

Paradise Now: Image Restoration of the Palestinian Society

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ABSTRACT

This paper sheds light on Hani Abu Assad's movie *Paradise Now*. The movie is seen as an alternative resistance method through which Abu Assad challenges the stereotypical image of Arabs. The movie presents Arabs, particularly Palestinians within a new identity that is closer to reality as opposed to the mythical one often promoted by Hollywood. The director chooses to follow the last days of two "suicide bombers" in order to expose part of the harsh realities that these young men and women go through as normal people facing dozens of cultural, economical and political challenges. This paper aims at focusing on such cinematic attempts that utilizes art in order to spread deeper understanding of the Other and a clearer vision of mutual existence.

Keywords: Alternative Resistance; Representations; Stereotypes; Identity; Culture; Suicide Bombers.

Introduction

The inner conflict between what I know is true and what I see as true in the eyes of people around me will probably never settle down any time soon. The media framing of Arabs and Muslims as terrorists, uncivilized and fanatic oppressors is well designed that it will often leave the audience actually believing. Today, Arabs' and Muslims' "...universally recognized prototypes are bearded, gun-toting, bandanna-wearing men, in long robes or military fatigues of some Islamic (read terrorist) organization or country." (Gerami, 2005:449) The Arab and the Muslim nations within such a one-dimensional equation become nothing but a mythically massive group of fanatics who are good at nothing but terrorism. The diversity of Arabs (Muslims and non-Muslims) and the richness of the Muslim nations (generally peaceful nations) are reduced to one fundamentalist Islamic representation. Few would question the authority and authenticity of this prototype especially as the "reality" they see in news equates the fantasy they see in other media productions.

Arabs deformed images on screen cannot be totally blamed on Hollywood or any other western and European producers. Real Arabs share the responsibility of today's reel Arabs. We have to acknowledge that ignorance and mere imitation of a long western history of stereotyping others must definitely influence today's productions of cinematic Arabs. Then again we cannot ignore that some actual historical events and terrorists' actions carried on by some Arabs through history play a major role in this production. Furthermore, the political tensions in the Middle East with Palestinian/ Israeli conflict being a cornerstone, present the region as a stage for various upheavals and wars. As no one can deny the political situation in the Middle East, one still believes that the people are no more but victims of a pull-and-push game of different powers in the world including Hollywood. Yet, passively accepting this "victim" position is definitely self-perpetuation, yet fortunately most of the Arabs today especially young Arabs are more than aware of this.

Film producers and movie professionals comprehend this cinematic war-effect as they realized that "The war years, he [Adolph Zukor, the head of Paramount Pictures] said, "register[ed] indisputably the fact that as an avenue of propaganda, as a channel for conveying thought and opinion, the movies are unequaled by any form of

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communication.”” (Shaheen, 2001:27) Alternative images are the long-needed outcome of new cinematic production and it all depends on presenting alternative knowledge. Many Arabs involved in media are using the different venues to get their voices heard and their true images acknowledged. And as cinema is the unequalled form of communication, Arabs movie producers and writers are paving their way towards Hollywood itself, slowly maybe, but definitely determined. *Paradise Now* is a good example of this and eventually raises many questions about the true messages and motives behind the bad and stereotypical ones. For it clarifies that the problem is not one of purely lack of knowledge but maybe rather one of more complicated political interests.

It is essential nowadays to address all kinds of stereotypes and prejudices spreading through our world today in order to reach a common ground where all of us feel that they belong. It might be harder for those who are rarely victims of such practices to understand the importance to this or understand that often such image distortions towards others are created in their part of the world. This paper sheds light on some of the stereotypes that circulate around Arabs and Muslims and are promoted through media as facts. It underlines that the time is now for Western society to change their perceptions and realize their role in the image deformation that Arabs and Muslims suffer from.

I attempt in this paper to forefront the movie *Paradise Now* as a work that promotes activism and change, not only towards Arabs and Muslims who are the victims of image deformations but also the Western society who are victims as well of a manipulative media that blinds their minds and hearts. *Paradise Now* is presented in this work as a work of art that calls for political resistance and social reform.

