
The Middle Eastern Culture and Its Representation in Walt Disney Pictures Movie Aladdin (2019)

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Abstract

This article examined how Disney presents Middle Eastern culture in the film Aladdin (2019). The 2019 live action film Aladdin by Walt Disney, is a film produced by a film company from the United States with a Middle Eastern cultural background. West (Walt Disney) and East (Middle East) have very different cultures. This analysis aims to show viewers how Disney presents Middle Eastern culture and how Disney attempts to influence the audience's perspective on Middle Eastern culture by incorporating western ideology in this film. To analyze the first research question in this article, the author used Cultural studies theory by Stuart Hall, which further examines the Middle Eastern cultural representations that may be related to the power shown in this film. In the first research question, there are 2 sub-chapters, namely the location setting used for the making of this film. It is known that the filming location of this film is built to resemble the Middle East region, and the costumes worn by the main characters in the film look like traditional Middle Eastern costumes. The second research question is about the influence of Western culture on films. This question will address how Disney influences viewers' perspectives in the Middle East. The author has a statement that the character Princess Jasmine was created by Disney (west), which is a character that represents modern women. To examine the second question the author uses the theory of Orientalism by Edward said.

Keywords: Aladdin movie, representation, culture, cultural studies

1. INTRODUCTION

Walt Disney Pictures is an American film studio that is a division of The Walt Disney Studios. Walt Disney Pictures also promotes films produced by Walt Disney Animation Studios and Pixar. On April 1, 1983, Walt Disney Pictures was established as a division of Walt Disney Productions (now The Walt Disney Company), and the first film to bear the "Walt Disney Pictures" banner was Never Cry, Wolf. Previously, "Walt Disney Productions" was credited with the company's live-action films, with the first, Treasure Island, premiering in 1950 (Ritchie & August, 2019).

Aladdin, a street boy in the Arab city of Agrabah, and his monkey Abu meet Princess Jasmine, who has fled the sheltered palace life, in the film. Jasmine aspires to succeed in her father's position as Sultan or leader of the country, but her father disapproves of it because she is a woman. Jasmine is expected to marry one of her royal suitors, perhaps the charming but foolish Prince Anders. Jafar is the royal advisor and confidant of the Sultan, but Jafar plans to overthrow the Sultan and find the magic lamp hidden in the Cave of Wonders because inside the lamp, there is the great genie with magic to help him seize the kingdom. (Pictures, 2021)(Ritchie & August, 2019)

Aladdin's 2019 live-action film is the latest version of the previous version in 1992, with the same title and background, i.e., *The Arabian Nights*. It is known that one of the places used for shooting locations in Jordan shows the nuances of the Middle East that are getting thicker. For this reason, this analysis will discuss two topics related to Middle Eastern culture. The first subject is how Disney representations Middle Eastern culture in the films. The second topic is how Disney can influence the audience's perspective on Middle Eastern culture.

Stuart Hall describes representation as to the process by which meaning is produced and exchanged between culture members through language, signs, and images that stand for or represent things (Hall, 1989). It interprets as something that can be in language, clothing, place, or anything that can describe or reflect a culture (Jhally, 2005). Hall presents a new perspective that offers a much more involved and innovative definition of position representation concerning the way people think about the environment and its place in it. This new understanding of representation is necessary for a much more nuanced way of thinking about communication. Hall points out that an image may have several different meanings and that there is no guarantee that it will function the way people think it is when they make it.

Raymond William (1983) calls culture one of the two or three most complicated words in English. Williams is proposing three broad meanings. First of all, culture can be used to refer to a general mechanism of intellectual, spiritual and esthetic development'. The second use of the word 'culture' is, it is probably a suggestion to a person, period, or group of how to live. Finally, according to Raymond William, the last use of 'culture' can also be used to refer to 'intellectual work and practice and especially artistic activity' (Storey, 2015). In the same book, *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture* by John Storey conclude that culture here means texts and practices whose primary function is to signify, produce, or become a place of meaning (Storey, 2015).

