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Unveiling Orientalist and Feminist Orientalist Stereotypes in Western Cinema's Portrayal of Muslim Women

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the representation of Muslim women in Western film and television, focusing on Hala, Elite, and Cuties. Employing textual and visual analysis within the theoretical frameworks of Orientalism and feminist Orientalism, the study reveals a consistent pattern of stereotypical depiction. Muslim women are portrayed as oppressed by their conservative, Islamic backgrounds and find liberation primarily through Westernized ideals of sexuality and freedom. This liberation is often symbolized by the removal of the hijab and is facilitated by relationships with white, non-Muslim men, perpetuating narratives of the Western savior complex and a sexualized rebellion against traditional Islamic values. The findings reveal a persistent trend in Western cinema that contributes to Islamophobic sentiments and simplifies the complex realities of Muslim women's lives. The study calls for a more nuanced and respectful approach in film and television narratives to avoid reinforcing harmful stereotypes and to acknowledge the diversity and agency of Muslim women.

INTRODUCTION

The representation of Muslim women in Western cinema has become a focal point of scholarly inquiry, particularly as media portrayals continue to shape and reinforce public perceptions of Islam and its adherents. This article interrogates the prevailing cinematic narratives that depict Muslim women as uniformly oppressed, sexually repressed, or in desperate need of Western intervention. By examining the films *Hala* (2019), *Cuties* (2020), and the series *Elite* (2018–present), our study employs a combined textual and visual analytical approach grounded in the theoretical frameworks of Orientalism (Said, 1979) and feminist Orientalism (Mohanty, 1988). Through this lens, we aim to reveal how these media texts not only recycle reductive stereotypes but also contribute to broader socio-political discourses that underpin Islamophobic sentiments in contemporary society.

Central to our analysis is the contention that Western visual media frequently constructs a dichotomous world in which traditional Islamic practices are pitted against the liberatory ideals of the West. Such representations often manifest through the symbolic use of the hijab, the portrayal of Muslim family dynamics, and the depiction of sexual agency, all of which are filtered through an orientalist gaze that simplifies and distorts the complexities of Muslim women's lived experiences (Said, 1979; Mohanty, 1988). In doing so, these cinematic narratives foster a binary understanding of Muslim identity—one that frames the East as inherently repressive and in need of Western rescue, and the West as a paragon of modernity and freedom.

The significance of this inquiry is emphasized by the persistent impact of these visual tropes on global perceptions of Islam and the social and political

marginalization of Muslim communities. This article contributes to a growing body of literature that calls for a more nuanced and respectful representation of Muslim women by critically engaging with the visual and narrative strategies employed in *Hala*, *Cuties*, and *Elite*. Our analysis not only identifies recurring themes such as Orientalist depictions of oppression, the white savior complex, sexualization, and the reductive symbolism of the hijab, but also interrogates the broader implications of these portrayals for feminist discourse and intercultural understanding (Brown, 2006; Bartels *et al.*, 2019).

In what follows, we first outline the key theoretical frameworks that inform our analysis, drawing on seminal works by Said (1979) and subsequent critiques from feminist scholars. We then provide a brief synopsis of the selected media texts, highlighting the specific narrative and visual elements that serve as focal points for our thematic analysis. Through this multifaceted approach, our study endeavors to illuminate the enduring impact of orientalist and feminist orientalist stereotypes in Western cinema, and to advocate for representations that honor the diversity and agency of Muslim women.

By situating our analysis within the broader debates on cultural representation and postcolonial identity, this article not only critiques the dominant cinematic paradigms but also paves the way for alternative narratives that challenge the entrenched dichotomy between the West and the East.

Theoretical Framework Orientalism

Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) provides a comprehensive critique of Western constructions and misrepresentations of Eastern cultures, particularly those

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of the Middle East, Asia, and North Africa (Bierman, 1979; Iosr Journals & Ranjan, 2015). Building upon this foundational premise, Said contends that Orientalism operates simultaneously as an academic field, a style of thought distinguishing “Orient” from “Occident,” and an institutional mechanism for governing Eastern societies (Bartels *et al.*, 2019). By drawing on Michel Foucault’s discourse analysis and Antonio Gramsci’s concept of hegemony, Said distinguishes between “latent” and “manifest” Orientalism—both contributing to a dichotomy wherein the Orient is depicted as inferior to a supposedly rational, civilized West (Pflitsch, 2020).