Attempts for alternative Images: Production and Reception of *Paradise Now*

Paradise Now (2005) is one of those movies that aim at exposing the strategic visual practices of the cinema industry in addition to presenting the audience with a real chance to hear the story from the mouths of the Arabs and Muslims themselves, generated from their own everyday realities. On the surface, the film follows two young Arab Palestinian suicide bombers who are living their last few hours before they carry on an attack in the city of Tel Aviv. The producer, Hani Abu Assad gives us a chance to go through the stream of consciousness of these men as well as the women involved in their lives. The movie has caused much debate, especially as it was nominated to the Oscars but never actually won, due mainly to a Zionist campaign. It is no joke that *Paradise Now* was fought fearfully as it was nominated for the Oscars by many parties who saw it as a threat to the status quo and their racist interests. This movie addresses the misery of Palestinians under the Israeli occupation and Zionist practices and accordingly it opens a huge window for the world to see the truth about those two parties, the thing that is surely unacceptable for the occupation. The director wanted to show the world a true picture through the silver screen in order to help us all understand where the Palestinians are coming from and try to put ourselves in their shoes. *Paradise Now* is not a justification for violence but rather a call for reality. This is exactly what the Zionist campaign wanted to and thus worked hard to stop the movie from winning the Oscars. The fact that it was even nominated to the Oscars was hard enough for the Israeli occupation and they surely did all they could to stop its winning.

This film tries to establish a new image of the Arab Palestinians, one perceived within its social and historical context and challenge by their daily reality of the Israeli occupation. It is one of the first popular films that present a more humanistic portrait of Arab men and women who despite public identity as “suicide bombers” they reveal their more complicated personal stories that allow the viewers another interpretation of the Arab-Palestinian conflict.

The movie has definitely given everyone something to think about especially as it is the first to feature the Palestinian-Israeli conflict with an emphasis on suicide bombers. According to Abu Assad the film is situated beyond pro or anti propaganda. Rather it helps situate one outside oneself where one can have a fresh look and judgment about what he/she takes as his/her realities. The success of the movie according to him is due to the fact that it allowed him to combine “...lighting dark places you’ve never seen, and letting the audience use their imagination in what they already knows”. (Oba, 2007:1) This alternative picture presents us with surely offers a physical and psychological transformation to an audience who more often than less have never seen the Palestinian reality by their own eyes away

from the framing of the western media and Hollywood's stereotypes.

Paradise Now was actually filmed in Palestine, the heart of the Arab struggle and political conflict that haunt the whole Middle East. The film is believed to bring the occupied territories of the West Bank to the political map of the current cinematic war and to the very reality of western audience. Even Arab audience themselves would find themselves paralyzed and silenced as they realized how little they themselves know about the reality of the Palestinians and the Palestinians suicide bombers. The film was co-written by Hani Abu Assad who is Palestinian and Bero Beyer who is a Jew Dutch. Obviously, the two writers felt a personal connection to the Palestinian issue and the right of these people to be presented to the world as who they really are. Above all they found it in themselves to collaborate as a team defying the media promoted reality that Arabs hates Jews and are not willing to work or even shake hands. This fact sends a message of coexistence to all those politicians who, in vain, have been trying to establish peace in the region for years now. It also emphasizes the common cause and efforts of genuine Arabs, Muslims and Jews towards a fair representation of the all sides of the conflict in the Middle East. The film is produced and supported by a number of European institutions and film funds. The crew itself is a combination of Europeans, Palestinians, and Israelis, all gathered as one team for one cause. With everybody coming together for one end, *Paradise Now* won 17 international awards including the Golden Globe for best foreign language film, and was nominated eight times to win other prizes including the Academy Awards.

Abu Assad declared, "Film is about allowing you to go to places you will never go, to be persons that you will never be. That is why we make films. You experience things you will never experience in life. You will know more when you leave than when you walked in". (Georgakas,2005:3) *Paradise Now* is more of an out of body experience that makes one learn the hard way. Most of the debates and reviews never really captured this multi dimensional aspect of the movie. As most reviewers were concerned with the obvious image that of the suicide bombers, they ignored many other aspects that were beautifully depicted in the film. One major angle that Abu Assad portrays is the gender identities and politics among Palestinians that can easily be applied to other parts of the Arab world. The lack of gender analysis presented *Paradise Now* with one masculine face that of the suicide bombers. Not only does *Paradise Now* present a different female image for Arab Palestinians, but it also map the gender relations between the Palestinian males and females, in addition to the gender politics that govern that society and set the boundaries. The film reviews never clearly crossed the prejudice gender boundaries that often focus on the male and keep the female in the dark shadow, silent with no clear voice.

