

“Otherness” in Films: Images of Iran in *Argo*

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Abstract: This paper is going to discuss the image of “otherness” in the medium of film. It will take the film *Argo* as an sample to analyze how the creators of the film portray the image of people who are “other” than their culture group, and what their inner intention is by creating this image.

Keywords: “Otherness”, The image of Iran, *Argo*.

1. Introduction

With a long history and a strong bond with Islam, Iran has been one of the nations with importance in the Middle East and the Islamic world. Once called the Persian empire, kings had ruled Iran for centuries, and the kings were called the "Shah." A monarchy has led the country for thousands of years; until 1950, the Iranian people elected a secular democrat, Mohammad Mosaddeq as the country's prime minister. However, the regime was soon overthrown by a coup d'état, and a Shah supported by the United States and other Western nations returned to power until the 1979 Revolution happened in Iran. Iranians welcomed Khomeini, a cleric who was exiled under the government of the Shah, to come back and rule Iran (“Argo”). The revolution brought a massive change to Iran, drawing the sights of the world to the oil-rich Middle East nation, Iran. The story of the movie "*Argo*" happened in this environment, describing a story of how a CIA agent planned and took out six staff of the US Embassy from Tehran, the capital of Iran. It is hard to determine whether the protagonist's behavior of saving the six men is righteous or not. In need of a positive image of the nation, the actions of the hero and his partners had to be justified; however, when standing on another side's position, for example, the Iranians, the nature of this event would be pretty different. This paper is not to critique the behavior and the meaning of behavior to either side; Within the movie, there are many points that directly or indirectly show the filmmaker's opinion on the society about a specific event and its culture behind it.

The film began with a pseudo-documentary lens, displaying a restless anger of the Iranian people and the chaos of them breaking into the United States Embassy. The story's first scene focuses on a burning national flag of the United States. The camera pans down, recording the exciting and angry people of Iran gathering in front of the United States Embassy and demanding the Shah to be returned and tried in Iran. A man kept cutting a white bag with the image of the Shah on it until the inside contents went all over the floor, and the bag was fragmented. People were cheering when they saw the load on the floor in pieces. On the other side of the story, in the United States Embassy, the situation was quite different and contrasted with those Iranian people outside. The officers and staffs of the embassy were calm and even idle in their work. At first, when the marching crowds had not broken into the territory of the US Embassy, the officers were drinking coffee, looking at the crowds outside through the window, and

even making jokes about them. Their behavior is leisurely and comfortable. The order inside the buildings was also well kept: the staff methodically issued visas and picked up calls. The different situations and moods inside and outside the embassy create the first contradiction between mainstream and "otherness." The people inside the walls are seen as "civilized," while the restless crowds are seen as uncultivated people other than civilized. Although the crowds on the street are all appropriately dressed, their behavior in the film is portrayed as beast-like. The film did not criticize the behavior of the crowds, but the lens language implied the discontent of the filmmaker about these Iranian people.

The dressing in this scene is worth focusing on. Outside the embassy on the street, the protesting people mostly wear dull clothes; many of the men wore tactical-style garments that can be easily connected to working-class and manual labor. Looking back into the building, the officers sitting next to their desks wear clean shirts or suits with lively colors, making a massive difference from the people protesting outside. If the men's dressing is merely about color and might not be so obvious, the differences in how women dress were much more evident. Although almost every woman in the scene did not wear a veil, nearly all the women protesting on the streets were Muslim: hijabs tightly wrapped around their heads. Their hijabs and even other clothes they wore are all black, giving the audience a huge visual impact. The image of all-black Muslim women rushing through the street and shouting out slogans they believed contrasted with the women inside the building. If the women on the road are seen in motion, the women inside the building are still. Some of the women in the building were officers and staff, while others were primarily Iranian people waiting to get a visa to the United States. Very few women were, or say, looked like Muslims: only two or three women in the visa room wore hijabs, and even if they wore hijabs, the hijabs were bright colors such as orange, compared to the dark black hijabs that the women on the street wore. Comparing the different dressing styles and colors between women inside and outside creates the second contradiction of mainstream and "otherness." The liveliness of the people inside and the dullness of the people out split the scene into two parts: a bright "civilized" world and a barbarous nation that is unknown to the other sides of the world. People have a natural fear of the unknown. When it comes to an Islamic republic that had newly overthrown the previous king in revolution, the fear from the Western world can only multiply. The fear of Islam, or more precisely hijabs and “Mohammedanism,”

had been carved into the subconsciousness of the Western culture for centuries (Said, 46). The image of the protesting Iranian people is only a projection and a stereotype from the Western culture of the Middle East and Islam since they are only "others" because of the differences between many aspects, including geographic position, politics, religion, and the Western mainstream society.

