

motivations are personal ambition, not ideological extremism. As a result, it does not fully meet this criterion.

- **Irrational Anger: Are they framed as irrationally violent or volatile?**

Jafar's rage is strategically not irrational. However, exaggerated facial expressions, and association with dark magic (mnt 1.03.15-1.03.40) is a stereotype of the "sinister Oriental villain." His anger is coded as inherently dangerous in contrast with Aladdin's noble behaviour. As a result, the film partially meets this criterion through stereotypical villain coding.

- **Cultural Backwardness: Are they portrayed as superstitious, anti-modern, or regressive?**

Agrabah is depicted as an exotic space where magic overcomes reality and logic. The Genie's supernatural powers and his strange blue colour, the Sultan's reliance on tradition and inability to rule Agrabah, and the marketplace's mystical chaos (snake charmers, monkey sidekicks) reinforce stereotypes of the East as anti-Enlightenment. The film's blending of anachronistic cultural elements of Mughal architecture with Ottoman aesthetics, detached Agrabah from real-world modernity. Therefore, the movie clearly meets this criterion.

- **Threat to the West: Is their culture framed as a danger to Western values?**

There is no direct confrontation with Western societies. However, the film's Orientalist framing embodies the East as a lawless desert kingdom in need of civilizing. Also, characters like Aladdin and Jafar echo colonial narratives of the Orient as a chaotic and dangerous place. The film indirectly reinforces this stereotype but does not meet it.

- **Female Oppression: Are women reduced to voiceless, oppressed figures?**

Jasmine challenges patriarchal norms rejecting suitors, advocating to rule as Sultan, and her solo anthem "Speechless" shows the need of gender equality. However, her "empowerment" is still tied to her physical beauty and exotic costuming harem pants.

The film's feminist messaging is diluted by its reliance on Orientalist spectacle. It shows the trope superficially but keeps regressive visual stereotypes.

The Riz test analysis answers positively the question that *Aladdin* (2019) fails the Riz Test. The film fails due to its reliance on cultural backwardness, coded irrational villainy and eroticized female "empowerment". While the remake attempts progress, yet it still remains within Orientalist frameworks. Agrabah's historical, mystical setting and Jafar's rage support stereotypes of the East as irrational and regressive, failing to humanize Middle East and South Asian cultures beyond exotic archetypes. *Aladdin* movie exemplifies how the updates can reproduce harmful stereotype when they prioritize spectacle over authentic representation. Passing the Riz test requires not just a diverse cast. *Aladdin* movie (2019) shows the colonial gaze that reduces Middle East and South Asia identities to enchanted deserts, tyrannical sorcerers, and hypersexualized princesses, reflecting Hollywood's failure to transcend the Orientalist narrative.

2.5. Conclusion

Aladdin movie (2019) based on Galland's added tale to *The Arabian Nights*, embodies Hollywood's uneasy relationship with Orientalism. On the one hand, it criticizes old stereotypes but on the other hand, it reproduces them through theatrical performances where heroes rise through their individual resilience and villains embody an inherent despotism. The film reflects the very narratives it seeks to update. Its commercial success underscores the enduring appeal of the Orientalist legend, requiring a more radical reconceptualization of who controls the narrative lens.




General Conclusion

The Disney *Aladdin* film (2019) presents an interesting contradiction; it aims to portray itself as a celebration of contemporary progressivism and at the same time is firmly rooted in the structures of Orientalism. Naomi Scott's Indian ancestry and Massoud's North African Egyptian heritage seems like a step toward authentic representation but these casting decisions fail to reach a balance with the Orientalist framework of the film. The story takes place in the fictional city of Agrabah, which works as an historical mixture of Eastern vivid signifiers but meaningless pastiche. The whole city of Agrabah is devoid of historical or cultural distinction, with a fantastic palace under purple skies and golden camels' parade as well as digital bazaars.

Through the exoticization of space, Agrabah's hybrid architecture, taken from Mughal domes, Ottoman minarets and fantastical souks, creates a mythic "Orient" detached from historical specificity, reflecting 19th century Orientalist paintings by "Gérôme and Delacroix" that framed the East as a decorative backdrop for Western fantasy. Instead of making a true depiction of a particular era, Agrabah became a legendary creation that quenches the thirst of readers of the exotic East.