Arab Men and Masculinities

"For cinema as for politics the "Middle East" now exists as a quasi-mystical category outside of time and space, a ready source of dark fears and threats".(Boggs, 2006:336) The authors argue that this existence of the Middle East dominated the public western perception long before 9/11. Then, the Arab man was the barbaric man who mainly practiced his physical violence on his domestic possessions represented mainly in his many women. The masculine violence and oppression against Arab women was typically depicted by the Harem spectacle where Arab women image would be shallow, passive and emptied of its humanistic essence. Often, the Arab Muslim women would be the symbol of the Middle Eastern patriarchal violence or better say private terrorism. The aggressive attitudes and practices of Arab men took different forms with the passage of time and moved casually to the public space. The international terrorist threat that Arab men impose on the world today is definitely mythical.

The hegemonic representation of Arabs as terrorists and potential suicide bombers in Western media influenced the ideology of the masses. With the "cinematic" coverage of the 9/11 attacks on TV and its exaggerated depiction on the silver screen, the Arab as a timed bomb became a physical truth for the western people as they actually hear the ticking of the bomb's timer and many actually decide to defend themselves by attacking first through the many hate crimes reported all over the U.S. and the Europe against Arabs and Muslims or anyone who looks as such. In their Article "Hollywood and the Spectacle of Terrorism" Boggs and Pollard highlight that " Cinematic as well as political

approaches to terrorism inevitably mirror recent shifts in world politics, just as they reproduce key elements of domestic ideological hegemony: patriotism, the cult of guns and violence, glorification of technology, the hyper-masculine hero, obsession with “alien” threats”.(336) Hegemonizing western patriotism and civilization, and Eastern terrorism and savagery served the powerful western white elites sell the elimination of the “other” as a heroic need to save the world of destructive fanatics.

Paradise Now does a good job in re-reeling a positive image of Arab men and women as rational human being as opposed to their “traditional” image as impulsive, irrational creatures. The two main men in the film, Khalid and Said, are presented as suicide bombers but they are only so in contrast and conflict of their other more common side of soft, emotional, and warm young men. As one can appreciate the more objective masculinity in *Paradise Now* one cannot mess the real femininity presented by the main female character. Suha stands for a femininity that has long been reduced to belly dancers, submissive maidens, ignorant covered women, or terrorists. Abu Assad not only presents a more real Arab femininity and masculinity, but he also ties the two together to establish a highly appreciated gender identities as well as gender power relations, that invite the audience to re-think a whole nation’s gender identity.

Hani Abu Assad acknowledges the violent side of Arab masculinity but he chooses to defy it by the other side of that masculinity. The personality of the main character; Khalid and his decision not to carry on the suicide attack challenge the cinematic Arab man who is bloodthirsty. Even Said, who became a suicide bomber accomplishing his hegemonic masculine role, is still imposing questions about the real motive behind his action. Abu Assad stresses, “Palestinian suicide attacks are born not of religious fervor but of hopelessness and the daily humiliation of living under the occupation.” (Smith, 2005:13) Violence is a consequence and reaction that cannot be understood unless it is taken in context along with all the other often silenced characteristics. What Abu Assad is trying to do in his film is to use the beam of suicide bombers’ bodies to catch the attention of the world to observe the bigger picture of a people and a nation who are often absent or deformed in all media venues. He employs fictional suicide bombers to find the real men and women, and present them to the world as simply such, sharing a lot of characteristics with all other men and women.

A more realistic image

Normally, what we see on the screen is the scary crude Arab who simply enjoys killing others, yet this time we actually see the man who is a product of his reality before we see the suicide bombers. We actually witness the humiliation, the frustration, and broken dreams of his manhood. This wrecked masculinity is what is often missing in the media images of Arab men. *Paradise Now* opens with an every-day routine of Khalid and Said who thought that their day has ended when it was about to start as they receive a notice that they have been chosen to carry on a suicide attack on Tel Aviv the next day. The smooth acceptance of their coming death stands for the common hopelessness that is slowly suffocating young Palestinian men and puts their masculinity to the test on daily bases. These young men are not as masculine as the media depict them after all. They might look tough, and they do have dark skin, and they might accept suicide missions easily, but this has a little to do with their true masculinity and a lot with their political subordinations and social definitions.