In analyzing this research, the writer used previous research with similar literary works and different topics and theories. The study is, the Messages and Perceptions about Feminism in the Film *Aladdin* (2019) in *Influencing Global Awareness from the American Journal of Humanities and Social*

Sciences Research (AJHSSR), written by Rio Saputra Ambarita and Theresa Ester Efrata. This study uses the cultural theory of imperialism to determine the message and perception of feminism in the Aladdin2019 film by analyzing the messages contained and presented in the film Aladdin (2019). The discussion compares the previous version of Aladdin and the latest version of Aladdin, namely the live-action film that aired in 2019. The result of the discussion was written that the old version of Aladdin did not highlight the character of Princess Jasmine. Instead, it focuses more on the main character, Aladdin, but in the latest version of Princess Jasmine, it has a more significant and more extended portion, and also, the writer explains things related to the topic of feminism in the film. In addition, the author mentions several scenes where Princess Jasmine is a character featuring a tough woman who reflects a feminist character (Ambarita & Efrata, 2019).

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This analysis uses Cultural Studies as the theory. It is also the first theory of the analysis. The usefulness of this theory in this study is to examine further the representation of Middle Eastern culture that may be related to power shown in the 2019 film Aladdin. Exploring how the film depicts the culture, society, and strength of a country, namely Middle Eastern culture, is the film's background.

Cultural Studies is a theory created by British sociologist and cultural theorist Stuart Hall who adopted Marx's critical theory. This theory is commonly used to study various cultures and cultural practices and their relation to power. In the 1983 book *Cultural Studies: A Theoretical History* by Stuart Hall, it is written that the Problem of Cultural Studies appeared in British intellectual history in the 1950s and early 1960s. However, it is also written that this cultural concept is proposed not to provide answers to big theoretical questions but as responses to concrete questions and political problems (Hall, 2016). Cultural Studies explores the relationship between the aesthetic, anthropological, and political economy aspects of cultural production and reproduction. For this reason, the author uses this theory to be applied in research that does not only study about a culture but is also concerned with power, politics, and also the aesthetic value of that culture.

The second theory is Orientalism by Edward Said. This theory is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient," which meant east, and (most of the time) "the Occident," which meant west (Said, 1978). This theory is related to the second question that is about the Eastern stereotype of Disney. This theory will explain the second research question about Disney trying to reconstruct the audiences about Middle Eastern Culture through the character of Princess Jasmine, based on Western ideology.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The 2019 live action film *Aladdin* by Walt Disney, is a film produced by a film company from the United States with a Middle Eastern cultural background. West (Walt Disney) and East (Middle East) have very different cultures. This analysis aims to show viewers how Disney presents Middle Eastern culture and how Disney attempts to influence the audience's perspective on Middle Eastern culture by incorporating western ideology in this film, using the theory of Cultural studies from Stuart Hall and also the theory of Orientalism from Edward Said.

3.1 Disney Shows Representation the Middle Easter Culture

3.1.1 Setting

The character introduction in the film opens with Aladdin meeting Princess Jasmine at a bazaar. In this scene, there is a part where Aladdin and Jasmine are running away from the soldiers. The cameras follow as Aladdin navigates across the city maze-like paths. The film also introduces the audience to the Kingdom of Agrabah in a long sequence, constantly switching between first-person and third-person camera views. The sequences are without any clipping and give the viewer a detailed micro view of the entire space, allowing the viewer to see the entire scene (Padiwalla, 2021).

From the beginning, the scene shows that this film is a story from Arab land. The film opens with a scene of a family riding a boat in the middle of the Ocean. There is the character of a father played by Will Smith, who is telling stories with his two children in the family. In the story, he tells about the Arabian Night story, accompanied by a song with the same title. The story begins by showing a magnificent building, which is the palace of a kingdom. In the film, Aladdin and other characters live and live in a country called Agrabah (Ritchie & August, 2019). The author created the fictional place that is Agrabah as the setting place of the movie. Many say that the fictional Disney-created city Agrabah located along the Jordan River is considered Arabic, as confirmed by the opening song, *Arabian Nights*. It is also written in the journal entitled "Running head: Orientalism in , One Jump Ahead or Behind? Princess Jasmine, The Magic Lamp, and A Whole New World: Cultural Representation, Identity, and Orientalism in Disney's *Aladdin* (2019)" (Misbah, 2019). Agrabah is nothing new in the film *Aladdin* because it is the same as in the latest version of *Aladdin*; in the previous version, which was released in 1992, this place was created.