In light of this theoretical grounding, Said demonstrates how Orientalism functions as both a cultural and political phenomenon, tethered to imperialist aspirations and Western scholarship (Said, 1979). Consequently, a distorted image of the Orient emerges—one not based on objective knowledge but on stereotypes that reinforce Western superiority and justify colonial expansion (Brown, 2006). This dynamic maintains cultural and political subjugation, firmly rooting the discourse of Orientalism in a hegemonic framework that casts Eastern societies as fundamentally backward (Elmenfi, 2023; Shahadat, 2024). Hence, Said’s critique, now a cornerstone in postcolonial studies, continues to illuminate how cultural and intellectual dominance operate in contemporary postcolonial contexts (Iosr Journals & Ranjan, 2015; Shahadat, 2024).

Extending these insights to modern media, recent scholarship indicates that Orientalist perspectives remain pervasive in contemporary cinema. The 2019 remake of *Aladdin*, for instance, replicates stereotypical Eastern imagery, reinforcing Western notions of the “Other” (Berker, 2021). Similarly, Turkish cinema often displays Orientalist elements by romanticizing and homoeroticizing depictions of Western and Eastern characters, spaces, and cultural practices (Peker Dağlı & Özarslan, 2022). In parallel, art from Asia is still subject to Orientalist framing in Western art circles, perpetuating harmful misrepresentations of East Asian cultures (Shi, 2023). Moreover, in Bombay cinema, the intersection of global “new Orientalism” and local historical conditions yields problematic portrayals of Islam, Muslims, and terrorists in post-9/11 productions such as *Aamir* and *New York* (Gabriel & Vijayan, 2012).

These persistent depictions matter, because Orientalist narratives fuel reductive stereotypes of Muslim societies—frequently representing Muslims as uncivilized, barbaric, or inclined to terrorism, thus emboldening Islamophobic sentiments (Abdul Wahid, 2023; Abubakar *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, the shift from traditional Orientalism to neo-Orientalism post-9/11 has exacerbated such portrayals (Abdul Wahid, 2023). This trajectory can be traced in international policy and politics toward Muslim-majority nations, illustrated by episodes like the Algerian War of Independence and the global War on Terror (Saidin & Zainal Rashid, 2022). Even during global health crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, these Orientalist agendas persist, intensifying “Muslim precarity” and

further entrenching racist narratives (Al-Moghales *et al.*, 2023). Consequently, scholars call for critical analyses, decolonization of historical narratives, and heightened awareness of misconceptions surrounding Islamic histories and practices (Saidin & Zainal Rashid, 2022; Abubakar *et al.*, 2019).

Feminist Orientalism

Building on the framework of Orientalism, Feminist Orientalism emerges when Western feminist discourse positions itself as a universal standard for progress and equality, often reducing women in Muslim-majority societies to a monolithic, oppressed category. Paidar (1997) identifies three distinct features: (1) a binary logic that portrays Western societies as modern and civilized while Muslim societies are deemed backward, (2) the depiction of Muslim women as purely victimized and lacking agency, and (3) the conflation of all Muslim societies into a single, undifferentiated entity (Paidar, 1997). Accordingly, this viewpoint aligns with a colonial rationale that presupposes Muslim women must be “rescued” or “educated” to conform to Western norms. Hasan (2005) further observes that Western feminist texts frequently imply that, even though women in the West also grapple with patriarchy, White Western women are innately more cognizant of their rights. Under this logic, Muslim women appear passive and universally subjugated, effectively erasing the myriad feminist movements anchored in non-Western cultures. A symbolic manifestation of this oversimplification is the veil (or hijab), often framed in Western feminist discourses as the quintessential signifier of backwardness (Yegeoglu, 2002). Therefore, removing the veil is upheld as the ultimate symbol of modernity and progress, overlooking the fact that many Muslim women choose to veil for reasons related to faith, identity, and personal autonomy (Hasan, 2005). In essence, such oversimplifications cast Muslim men as unyielding oppressors while Western men become de facto liberators, disregarding the intricacies of culture, religion, and female agency (Hasan, 2005).