Towards the end of *Paradise Now* Khalid tries to convince Said of the uselessness of their coming act and he urges him to go back with for killing others and being killed is no way to prove any point not even masculinity. Said never refutes Khalid’s logic, yet he declares that he has no other choice as he is dead anyway. If Said goes back, not only his own masculinity would be demeaned but also his family’s for generations to come. As a son of a Palestinian Israeli-agent who was assassinated by ‘masculine’ Palestinians, Said can no longer take the social stigmatization to his family. He has to clear the family’s name and the only way is to prove his ultimate masculinity by killing himself along with others. *Paradise Now* emphasizes this socially constructed masculinity, yet it places such masculinity within its true context and along side with other masculinities such as Khalid’s who never actually carries on the attack.

Paradise Now keeps jumping between the fine boundaries separating the Arab cinematic masculinity and the more

real one. The image we see in Abu Assad's film doesn't directly dismiss what exists but rather shrewdly play on the image and rotate it over and over building realistic Arab men and masculinity. One side of this ignored masculinity is the soft humane side. Both Said and Khalid are beautifully depicted as soft men with sweet emotional side. Khalid's recitation of his will is an unforgettable scene that defies that image of a heartless Arab man who cares for nobody but himself. He stands there in front of a taping camera with his weapon in one hand and a ready-made speech in the other. As he reads along one can feel the fear and sorrow in his eyes and the eyes of Said who was watching, waiting for his turn. As the men recording Khalid start eating his mother's sandwiches, the chewing faces awaken the human in Khalid as he goes blank for a moment obviously remembering his mother, his home, and his life as a human before being a man. He stops reading and lets his emotions out and sends a personal message to his mother, one of care, poverty, and despair.

The film also follows the workings of humane reasoning, influencing, and feelings between the males and females. The sexual masculinity of Arab men is challenged through a sincere love story between Said and Suha. As the story unfolds we realize that Said always had feelings for Suha and had always been faithful even though she was abroad. This dedication to one woman resists the hyper sexuality of Arab masculinity and brings it closer to "ideal" cinematic western masculinity dedicated to one woman. Yet, Abu Assad never attempts to depict this masculinity as perfect and unrealistic especially as it unfolds through Suha's femininity. Thus, Said, like any other man who is in love, tries to get to Suha at least twice in the movie, once as he visits her in the middle of the night and the other when he actually kisses her in the car after he exposes his deepest pain and worries to her. Despite his feelings to her and hers to him, Said's masculinity never appears as vulgar, violent, and sensational as it often appears in western movies. In *Paradise Now* the Palestinians' masculinity is simply an ordinary male masculinity, one commonly shared with other men in the world and definitely shared with other women.

One task that *Paradise Now* seems to be set to accomplish is emphasizing the feminine masculine relations among Arab Palestinian women and men. The common image of the Arab gender relation is a dark one, one of subordination and oppression practiced by the men over the women. We rarely see the Arab men logically or emotionally competing with Arab women within a healthy gender relation. In *Paradise Now* Abu Assad clearly raises this issue. Suha is frequently involved with conversations, debates, and critical thinking with Said and Khalid. In many scenes the various political messages of the movie are transmitted to the audience through the gender relation, mental reflections, and debates. The three main characters, despite their gender identity, challenge each other, and question each other's gender identity, logic and purposes. Such a reality is seen as a highly political message that sets Arab masculinity and femininity on the defense line to fight for a whole culture and nation.

Aside from its juxtaposition to Arab masculinity, Arab femininity in *Paradise Now* stands individually as a true example of the common Arab feminine identity. Through the character of Suha, Abu Assad is challenging the hegemonic Arab femininity as voiceless shadows. Woman's worth as life giver equates man's worth as breadwinner. This is not to dismiss all the patriarchal practices that Arab women suffer from. With the character of Suha, *Paradise Now* is revealing the face of true Arab Middle Eastern femininity that is as rich as any other femininity. Suha is an inspirational character who is independent, open-minded, strong, and logical. She prevails as outspoken, intellectually shrewd, and emotionally stable, defying the Arab hegemonic femininity with much autonomy and self-determination. Her strong passion for politics, her optimistic vision for a peaceful coexistence, and her often engagements in various arguments, release her from the private space in which western portrayals have locked her for so long and into the public masculine sphere where she proves to be a good equal.