Light is also used in the film to create a line between the "civilized world" and the protesting crowd. The background light and the lens language when shooting the protesting side is gray and shaky, giving the audience an impression of chaos and intimidation in their actions, implying that the "uncultivated" crowd was doing something unreasonable. There are many shouts and noisy voices in the background, setting off a chaotic atmosphere with a hint of madness. The chaotic mood implied to the audience a foreseeable action of crossing the line and making the situation irreversible. However, the scenes and effects of lights and shadows are different from the gathering crowds. Again, it was the contradiction of motion and stillness. The more restless the masses outside on the streets, the quieter, more elegant and civilized the people inside the embassy. The lights in the room were bright, giving a kind of quiet time good illusion to the audience, compared to the grey sky and chaotic protests outside the buildings. This comparison creates the third contradiction of mainstream and "otherness," as well as the "civilized" and the "brutal."

The film portrays these protesting Iranian people as "others." Their culture is very different from the mainstream culture of the United States and the Western world. Under Western content, this film shot by Hollywood carries a Western perspective on Islam and Muslims in nature. For a long time, mainstream Western societies have seen themselves as more advanced or civilized. This self-knowledge was not implied but spoken out in clear discourse within the movie. When the Iran hostage crisis—the conflict that caused the film's story—happened, it shocked the world and angered the United States. A spokesman for the United States said publicly on the television that "actions of Iran have shocked the civilized world". The spokesman said almost with no implication that Iran does not belong to the civilized world – that Iran is a backward and savage nation. The phrasing of the word is delicate and provocative, driving the negative emotions that people had had in centuries to the Muslims that they could not understand. Language arts serve a political purpose (Minh-ha, 12). Language is the best way to address and solidify the boundaries between one group of people and "the others." The film did not intend to blame only the Iranian Muslims were bad or evil; it admitted at the beginning that the United States was not innocent either. However, even if the filmmaker tried to minimize the antagonism, their subconsciousness as Western people cannot be completely erased; not to say that in the circumstances of 1979, the antagonism toward Iran as an "otherness" pushed people to draw the boundary through languages, since everyone had to pick a side. As Trinh T. Minh-ha wrote in her work, "one often speaks of the masses" (Minh-ha, 12-13). The discourse of the spokesman could be seen as the attitude of the United States government and a true reflection of the voice of the people.

When the protesting crowds finally breached the embassy, pent-up agitation was ignited into a raging conflagration of chaos. The crowds rushed into the building, hitting, smashing, and seizing the officers and other staff in the embassy as their

hostages. The images of the Iranian protesters here grew more and more beast-like, making noises and damages in the building. There was a scene where the captain of the American soldiers stationed at the embassy tried to open the door of the building and reason with the crowds outside. However, as soon as he went out, he was dragged down by the raging groups and got a tie on his eyes that kept him from seeing anything. The metaphor here is quite simple to understand. The officer who went out, trying to reason with the crowds, symbolized manner, sympathy, and rationality. The door of the building was the door of a case. Inside the point, it was the "civilized" world, where people were rational and understanding; outside the issue was the rampaging "beasts," who kept attacking the wall that kept them from the beautiful modern world. The door marked the boundary of the "otherness." When the officer was dragged down and treated like a prisoner, it symbolized the disappearance and failure of why the barbarians took over the civilized land. After breaking down the window and picking the lock, the protesting crowd went into the building and arrested the American citizens in the building. On their way to the offices, one man saw that there were three darts on the leader Khomeini's picture on the wall. He grew extremely angry, shouting to the remaining people in the room, "who made this." His tone and body language made him look like a raging animal whose territory was invaded. These people are portrayed as animal-like, with the image of a lack of humanity but only a primitive desire to damage and destroy. The image of these people can be seen as the image of Iranian Muslims back in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the eyes of Western societies. The image of otherness was demonized and twisted into a non-human creature. There might be irrational behaviors of the Iranians during the protesting and when they occupied the embassy, yet it cannot be the total image of Iranians. At the end of the film, the audience learns that the plot of occupying the US embassy at the beginning was recovered from news photos shot by journalists in Tehran at that time. However, when the hostage crisis took place, none of the reporters in Tehran understood Farsi (Said, 32). A non-Persian speaker cannot understand the languages of the Iranians next to them, and their reports were thus biased in nature, for either article they wrote or photos they shot. When the film's scenes were recovered from these photos, the image of beast-like Iranian Muslims can be seen as the product of bias and Orientalism. Here, the image of Iran is a nation full of religiously fanatical citizens.