Parallel critiques by Chandra Mohanty shed light on how Western feminist discourses construct rigid binaries, juxtaposing “Westerners” with so-called “Orientals” (Mohanty, 1988). Within this essentializing lens, non-Western women are depicted as limited by tradition and perpetually victimized, whereas Western women embody modernity and autonomy. As a result, this framework not only oversimplifies experiences of women in the Global South but also widens the divide in transnational feminist collaboration (Parameswaran, 1996). Moreover, Mohanty (2022) critiques the deep-seated stereotypes about “Oriental” societies for reinforcing the notion that the West and the East are inherently incompatible. By positioning non-Western women as uniformly oppressed and in need of Western intervention, these narratives silence and homogenize the diverse voices striving for change within the so-called “Third World” (Parameswaran, 1996; Kapadia, 1995).

Concomitantly, Mohanty (1988) points out that some Western feminist discussions depict themselves as innately more progressive, thereby dismissing or diminishing local activism across cultures, religions, and social contexts. In this vein, critics argue that universalist positions in Western feminism risk speaking for—rather than engaging with—women outside the West, perpetuating a colonial dynamic (Alghamdi & Al-Sarrani, 2014; Rather, 2023). Hence, postcolonial feminists call for more nuanced interpretations that recognize the breadth of factors influencing the lives of “Third World” women—cultural customs, historical legacies, religious practices, and socioeconomic conditions (Kapadia, 1995). Responding to these critiques, Muslim feminist scholars reject sweeping assumptions regarding the hijab, female agency, and the Western-centric ideal of liberation. Recent research reveals that many young Arab Muslim women see veiling as a personal choice and form of self-expression, challenging Western stereotypes of passivity or coercion (Zimmerman, 2015). Likewise, Muslim women scholars demand a more context-specific approach that accounts for religious practices, cultural backgrounds, and alternative feminist trajectories (Tuppurainen, 2010). To capture the full spectrum of women’s experiences, feminist anthropology of the Middle East advocates looking beyond large-scale systems to consider the emotional and aspirational dimensions of human life (Sehlikoglu, 2018). Accordingly, Islamic feminism and postcolonial feminism stand united in arguing that the hijab can signify empowerment rather than repression—a viewpoint that destabilizes Western presumptions about veiled Muslim women (Mahir *et al.*, 2023). Thus, these varied perspectives reinforce the importance of examining women’s experiences through their own sociocultural lenses rather than imposing external judgments based on a singular, Western-oriented paradigm.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilizing both textual and visual analysis to examine the representation of Muslim women in the selected media texts—Hala, Cuties, and Elite. The analysis is rooted in the theoretical frameworks of Orientalism (Said, 1979) and feminist Orientalism (Hasan, 2005; Paidar, 1995), which provide the lens through which recurring cinematic tropes are identified and interpreted.

Data Collection

The primary data for this study consist of the films Hala (2019), Cuties (2020), and the series Elite (2018–present). These works were chosen based on their cultural prominence and their explicit depictions of Muslim female characters. Both textual elements (dialogue, narrative structure, and thematic content) and visual components (cinematography, mise-en-scène, and symbolic imagery) were systematically examined. Additionally, secondary

data—including scholarly critiques—provided contextual insights and aided in the triangulation of findings (Creswell, 2018).

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The process began with a thorough familiarization with the media texts, followed by systematic coding of both visual and textual elements relevant to the research questions. Codes were then organized into themes that encapsulate Orientalist and feminist Orientalist stereotypes, such as the portrayal of Muslim women as oppressed, the white savior complex, the sexualization of female characters, and the symbolic use of the hijab.

NVivo (QSR International, 2020) was utilized to enhance the rigor and transparency of the analysis. This qualitative data analysis software facilitated the organization, coding, and retrieval of data segments, ensuring that the thematic analysis was conducted in a systematic and replicable manner. NVivo enabled the researchers to visually map connections between codes and themes, thereby reinforcing the credibility of the findings (Bazeley, 2013).