Suha is more of the voice of logic that brings the two main male characters as well as the audience to rethink their values, aims, and identities. She is a beautiful person from within as well from without. She has been educated and raised abroad, lived alone for some time, and is not following any male figure as she continues to live independently. She comes back to Palestine for she wants to serve her country and her people. We never see her as a passive shadow of some man, or as an ignorant female, who only masters the art of sensational femininity. The femininity that Suha

stands for is a product of her reality and circumstances. It is a consequence of her foreign exposure but definitely a product of her heritage, Arab identity, and eastern femininity. She is depicted as not completely free but at the same time not mythically suppressed by her man, or her culture or her religion. *Paradise Now* is not aiming at romanticizing Arab femininity, but it is surely aiming at introducing its more realistic face that can dismiss the mythical and stereotypical image of Arab femininity.

Conclusion

Often, Western cinema presents the Arab within a rigid framework of barbarity, ugliness, and violence. The Arab cinematic identity is reduced to few major representations ranging from greasy oil sheiks to heartless terrorists. Unfortunately, the western conception of Arabs, their culture and region is highly influenced by the media venues and what they have to promote as true. Sadly, the Arab reality, the political upheavals surrounding their region, extremisms, and all kinds of frustrations pave the way for elite capitalists and imperialists to sell the whole race as “others”. The Arab humanity and dignity, shared with all other humans are often out of the picture and consequently out of western reality. The geographical distance along with the virtual distance that media are enforcing make the Arab world a mysterious mythical place. Accordingly the Arab is more of a non-existent creature that can easily be exploited and stripped of humanistic characteristics and richness. Arab men and women on screens are more of zombies, empty entities for the wildest imaginations to fill with all kinds of stereotypes and racial profiling that leaves Arabs themselves confused.

Amongst this turbulence of confusion, image deformation and political cinematic tactics to dehumanize a nation, Arab masculinity and femininity fall as the prime candidates for victimization. A film like *Paradise Now* doesn't actually turn the table upside down for Hollywood but rather acknowledges all the social and political constructions of Arab masculinity and femininity and all the extremisms and negativities that might accompany that. We witness the social constructions of Arab masculinity and femininity that actually drive young men to explode their own bodies to fulfill their masculine requirements as “true” men, while women accept it passively and sadly as a “true” feminine woman would do. Khalid, Said and Suha openly challenge these definitions and invite us to rethink the images we for long have taken as representational and nothing but the truth. *Paradise Now* never claims the existence of paradise on earth, but it calls for a just image of a people who might not be as perfect as angels but who are as human as all others and who definitely deserve to be saved from the cinematic Hell.

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الجنة الآن: استعادة الصورة للمجتمع الفلسطيني

هاله عبدالحليم أبوظالب*

ملخص

تلقي هذه الورقة الضوء على فيلم "الجنة الآن" للمخرج هاني أبو أسعد. يعدّ الفيلم بمثابة أسلوب مقاومة مغاير يتحدى من خلاله المخرج أبو أسعد الصورة النمطية للعرب. إذ يقدم الفيلم العرب وخاصة الفلسطينيين بهوية جديدة هي أقرب للحقيقة بمقابل الصورة الخيالية التي عادة ما تروج لها هوليوود. لقد اختار المخرج أن يتتبع الأيام الأخيرة لمنفذي تفجيريين انتحاريين وذلك رغبة منه لتوضيح الواقع الذي يعيشه هؤلاء الأشخاص والظروف الاقتصادية والحضارية والسياسية التي تشكل تحدياً يومياً لهم. تهدف هذه الورقة إلى التركيز على مثل هذه المحاولات السينمائية التي توظف الفن؛ لكشف الحقيقة وتوثيق فهم الآخر والتعايش المشترك.

الكلمات الدالة: الصور النمطية، الهوية، المقاومة المغايرة، الحضارة، التفجيرات الانتحارية.

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