Here is shown a palace with an architectural form and is the same as a typical Middle Eastern building, namely a building that looks like it is made of sand. This building can be seen at the beginning of the film, where Princess Jasmine first meets Aladin around 0:10:00. The houses look like buildings made of sand or mud, which are typical of most countries with summer in Arabia. Based on the journal entitled, *Traditional Sustainability: Environmental Design in Traditional Buildings of the Middle East*, traditional mud structures are present throughout the hot, dry countries of the Middle East. Traditional buildings in the hot, dry tropical

climate of the Middle East are made of mud. The building is made of poured mud or sun-dried blocks of mud, which are excellent materials for keeping a room cooler than outside (Ali et al., 2014)



Figure 1: Setting location

Apart from the fact that the building looks very similar to the characteristics of buildings in Middle Eastern countries, the audience can also know the typical nuances of the Middle East from the many date palms planted in the neighborhood around residential areas. As is well-known, plants and dates are found in many Middle Eastern countries such as Arabia, Iraq, Iran, and many more. Dates play an essential role in the economy and environmental conditions in the region. The primary purpose of planting dates is to consume fresh, dried or processed fruit. There are about 100 million date palms worldwide of which 62 million of these trees are located in the Middle East and North Africa. In Saudi Arabia alone, 15,000 tones of date palm leaves are processed as waste material (Jonoobi et al., 2019)

Stewart stated that he and Ritchie had open discussions about Aladdin's appearance, including the possibility of a very devastated and bleached desert, inspired by films such as *Black Hawk Down* and *Sahara*, as well as the practicality of having to mix multiple locations in the UK and abroad with stage work. Interiors and exteriors and a variety of VFX lead them to a sleek, colorful look (*Alan Stewart / Aladdin - British Cinematographer*, n.d.).

In the film, several scenes show camels being used as a means of transportation. In a journal that discusses camels, it is stated that one type of camel, namely the dromedary camel, is the most critical livestock animal in the semi-arid regions of North and East Africa, as well as the Arabian and Iranian Peninsula; the dromedary camel is the most common livestock animal. The single-hump camel has probably domesticated some 3,000 to 4,000 years ago in present-day Yemen and Oman territory. It is a versatile animal used for milk, meat, skin, and transportation (Yam & Khomeiri, 2015).

The shooting process in this scene uses the high angle Shot technique, which is shooting from above to show a region or a whole place. The process of taking pictures from above is to make the entire region or city is captured very clearly and the nuances of the Middle East that we can observe from this

part. This technique is usually done using a drone, also known as a high shot or down shot. A shot made with the camera above the action usually implies a feeling of superiority to the subject being photographed (Barsam & Monahan, 2010).

3.1.2 Costume

Costumes are one of the crucial things in the world of film because costumes are one of the things that can show the identity of a character. Disney's efforts to present Middle Eastern culture can also be seen from the costumes worn by each character in the film. The costume is a typical Middle Eastern costume.

Each scene in the film shows the players, especially the leading player, Aladdin, played by Mena Massoud, and the Sultan (Jasmine's father), played by Navid Negahban. The opening of the story shows Aladdin in a traditional market. This scene introduces the character, Mena Massoud, as Aladdin, who plays a poor thief. In this scene, it can be seen that the costume worn by Aladdin is an effortless costume that also depicts his character as a poor person. The costume or clothes worn by Aladdin at the time of the scene are typical Middle Eastern costumes or clothes; for the country of origin, these clothes may be traditional Turkish clothes.