Trustworthiness and Rigor

Ensuring the credibility and dependability of the analysis was paramount. Methodological triangulation was achieved by cross-referencing findings from the films with insights drawn from scholarly literature on Orientalism and feminist Orientalism. The iterative process of coding and theme refinement, guided by established protocols (Braun & Clarke, 2006), further contributed to the study’s overall rigor. The use of NVivo provided an audit trail of decisions made during the analysis, which enhances the study’s transparency and reproducibility (Bazeley, 2013).

Brief Synopsis of the Films And Series

Hala (2019) – Apple TV+

Hala follows the journey of its titular character, a 17-year-old Pakistani-American Muslim girl navigating the intersection of cultural expectations, religious identity, and personal autonomy. Raised in a conservative household, Hala struggles with the constraints imposed by her family’s rigid adherence to tradition while simultaneously embracing the liberating possibilities offered by her Western surroundings. As she grapples with burgeoning romantic desires—particularly her attraction to a non-Muslim classmate—her internal conflict intensifies. The film explores themes of repression, self-discovery, and the negotiation of identity, culminating in Hala’s symbolic act of removing her hijab as an assertion of independence. While Hala attempts to provide a nuanced coming-of-age narrative, it has been critiqued for reinforcing reductive Orientalist tropes, particularly in its portrayal of Muslim family life as inherently repressive and incompatible with personal freedom.

Cuties (Mignonnes, 2020) – Netflix

Cuties (*Mignonnes*) is a French coming-of-age drama that centers on Amy, an 11-year-old Senegalese Muslim girl growing up in a conservative immigrant household in Paris. The film follows Amy's rebellion against her family's expectations when she becomes fascinated with a hypersexualized dance troupe composed of her classmates. Torn between her family's strict religious values and the Western ideals of freedom and self-expression embodied by the dance crew, Amy's journey is marked by tension, transgression, and ultimately, disillusionment. *Cuties* aims to critique the premature sexualization of young girls in modern society, yet its execution has been highly controversial. Critics argue that the film juxtaposes Islamic tradition against Western liberation in a way that homogenizes Muslim cultures as uniquely oppressive while presenting Western norms as the singular path to empowerment.

Elite (2018–present) – Netflix

Elite is a Spanish teen drama series that revolves around the lives of students at Las Encinas, an exclusive private school. Among its central characters is Nadia Shanaa, a Palestinian-Spanish hijabi student from a working-class Muslim family. As she navigates the elite academic environment, she faces discrimination, culture clashes, and social pressures that conflict with her family's conservative values. Much of Nadia's storyline revolves around her romantic entanglement with Guzmán, a wealthy non-Muslim classmate who becomes a catalyst for her transformation. Throughout the series, Nadia's hijab is portrayed as a restrictive burden, with her eventual removal of it symbolizing her supposed liberation. *Elite* employs common Orientalist tropes by constructing a binary opposition between Nadia's traditional Muslim upbringing and the Western ideals of love, freedom, and modernity, reinforcing the stereotype that Muslim women can only achieve self-fulfillment by breaking away from their cultural and religious roots.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Orientalist Depictions of Oppression and Homogeneity

Drawing on Said's (1979) conceptualization of Orientalism as a framework that constructs the East as static, backward, and inherently repressive (Bartels *et al.*, 2019; Brown, 2006), contemporary cinema frequently reproduces these tropes to depict Muslim women as uniformly subjugated. In *Hala*, for instance, the narrative is structured around a rigid familial hierarchy where parental authority is absolute. The protagonist's interactions are tightly controlled, and her domestic environment is portrayed as culturally insular—with her mother's insistence on exclusively using Urdu highlighting a deliberate rejection of Western norms. Such portrayals mirror Said's (1979) argument that the Orient is systematically presented as monolithic and resistant to

progress, thereby reinforcing stereotypes of oppression and cultural isolation (Bierman, 1979).

Similarly, *Cuties* dramatizes the tension between traditional Islamic conservatism and Western modernity by positioning its central character in a conflict between family-imposed religiosity and the liberatory promise of secular expression. The film utilizes narrative elements such as an arranged marital subplot and strict familial expectations to suggest that adherence to Islamic practices inherently suppresses individual freedom. This binary opposition between an oppressive religious framework and the allure of Western modernity not only simplifies complex cultural realities but also reinforces a homogenized image of Muslim family life, echoing the orientalist perspective that reduces diverse experiences to a single narrative of victimhood (Iosr Journals & Ranjan, 2015; Shahadat, 2024).

