



## Television industry

# From Aladdin to Lost Ark, Muslims get angry at 'bad guy' film images

**Crude and exaggerated stereotypes are fuelling Islamophobia, says study**

**Lucy Ward, social affairs correspondent**

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Popular films ranging from Hollywood blockbusters to children's cartoons are depicting "crude and exaggerated" stereotypes of Muslims and perpetuating Islamophobia, according to a study published today.

A report by the Islamic Human Rights Commission argues that films as diverse as *The Siege*, a portrayal of a terrorist attack on New York starring Denzel Washington and Bruce Willis, the Disney film *Aladdin* and the British comedy *East is East* have helped demonise Muslims as violent, dangerous and threatening, and reinforce prejudices.

While *The Siege* is attacked for inter-cutting Islamic ritual and terrorist violence, potentially linking the two in the minds of audiences, *Aladdin* faces criticism for depicting Arabs as "ruthless caricatures" with "exaggerated and ridiculous accents".

The study, titled *The British media and Muslim representation: the ideology of demonisation*, argues that Hollywood has a crucial role in influencing how the public views Muslims.

A survey conducted as part of the research revealed that Muslims in Britain felt negative images of their faith on the big and small screen had consequences in their daily lives. Those interviewed "found a direct correlation between media portrayal and their social experiences of exclusion, hatred, discrimination and violence".

## **Bias**

As well as deep unease with big screen portrayals, the research also found a perception of "unashamed bias" in the media against Muslims, with 62% believing the media to be Islamophobic and 16% describing it as racist. Only 4% considered its representation "fair".

The authors call for more power for cinema censors to be able to curtail or even decline certification of "objectionable material", as well as more effective media watchdogs and increased responsibility in coverage of issues involving Muslims on the part of newspapers and television. The report, part of a series produced by the commission - a research and campaigning body - with the backing of the Joseph Rowntree charitable trust, is significant in that it seeks to provide a direct voice for the Muslim community in Britain.

Massoud Shadjareh, spokesman for the commission, said: "Rather than guess what the Muslim community's needs and aspirations are, it actually comes from the community itself rather than organisations that represent it."

There was widespread agreement among more than 1,100 Muslims questioned by researchers that media reports involving Muslims in Britain are "selective, biased, stereotypical and inaccurate", with Muslims generally considered as "others" and outsiders.

Arzu Merali, head of research at the commission and co-author of the report, said the representation of Muslims in film and television was particularly important, given recent research indicating that eight out of 10 Britons had no close contact with Muslims.

The problem with portrayals in film was not the fact that they were negative images, but that they were the only images: "You don't get a good Muslim guy in a movie." Any suggestion that films such as Aladdin were never intended to be realistic portrayals was "analogous to saying similar things to the Jewish community in the early 1930s", she said.

The fact that films such as The Siege pre-dated the 9/11 attacks on the twin towers challenged any argument that negative portrayals of Muslims as potential suicide bombers are a "natural" result of atrocities such as the Madrid and London bombings, Ms Merali added.

The report says the tale of indiscriminate terrorist violence in New York "brings into focus some of the worst American fears - that is, Muslims or Arabs attacking the country, murdering men, women and children ... and 'attacking our way of life'."

Repeated juxtaposition of Islamic ritual practices such as prayer in a mosque and the call to prayer from a minaret with scenes of exploding bombs and indiscriminate killing implies that "terrorist acts are intrinsic to Islamic beliefs and practices", the study argues.

Executive Decision, featuring a plane hijack by Palestinian terrorists, also shows terrorists reciting prayers before and after murdering innocent passengers, "almost defining terrorism as an Islamic ritual", it adds.

Other films criticised include Raiders of the Lost Ark, where, say the authors, the Egyptian backdrop is portrayed using a stereotyped shorthand including veiled women hurrying through bazaars to the sound of snake-charming music.

### **Harsh**

The cartoon Aladdin faced protests on release in 1993 because its opening song referred to a place where "they cut off your ear if they don't like your face", forcing Disney executives to edit out the lines. Today's report says: "Rather than portray the Arab culture and Islamic religion in a positive or neutral light, the producers associate it with harsh punishments and oppressive practices.

Some of those interviewed believed that the film industry is used as a tool of foreign policy in western countries to demonise Muslims and galvanise public distrust. A Bradford man, aged 35, said the film industry needed "a new bogeyman" after the collapse of communism. Others said the media was the chief instrument of Islamophobia, particularly through the frequent linking of "Islam" and "Muslim" with words such as extremism, terrorism and bombing.

Many felt the media failed to give enough opportunity to Muslims to represent themselves. Those Muslim figures who do appear in the media are seen as either holding extremist views or are "marginalised Muslims" who do not represent the Muslim community.

### **Myths and messages from the movies**

#### **Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981)**

Indiana Jones must find the ark of the covenant before the Nazis. The report says: "The cultural stereotypes and scenarios are patently obvious," pointing to a street

scene featuring bazars, veiled women and bearded men in traditional dress, all set to snake-charming music

### **The Siege**(1998)

Depicts a wave of attacks by Palestinian terrorists in New York city, in response to an Islamic religious leader's abduction by the US military. Report says that the film reinforces "the monolithic stereotype of the Arab/Palestinian/Muslim being violent and ready to be martyred for their cause".

### **East Is East** (1999)

A mixed-race Anglo-Pakistani family in 1970s Salford struggle against the traditional background enforced upon them by their father. The report says the representation of the Muslim husband as a polygamous wife-beating tyrant "fits into many of the negative perceptions people have of Muslims"

### **Executive Decision** (1996)

Palestinians hijack a Boeing 747 to launch a nerve gas attack on Washington DC. Report says the film "plays on the worst fears ... about a potential terrorist lurking in every Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim-looking person, and the incompatibility of Islamic and western values"

### **Aladdin** (1992)

The report queries why a children's cartoon describes Aladdin's homeland as "barbaric", and notes that "good Arabs" including Aladdin are given American accents while the rest of the cast have "exaggerated and ridiculous Arab accents".

### **House of Sand and Fog** (2003)

An abandoned wife is evicted from her home, which is taken over by an Iranian family forced to flee their country following the 1979 revolution. The report says the film constructs a "negative description of the revolution, without enabling any detailed or balanced analysis of the event"

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