Figure 2: Costume. <https://images.app.goo.gl/SvEZ71CbC8F2Tw5U6>

Aladdin wears trousers with a wide green belt, a shirt with the sleeves folded several times, he also wears a vest or also looks like a short red jacket, and also a head covering that looks like a hat which is also red. These garments share some similarities with traditional Turkish clothing. In Turkey, these clothes are usually called, *şalvar* (pronounced *shalwar*, Turkish: *fal'var* are Turkish trousers or also often referred to as *demise* which are traditional baggy pants that gather around the waist, while the bottom of the legs has cuffs or folds, this extends to just above the ankle. These trousers or *dimije* are usually worn with a *gömlek* (shirt). On the outside of the shirt, it is paired with a *cepken* (short jacket), or it also called as *yelek* (vest) (Koç & Koca, 2011)(Koç & Koca, 2012). It is a traditional Turkish dress that people of low social status usually wear.

Likewise, with Aladdin, who plays the character as a poor thief, Even the clothes looked very shabby; this added to the impression of low social status. In contrast to the costumes used by Aladdin, the costumes worn by the Sultan (Princess Jasmine's father) looked very luxurious, indicating that he was a person from a high social class. This happens in the film, but it is known that the costume has a similarity with the costume which also comes from Turkey which aristocrats often wear. Nobility, wearing a kaftan with fur and embroidery. In the 16th century, economics, politics, and the arts flourished as the Ottoman Empire entered its Golden Age. Textiles also reached their zenith with the introduction of weaving, especially metallic yarn. Sultans took great pride in their fashion; wearing robes or caftans of the finest and most expensive materials. Court dress designs were made by certain people in the palace called *hassanakkaşları*. Unique fabrics are also used for the Sultan's clothing, such as brocade, velvet, metallic silk, taffeta, cashmere, and cotton. Sultans, in particular, wore a kaftan, *şalvar* (a type of undergarment), and an inner robe and head covering. The headgear passed through five types during the span of the Ottoman Empire. For formal or formal occasions, the Sultan wears an inner robe with long sleeves buttoned from the elbows to the wrists and consists of a cuff, a short kaftan made of thick silk, and a long outer robe with a fur lining and buttons made of the material jewelry (Turkish Cultural Foundation). During the same period, sultans wore *üsküf* with turbans wrapped around them when they participated in state council meetings. This type of head covering became known as the tac-ı Sultani (head covering of the Sultan) (Jordan, 2021).



Figure 3: Costume. <https://images.app.goo.gl/hrMTvFip3FAihLoa6>

The materials that are allowed to be used in the garment, as well as the regulations governing the dress code, must be followed by the tailor who prepares the garment, who plays an important role in the garment design, by promoting strong preservation. traditional style. Personal tastes have no place in Ottoman culture, even though the clothing is varied and striking. The colors, shapes and qualities of the fabrics used in clothing, as well as the pieces of clothing and accessories used are all considered key

elements in the creation of social hierarchies, and there are constant attempts to regulate them.(Koç & Koca, 2011).

3.2 The Influence of Western Culture in the Film

The Middle East has a culture that is different from western culture. It can be seen in western countries such as Britain and America, where most of the population is Christian, while in the Middle East, such as Arabs, most of the population is Muslim. This difference shows the backgrounds of the two different societies and different perspectives. In addition, it shapes their values and principles. Based on the research journal from the Islamic University of Medina on "Cultural Differences in the Arab World and British Culture," which is based on the Hofstede Dimension, the results of this study indicate that Arab societies often place the family at the center of consideration. Then anything else. Friends, neighbors and the general public are critical in the lives of Arabs. Meanwhile, western people tend to be more selfish and more individual. In addition, we can also see the difference in the way they treat women. It is not surprising anymore, related to the stigma of an insufficient level of gender equality in Middle Eastern countries from a world perspective. Based on the Report of Global Gender Gap, released by the World Economic Forum in 2020, 10 countries with the worst ranking regarding their gender gap, almost all of them are countries from the Middle East region(World Economic Forum, 2019).

Regardless of the differences between the two, western countries, especially America, have more or less influenced the cultural, social, political, and economic aspects of Middle Eastern countries. In the 2019 Aladdin film, the writer argues that Disney has incorporated western culture, which aims to influence and change the way viewers perceive Middle Eastern culture through the change in Disney's Princess Jasmine character in the latest version of Aladdin.