In the Spanish series *Elite*, the character Nadia is similarly burdened with conflicting cultural demands. Her enforced adherence to a conservative dress code—including the compulsory wearing of the hijab—and the imposition of strict academic and social expectations further embody the orientalist depiction of Muslim families as authoritarian. Nadia's struggle to reconcile her traditional upbringing with the liberal milieu of her educational environment reinforces the dichotomy between a repressive Islamic tradition and the progressive ideals of the West. This portrayal is indicative of a broader cinematic trend that reduces Muslim women's lived realities to simplistic tropes of oppression, thereby perpetuating the notion that authentic liberation can only be achieved through the abandonment of traditional cultural practices (Pflicts, 2020; Elmenfi, 2023).

Collectively, these cinematic examples illustrate how Western media often employs Orientalist imagery to depict Muslim women as uniformly oppressed by rigid familial and cultural structures. This homogenization not only distorts the complexities of Muslim identities but also reinforces a broader political and cultural agenda that privileges Western notions of modernity and freedom over indigenous forms of self-expression (Said, 1979; Brown, 2006). By simplifying diverse experiences into a singular narrative of subjugation, these portrayals contribute to the enduring myth of a repressive, monolithic Muslim society—a myth that continues to underpin Islamophobic sentiments and obscure the rich plurality of Muslim women's lives (Bierman, 1979; Shahadat, 2024).

Theme 2: White Savior Complex and Western Feminist Imperatives

Contemporary representations in films such as *Hala*, *Cuties*, and the series *Elite* frequently reproduce a narrative in which Muslim women are portrayed as inherently oppressed by their traditional cultural milieus and liberated only through the intervention of Western, predominantly white, figures. This depiction resonates with Edward Said's (1979) notion of Orientalism, which situates the West as the epitome of modernity

and progress in opposition to an allegedly static and repressive East (Bartels *et al.*, 2019; Brown, 2006). By extension, feminist Orientalism critiques such portrayals for imposing a homogenized vision of non-Western femininity, wherein the removal of cultural markers—most notably the hijab—is valorized as the ultimate signifier of emancipation (Hasan, 2005; Paidar, 1995).

In *Hala*, the narrative centers on a Pakistani American Muslim teenager whose journey toward self-actualization is inextricably linked to her interactions with white characters. The film situates her struggle within a conservative household, wherein parental strictness and cultural insularity are juxtaposed against the liberating influence of white mentors. For instance, her English teacher, Mr. Lawrence, not only encourages her creative expression but also implicitly endorses Western literary traditions as the pathway to personal freedom. Likewise, her burgeoning friendship with Jesse—a white classmate who introduces her to the liberating activity of skateboarding—further emphasizes the narrative that her cultural liberation is contingent upon adopting Western modes of recreation and self-expression. This binary framework, where Western practices are depicted as inherently superior to traditional Muslim norms, reinforces the notion that true empowerment for Muslim women is accessible only through the rejection of their cultural heritage (Said, 1979; Mohanty, 1988).

The film *Cuties* extends this argument by illustrating how Western cultural influences permeate the lives of young Muslim girls. The protagonist is subjected to the authority of a white dance coach who advocates for provocative and overtly sexualized dance moves—behaviors emblematic of Western ideals of freedom and modernity. Additionally, the protagonist's quest for validation through social media channels dominated by white influencers further enforces the idea that Western approval is paramount for self-worth. Peer pressure from friends who have already assimilated into Western culture compounds this pressure, implicitly suggesting that deviation from these norms not only isolates one from the mainstream but also precludes the attainment of personal liberation. Such depictions, by conflating empowerment with Western cultural assimilation, reduce the complex interplay of cultural identity and individual agency to a simplistic formula: to be free, one must abandon one's traditional markers of identity, such as the hijab (Hasan, 2005; Iosr Journals & Ranjan, 2015).

Similarly, in *Elite*, the character Nadia exemplifies the white savior complex through a transformation narrative that is catalyzed by interactions with white peers and institutional pressures. Nadia's gradual disavowal of her traditional appearance—most notably through the removal of her hijab—is presented as a pivotal moment in her journey toward liberation. White characters, such as Guzmán, a Spanish student, and affluent peers like Carla, are portrayed as mentors who encourage her to embrace Western fashion and behavior and implicitly position themselves as the agents of her transformation.