There are still other types of images among the Iranians. When the protagonist went on the travel to rescue the remaining members of the embassy hiding in the house of the Canadian ambassador, he went to the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance first to create a cover for his action. The man sitting in the office greeted him. He looked modest, gentle, and communicable in a fitted suit. When the protagonist spoke to him, he responded like a well-educated European, regardless of his face. His attitude toward the Americans – or Western people – was cautious yet slightly welcoming. During their conversation, the man mentioned a general stereotype of Iran: "the exotic Orient." He briefly summarized the image of the Middle East – even the whole Asia continent – in the Western sights: bazaars with long histories, palaces with mysteries about kings, snake charmers, and flying carpets ("*Argo*"). Here the image of this Iranian was not brutal or primitive; he was cultivated, just like any person in the Western society. The stereotype he mentioned

about Iran corresponds to Said's concept called Orientalism. This image split Iran and the Middle East into two parts: Islam and secular life. However, to understand Iran, it is impossible to look at these two things separately (Said, 105). Because the protagonist's Western society only sees Iran and the Middle East as a vague symbol with dis severed religion and culture, the fake film they designed to play up to the Iran government was still created upon stereotypes. Although the complicated situation made this stereotype an advance to the protagonist's action in the film, the image of Iran as an exotic Orient nation was deepened when the audience was watching this film.

The stereotype of Orientalism did not come alone. During the creation of the fake film, the stereotypical description can be seen in multiple scenes. Before the script reading meeting began, the actors and actresses gathered and dressed in costumes in the hall. A reporter asked for information about the film, confusing Iran with Iraq. Although Iran and Iraq are neighbors, they inherited from different cultures: Mesopotamia and Persia. The women characters reflected the stereotype most: they dressed in silver and gold from head to toe, revealing clothes that capture the imagination. These images mimicked the women in the Middle East harem, yet the real Iranian women looked far different from them at that time. Muslim women in Iran wore black hijabs on their heads and robes that entirely covered their bodies. They appeared in the film many times, only exacerbating the contradiction of Western people's misunderstanding of otherness – for here, Iran – and the reality.

Stereotypes of otherness did not stop with Middle Eastern people. An American government officer once proposed a rescue scheme, letting the six people playing the role of Canadian agricultural NGOs going to Iran to inspect grain growth so that children in Iran would not starve. He took out a picture of a starving African child who looked pathetic and sad. He didn't realize the mistake of using a black child as the representative of Iranian children – primarily Asian – until another man reminded him. The further meaning of this mistake is that African children and Middle Eastern children were the same to them – the white-dominant Western society. At first glance, it cannot be called racism: the narrow definition of racism is based on appearance differences, especially skin color (Memmi, 93-94). However, think twice about the action, and conflict can be found. The image of Iran and Iranian children is an African child; it may not be called racism, but there is mere arrogance in the discourse. Regardless of how different the cultures and people in Africa and Asia were, the Western people considered them as one image – or images that could replace each other as long as the

faces were not white. When it comes to the broad meaning of racism from Memmi, the subconsciousness of mixing up Africans and Asians can somehow be seen as racism. African and Asians were stereotypically non-white, and it helped as a racial affirmation to self-affirmation of the white identity for these American officers (Memmi, 97). Their Western dominant society gave them the environment to grow such ideas, and the stereotyping subconsciousness deepened the image of the “Orient”. It again came back to the self-contradictory stereotype of the Middle East and Iran: exotic Orient and fervent religious worship.

The film was made in 2012, almost thirty years after the hostage crisis. The images of Iran in the eyes of Western people back in 1979 were pretty much displayed in the film since some of the scenes were recovered according to the photos shot by Western reporters from that time. The images of Iran were stereotypical yet self-contradictory. On one side, it showed the belief of how Western people see current Iran – an Islamic republic – as a strange nation that believes in Islam and is filled with devout religious zealots. On the other side, it showed how Western society had seen Iran and the Middle East in the past several centuries: the exotic Orient with spices, harems, and other novelties that cannot be seen in Europe or North America. Forty years after the event and ten years after the film was published, because of the vigorously-growing anti-racism movement across the world and frequent propaganda about Islam from the Muslims, there seem to be fewer stereotypes around the Middle East and Iran than in 1979. The world is progressing, yet stereotypes are not so easy to be eliminated. Even in the film, there are either expression or implications of stereotypes in the images of Iran and Iranians. It has to be remembered that any nation has multiple faces, some are kind, and some are not. Stereotypes only cover part of the culture of the group of people – and the part may be wrong or misunderstood. The images of Iran in 1979 were diverse in the film, yet the core theme was still grey and chaotic since it was made on the Western side. Standing on the Iranian side, how they would portray the image of their nation forty years ago would be a different story from the “*Argo*”.

References

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