3.2.1 Princess Jasmine's Character which Represents for Modern Issue

Since the beginning of the broadcast of the latest version of Aladdin, there is one thing that has become the focus of every audience, namely the character Jasmine, played by an English-Indian actress, who has drawn considerable criticism because the public expects an actress Middle Eastern. People criticize this casting choice for the overgeneralization of the Middle East, in which countries such as Iraq and India seem interchangeable. However, Disney remains on the choice (Theysen, 2020). In the film, Princess Jasmine's character is portrayed as a smart woman and resolves to refuse anything she does not want. Her main ambition was not related to marriage as she was advancing to become a female sultan, which went against tradition and law. However, it is not a middle eastern female character, but a character created by Disney. Here we can see Disney's efforts to incorporate western ideology through the character

Princess Jasmine, namely by turning Jasmine into a woman who has the ambition to become a country leader.

The first scene that can be seen is when Jasmine's daughter gets into an argument with her father. He said he could become a leader. However, his father interrupts and says he cannot become a sultan because this (women being leaders) has not happened since 1,000 years the kingdom was founded. This scene appears at 0:22:05(Ritchie & August, 2019). Here, the audience knows that women's freedom is still very limited, including for women from respected families. It can be seen from the scene above where her father firmly rejected Princess Jasmine's wish.



Figure 4: Princess Jasmine's Character

In this film, Naomi plays Princess Jasmine who is a woman from the Middle East, also the daughter of the dreamer of the land of Agrabah. By using the theory of Orientalism from Edward Said which is a style of thought from a western point of view and an eastern point of view, the author has a statement that the character of Princess Jasmine is visually depicted as a Middle Eastern woman but character and character is formed using a Western perspective by incorporating Western culture.

According to the Journal Beauty and the (B) East: A Postcolonial Reading of Disney's Arab Woman by Hajar EDDARIF, Disney's story presents Middle Eastern women who are "Orientalized" par excellence. Throughout the film, these women are objectified, silenced, and proved satisfied with their position and fate. Arab women, in general, are associated with backwardness and passivity in the eyes of Disney audiences, especially children. It is also caused by their inability to speak out and lack of organization, alluding to the dictatorships and lack of democracy of the Arab world. As Edward Said has said in his book Orientalism (1978): "There has been so massive and calculatedly aggressive an attack on the contemporary societies of the Arab and Muslim for their backwardness, lack of democracy and abrogation of women's rights that we simply forget that such notions as modernity, enlightenment, and democracy are by no means simple and agreed-upon concepts that one either does or does not find, like

Easter eggs in the living-room." (Said, 1978). Said emphasizes in this quote that by accusing Arabs of a lack of equality and violations of women's rights, the West ignored the fact that democracy, like modernity and enlightenment, are far from simplistic and predefined concepts that can and must mean the same thing to all. According to Said, democracy is not something that one considers or does not find.

Apart from that scene, there was also a scene in which Princess Jasmine sang a song entitled Speechless; that scene is when Jafar ordered the soldiers to put Princess Jasmine to the prison. The few lines of the song that are visible are the first line of the song's lyrics, "Written in stone Every rule, every word Centuries-old and unbending," which means that She (Jasmine) refers to the rules of the Easter society around her as (centuries) old and unbending) showcasing her desire to defy the laws that dictate what she can and cannot do. The second is, "**Stay in your place better seen and not heard but now that story is ending,**" (Scott, 2019), which can be interpreted as She repeats Jafar's words as she imagines the men around her disappear. This song serves as a source of empowerment for her, viewed as a positive representation of a strong Muslim woman. (Misbah, 2019). Moreover, the last part is the most iconic, that is the chorus which sounds, "**I won't be silenced you can't keep me quiet won't tremble when you try it all I know is I won't go speechless. Let the storm in I cannot be broken no, I won't live unspoken cause I know that I won't go speechless.**" (Scott, 2019) It could be represented as she will not be silent anymore like before, the people who had been silenced by her and under pressure now they will not be able to do it anymore; they will not be able to make her tremble. No matter how much storm (pressure) she will endure, Jasmine will never be crushed. Jasmine has realized, and from now on, she will not live in silence. Quote from The University of Chicago Press Journals, "Censor the body and you censor breath and speech simultaneously" (Cixous et al., 1976).