Moreover, the school administration, predominantly composed of white individuals, enforces assimilation by pressuring Nadia to conform to Western standards. This conflation of empowerment with Westernization not only reinforces a binary opposition between the West and Islamic tradition but also insinuates that Muslim identity, as symbolized by the hijab, is incompatible with modernity. Such narratives effectively demonize traditional cultural practices and, by extension, cast Muslim men as enforcers of oppression, thereby further entrenching the white savior trope (Said, 1979; Mohanty, 1988).

Collectively, the portrayals in *Hala*, *Cuties*, and *Elite* embody a problematic intersection of Orientalist and feminist Orientalist discourses. By positioning Western norms and relationships as the essential prerequisites for the liberation of Muslim women, these media texts not only reify a narrow vision of freedom but also contribute to the persistent stigmatization of Islamic cultural symbols. The recurring motif of the hijab as a marker of oppression—whose removal signals an almost magical transition to modernity—obscures the nuanced realities of Muslim women's experiences. Instead of acknowledging the diverse forms of agency and resistance present within these communities, such narratives reduce their identities to static, homogenous constructs in need of external salvation (Paidar, 1997; Hasan, 2005).

In sum, the white savior complex and Western feminist imperatives as depicted in these cinematic examples emphasize a broader cultural agenda that privileges Western modernity over indigenous forms of expression. By insisting that liberation for Muslim women is achievable only through the abandonment of cultural heritage and the adoption of Western practices, these representations not only simplify complex socio-cultural dynamics but also reinforce orientalist stereotypes that have far-reaching implications for global perceptions of Islam and Muslim identity (Brown, 2006; Said, 1979). The critical examination of these narratives calls for a more nuanced approach that respects the plurality of Muslim women's experiences, one that recognizes empowerment as emerging from within diverse cultural contexts rather than as a product of external intervention (Mohanty, 1988; Iosr Journals & Ranjan, 2015).

Theme 3: Sexualization and Exploitation of Muslim Women and Girls

The sexualization and exploitation of Muslim women and girls in Western media is a theme deeply rooted in Orientalist and feminist Orientalist discourses. According to Said (1979), Western portrayals of the "Orient" often rely on an exoticized, pornified vision of Eastern femininity—a perspective that not only constructs Muslim women as sexually repressed but also paradoxically hypersexualizes their bodies for the male gaze (Bartels *et al.*, 2019; Brown, 2006). This duality is evident in the representations found in *Hala*, *Cuties*, and even in segments of *Elite*, where the complex realities of Muslim identity are reduced to easily consumable tropes.

In *Hala*, the protagonist's navigation of her sexuality is depicted in a manner that both subverts and reinforces traditional stereotypes. For example, her engagement in self-stimulatory behavior during prayer times and her provocative attempt to initiate intimacy with her English teacher are presented as rebellious acts against the confines of her conservative upbringing. However, these scenes lack sufficient narrative context or character development to justify her actions, instead positioning her as impulsive and overly sexualized—a representation that echoes long-standing Orientalist fantasies. This portrayal not only trivializes her agency but also reinforces the reductive notion of Muslim women as simultaneously repressed and overtly provocative when they confront their sexuality (Said, 1979; Hasan, 2005). The cinematic choice to depict these transgressive moments without a nuanced exploration of their motivations perpetuates a simplistic binary: Muslim femininity is either submissively modest or dangerously erotic.

Cuties amplifies these issues by portraying its protagonist, Amy, as caught between her inherited cultural norms and an aspirational, forbidden femininity. In one notable scene, Amy reacts against the moral rigidity of her religious environment by concealing herself under a voluminous hijab—a physical manifestation of her internal conflict. As the camera moves beneath the hijab, the audience is exposed to her engagement with sexually explicit content, a visual strategy that starkly juxtaposes her external appearance with an internal, repressed desire. This moment illustrates how certain portrayals sexualize and pathologize the body of the Muslim girl, effectively merging overt eroticization with orientalist stereotypes (Hasan, 2005). The narrative further compounds this issue by depicting Amy as the ringleader of a group that gradually adopts increasingly provocative behaviors—from learning suggestive dance moves to engaging in actions that verge on the exploitation of their own bodies. This transformation not only recycles familiar tropes of the “sexually oppressed” yet “exotic” Muslim girl but also contributes to a broader discourse that frames such behavior as inherently perverse and dangerous (Said, 1979; Mohanty, 1988).