Aladdin's visual fantasy that puts show before content reduces the richness of the Islamic Golden Age, which was a time of great intellectual, scientific, and cultural advancement. This trend, made to reduce cultural narratives to consumable images by the westerners, is harmonious with the West portrayal of the East, a place of mystery, decadence, chaos and otherness, which Edward Said critiques in *Orientalism* (1978). The city of Agrabah is framed as a symbol of a timeless strange place rather than a place of vivid history, its glamorous fantasy is a lack of great cultural depth.

The way power dynamics are portrayed in the movie, especially Jafar's character as the main antagonist, shows its reliance on Orientalist stereotypes. The clichés of the barbarian tyrant, a figure at the heart of Orientalist discourse, are referenced in Jaafar's behavioural function coding. Jafar is portrayed as irrational, thirsty for power and dangerous. He is often enraged into volcanic reactions, wears dark robes, and possesses a magical hypnotic serpent staff. Instead of being presented as a strategic political character, his desire to topple the monarchy of Agrabah is presented as an inherent



malignancy. This portrayal reinforces the idea that Eastern leaders are despotic and dangerous. Jafar's motivations are never given the depth that could make him a more fully realized character. Instead, he is reduced to a caricature that emphasizes the protagonist's pretended moral superiority.


Also, the Genie's "magical Negro" subtext and Jasmine's eroticized "empowerment" resurrect stereotypes critiqued by Said reducing Muslim and Middle Eastern identities to irrational villains, mystical servants and objectified princesses. Despite surface diversity, the film recentres Western righteousness in contrast to Oriental duplicity such as Aladdin's rise through lies and deception. The Genie's liberation is contingent on white-coded benevolence and refuses systemic critique of monarchy or patriarchy.


As a conclusion, Disney's *Aladdin* (2019) newest version is an example of the contradictions that arise while trying to create a combination between progressive ideals and an Orientalist-influenced story. The film relies on visual and narrative constructs that support erotic depictions of Eastern culture and undermine the casting of actors of North African and South Asian descent, which may indicate an attempt at inclusivity and diversity. As a result, the movie failed to transcend the Orientalist clichés that as usual characterized Western representations of Eastern cultures, even with its gestures toward diversity. The conflict between Orientalism and progressivism highlights the difficulties of creating a real inclusive media by using a framework still rooted in colonial ideologies.



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Summary

This research shows the new 2019 version of Disney's *Aladdin* movie through a postcolonial lens that highlights the persistence in portraying the East through Orientalist stereotypes. Regardless of the efforts to represent Middle Eastern voices more respectfully, the film still depicts the Orient as exotic, backward, and uncivilized. It also focuses on how such portrayals, rooted in colonial discourse since the Elizabethan era, continue to shape Western views until the 21st century. Drawing on *One Thousand and One Nights* and cultural film theory, the study shows how Orientalism endures in modern media.

ملخص

يُظهر هذا البحث فيلم ديزني علاء الدين (2019) بنسخته الجديدة من منظور ما بعد الاستعمار، مُسلطاً الضوء على استمرار تصوير الشرق من خلال الصور النمطية الاستشراقية. وبغض النظر عن الجهود المبذولة لتقديم أصوات الشرق الأوسط باحترام أكبر، لا يزال الفيلم يُصوّر الشرق على أنه غريب ومتخلف وغير متحضر. كما يُركّز على كيفية استمرار هذه الصور، المتجذّرة في الخطاب الاستعماري منذ العصر الإليزابيثي، في تشكيل وجهات النظر الغربية حتى القرن الحادي والعشرين. وبالاستناد إلى كتاب "ألف ليلة وليلة" ونظرية الفيلم الثقافي، تُظهر الدراسة كيف يصمد الاستشراق في وسائل الإعلام الحديثة.

Résumé

Cette recherche présente la nouvelle version 2019 du film Disney *Aladdin* sous un angle postcolonial, soulignant la persistance des stéréotypes orientalistes sur l'Orient. Malgré les efforts déployés pour représenter les voix du Moyen-Orient avec plus de respect, le film continue de présenter l'Orient comme exotique, arriéré et sauvage. Elle s'intéresse également à la manière dont ces représentations, ancrées dans le discours colonial depuis l'époque Elisabéthaine, continuent de façonner les visions occidentales jusqu'au XXI^e siècle. S'appuyant sur les *Mille et Une Nuits* et la théorie du cinéma culturel, l'étude montre comment l'orientalisme perdure dans les médias modernes.