Figure 5: Princess Jasmine's Character

That sentence defined that a woman cannot just silent and accepts anything that other people give. It describes a modern woman who is a woman we could not just silence when other people curtail our freedom. That image is using Low Angle Shot, which shows objects from below to show the object has a

strong character. Indeed, this part is a scene devoted to fully highlighting the main female character. The camera continues to highlight and focus on Princess Jasmine's every move when she chants the lyrics of the song out loud as if she wants to voice her inner voice all this time when Jasmine always been restrained and limited for her dreams and desire, at the same time she wants to show her strength as a woman and will not just silent. The camera shoots it from various angles to make it look the way it should, so the viewer can feel and capture the scene's implicit message and character.

The final scene shows Princess Jasmine talking to her father after defeating Jafar with the help of Genie and Aladdin at 1:57:09 minutes. At this time, Jasmine's father decided that Jasmine should be the next sultan, which meant that Jasmine would be the next sultan to succeed her father.

It illustrates that women can become leaders in films because there are no gender boundaries to become leaders. Therefore, the culture that Disney built embraces western culture. In Middle Eastern culture, women's freedom is still minimal today, in contrast to a western culture where women have the same position as men.



Figure 6: Princess Jasmine's Character. <https://id.pinterest.com/pin/495114552787695029/>

Changes in views and prejudices occur regularly and affect not only racial stereotypes but gender stereotypes as well. Before the Sexual Revolution and the Women's Liberation Movement, women are depicted as submissive and passive, with only one goal in mind: finding a man who could save them from suffering. Women are depicted stereotypically in the Disney animation Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella. However, after the Sexual Revolution and the Women's Liberation Movement, the stereotypes of women changed for the better. Recent Disney classics such as Mulan, Beauty and the Beast, Pocahontas, and Aladdin featuring Princess Jasmine all feature stronger heroines who have a degree of freedom and seem able to shape their destiny and make their voices heard. (Letaief, 2015)

The film's ending shows the Sultan (Princess Jasmine's father) approving and allowing Princess Jasmine to replace her position as leader of the country, and Princess Jasmine is appointed as the Sultan in the land or kingdom of Agrabah. Not only that, but at the end of the story, Princess Jasmine also found her love destiny; she was finally able to unite with Aladdin without Aladdin having to disguise himself as Prince Ali because the Sultan had blessed them both to become life partners. (Ritchie & August, 2019).

4. CONCLUSION

As the result of the research, the author explained how Disney represents Middle Eastern culture. The author took two things: the setting and the second is the costumes worn by the main players in the film. It has been explained that the setting of the place in the film Aladdin looks very Middle Eastern nuanced. It is proven by the shape of the building, which has characteristics such as buildings in Middle Eastern countries, especially Arabs. As already mentioned about the characteristics of Middle Eastern buildings, one of which is the discussion of buildings made of sand or mud, which according to the author's research this material is indeed suitable for buildings with hot climates. In addition, dates and camels are also widely available around the population; it is known that dates and camels are plants and animals that are identical to Middle Eastern countries, especially Arabia.

Second, the Middle Eastern culture is also shown by Disney in the film through the costumes used by the players. For discussion, the author has made costumes worn by the two main characters in the film, namely Aladin and Sultan (Princess Jasmine's father). In the above discussion, the writer explains the results of his research; the writer argues that Aladdin's costumes and the sultan are traditional Turkish clothes. The author clarifies this by explaining the Turkish Empire's history and the changes in clothing each year.

The second research question is about the Influence of Western Culture in the Film. This question would be discussing how Disney influences the audience's perspective of the Middle East. The author has a statement that Princes Jasmine's character is created by Disney (western). It because, as we know that the freedom of Middle east women is still limit. The author took three scenes of Princess Jasmine from when Princess Jasmine told her father that she has been ready to be a sultan, but her question was rejected directly by her father. The second scene is when Princess Jasmine sang a song titled Speechless, and the third scene and the final of the film are when Princess Jasmine finally makes her wish, that is, to be a sultan and found her true love.

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