Although *Elite* is predominantly recognized for its portrayal of the white savior complex, certain visual and narrative cues also contribute to the sexualization of its Muslim female characters. In the case of Nadia, for example, her journey toward a Westernized identity is marked not only by the removal of her hijab but also by camera work that hyper-focuses on her physical transformation. Such visual strategies serve to emphasize the exotic allure of her body, suggesting that liberation from her traditional cultural milieu is inseparable from her adoption of a more sexually expressive—and ostensibly, more acceptable—Western form of femininity. This representation reinforces a longstanding Orientalist trope that conflates the act of shedding traditional symbols, such as the hijab, with an emergence into a realm of overt sexual agency—a notion that is at odds with the complex

realities of Muslim women's lives (Said, 1979; Mohanty, 1988).

Together, these cinematic representations reveal a disturbing trend in the exploitation of Muslim female bodies for narrative effect. By oscillating between depictions of repressed sexuality and overt hypersexualization, these films and series not only distort the lived experiences of Muslim women and girls but also align with a broader cultural agenda that privileges Western visual and ideological norms. The portrayal of sexual transgression as a form of escape from cultural and religious strictures ultimately undermines the possibility of understanding Muslim women's sexuality in its full complexity. Instead, these representations risk reinforcing damaging stereotypes that have historically been used to justify both cultural domination and the marginalization of Muslim identities (Bartels *et al.*, 2019; Brown, 2006).

In conclusion, the sexualization and exploitation of Muslim women and girls in *Hala*, *Cuties*, and *Elite* exemplify the ways in which Orientalist and feminist Orientalist frameworks continue to shape Western media narratives. By reducing complex characters to simplistic tropes—whether as impulsive, repressed, or dangerously seductive—the films contribute to a legacy of misrepresentation that not only dehumanizes Muslim women but also perpetuates a cycle of cultural misunderstanding and Islamophobic sentiment. A more nuanced and culturally sensitive approach is necessary to transcend these entrenched stereotypes and to allow for representations that honor the full spectrum of Muslim women's experiences (Said, 1979; Hasan, 2005; Mohanty, 1988).

Theme 4: The Hijab as a Symbol of Oppression and (Supposed) Liberation

In Western cinematic narratives such as *Hala*, *Cuties*, and *Elite*, the hijab is frequently depicted not as a multifaceted emblem of personal identity but rather as a monolithic symbol of oppression—one that must be discarded to achieve true liberation. This portrayal aligns with Edward Said's (1979) argument that the West constructs the “Orient” as inherently repressive and in need of salvation. Similarly, postcolonial feminist critiques—such as those advanced by Mohanty (1988), Hasan (2005), and Paidar (1997)—contend that these representations reduce complex cultural practices to simplistic binaries, in which empowerment is equated solely with the abandonment of traditional markers like the hijab.

In *Hala*, the hijab is positioned at the heart of the protagonist's internal and external conflicts. Early scenes depict Hala engaged in classroom presentations and artistic expressions that underline her struggle with the cultural significance of the hijab. Her mother's insistence on the hijab as a non-negotiable aspect of their faith and identity frames it as a symbol of rigid cultural and familial expectations. This dynamic is then contrasted with Hala's eventual, and seemingly abrupt, decision to remove her hijab—a moment portrayed as the ultimate act of

liberation. However, this narrative leap is problematic because it offers no substantive exploration of the complexities of her identity or the nuanced role the hijab plays in her life. Instead, it reinforces an orientalist logic that equates Muslim identity with subjugation, thereby suggesting that freedom is attainable only through the renunciation of traditional Islamic practices (Said, 1979; Hasan, 2005).

Cuties similarly exploits the symbolism of the hijab to comment on cultural conflict and individual emancipation. The film juxtaposes a traditional Senegalese dance performance—where modest attire and headscarves are worn as part of a cultural ritual—with the provocative, Western-influenced aesthetics of the dance troupe. In one particularly poignant scene, the protagonist Amy stands before a mirror, her headscarf symbolically highlighting the internal struggle between adhering to her cultural heritage and aspiring toward a liberatory, Western notion of self-expression. The narrative implies that social integration and personal fulfillment are attainable only when one abandons the hijab, thus reinforcing a narrow and damaging stereotype of Muslim women as inherently oppressed by their cultural symbols (Said, 1979; Iosr Journals & Ranjan, 2015).

In the series *Elite*, the hijab emerges as a contested site of cultural and institutional power. Nadia, a Palestinian-Spanish Muslim student, finds herself navigating a school environment that enforces Western standards of appearance through strict uniform policies. Her romantic involvement with a non-Muslim white character and her subsequent removal of the hijab are depicted as necessary steps toward achieving personal freedom and social acceptance. This narrative not only positions the hijab as a barrier to modernity but also implies that authentic liberation is possible only through its abandonment. Such depictions contribute to a reductive discourse that equates the hijab with an oppressive cultural past, thereby denying the possibility that it may also serve as a symbol of resilience, identity, and even empowerment for many Muslim women (Mohanty, 1988).

Collectively, these representations in *Hala*, *Cuties*, and *Elite* exemplify a broader cultural tendency to frame the hijab as an impediment to freedom. By suggesting that true liberation is achieved only by shedding this traditional symbol, these media texts not only perpetuate orientalist stereotypes but also undermine the agency of Muslim women. They reduce a complex and personal practice—often imbued with varied meanings ranging from religious commitment to political resistance—to a simplistic marker of oppression. This narrative, deeply rooted in Western feminist imperatives, obscures the diverse realities of Muslim women's lives and disregards the voices of those who assert that the hijab can be an expression of choice and empowerment (Hasan, 2005; Paidar, 1997). Ultimately, such portrayals reinforce damaging stereotypes and contribute to an ongoing discourse that privileges Western modernity over indigenous expressions of identity and freedom (Said, 1979; Mohanty, 1988).

CONCLUSION

This study has critically examined the representations of Muslim women in Western cinema through the films *Hala*, *Cuties*, and the series *Elite*, employing the theoretical frameworks of Orientalism and feminist Orientalism. The thematic analysis reveals that these media texts persistently reproduce orientalist tropes that depict Muslim women as uniformly oppressed, sexually conflicted, and in need of Western intervention for liberation. In particular, the portrayal of Muslim family dynamics, the white savior complex, the hypersexualization of female bodies, and the reductive symbolism of the hijab serve to construct a binary narrative in which Islamic cultural practices are framed solely as impediments to freedom and modernity. By deconstructing these recurring images, the study emphasizes how Western cinematic narratives simplify and distort the multifaceted realities of Muslim women's lives. The insistence on equating emancipation with the abandonment of traditional markers—such as the hijab—not only reinforces longstanding orientalist prejudices but also marginalizes the agency and diverse experiences of Muslim women. The intersection of Orientalist and feminist Orientalist discourses further complicates this representation, as it simultaneously positions Muslim women as victims of cultural repression and as objects for Western rescue. Such portrayals contribute to a broader cultural agenda that privileges Western notions of modernity and freedom, thereby sustaining Islamophobic sentiments and reinforcing socio-political hierarchies that have far-reaching implications beyond the realm of cinema. In light of these findings, it is imperative that future media productions adopt more nuanced and culturally sensitive approaches to representing Muslim identities. By challenging the dominant narratives that reduce complex cultural practices to simplistic symbols of oppression, filmmakers and scholars can contribute to a more accurate and respectful portrayal of Muslim women—one that acknowledges their resilience, diversity, and capacity for self-determination. Ultimately, reimagining these narratives not only holds the potential to transform cinematic discourse but also to foster greater intercultural understanding and dismantle the entrenched stereotypes that continue to marginalize Muslim communities. This study, therefore, calls for a critical re-evaluation of how Muslim women are depicted in Western visual media. By advocating for representations that honor the plurality and agency inherent in Muslim identities, the research contributes to ongoing debates within postcolonial and feminist scholarship and highlights the need for a transformative shift in both academic inquiry and media practice.

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