Iron Man: A Case Study in Orientalism and Hegemony

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Abstract

This paper examines media-propagated orientalism and Western hegemony in relation to the Middle East. There are countless films that portray Arabs as monodimensionally evil villains. One such film is the 2008 blockbuster *Iron Man.* This paper analyzes orientalism and hegemonic constructs in *Iron Man* and some of the effects and messages that *Iron Man* promotes.

Keywords: orientalism, hegemony, Arabs, media, comics

Introduction

In today's society, anti-Arab sentiment is rampant in many Western cultures. During the Cold War up until the late 1980s, Western media used the Soviets and communist powers as the "default villain". Today, Arab terrorists and Muslim extremists have taken their place. Although this phenomenon has historical roots in the United States' dominant conflict shifting from the Cold War to the Gulf War, War on Terror, and other Middle Eastern conflicts, it is undeniable that Western media are doing the Arab people no favors in terms of image.

Drama and action movies are particularly guilty of propagating negative portrayals of Arabs. The 2008 action blockbuster *Iron Man*, based on the Marvel comic, features a wealthy businessman who is kidnapped by Afghan terrorists and develops a superweapon suit that he uses to bring justice to those terrorized by the evil Afghans. *Iron Man* holds a prestigious place in film archives. It starred Robert Downey Jr., Gwyneth Paltrow,

and Jeff Bridges, all prolific and respected performers. It was met with critical praise and won several awards for Best Action Movie, Best Science Fiction movie, etc (Internet Move Database, n.d.) and was the first film of 2008 to pass the $300 million mark in domestic box offices. There is also an extensive line of Iron Man merchandise, several television shows, video games, and, of course, the original comic series, which was first published in 1963 (Couture and Huber, n.d.). Clearly Iron Man is a popular and profitable figure in pop culture history, and as such, is worth scrutinizing as to its contribution to reinforcing or defying Arab stereotypes.

My research questions encompass the following: How are aspects of orientalism and hegemonic constructs manifested in *Iron Man*? What are possible reasons for these media portrayals? And what criticisms or media effects might stem from *Iron Man*?

Literature Review

Orientalism and Arab Stereotyping

The concept of orientalism was first proposed by Edward Said in his 1978 work *Orientalism*. Said argued that orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (p. 3). Western powers create their own construct and image of Eastern nations ("the Orient"), usually employing willful ignorance or intentional misinformation of actual Eastern traditions, phenotypes, and temperament. The purpose of this construct is to allow Europeans (and now Americans) to emphasize the strength and

9

identity of their own cultures by setting it against a strange and oft-inferior "other."

Cultures that are often blanketed by orientalism include most of the east Asian world, most notably China, Japan, the Arabian Peninsula, Indochina, the Middle East, and India. However, the caricature of most relevance and interest now, in the 21st century, is the Arab and/or Muslim. Derrida (as cited in Hall, 1997) argued that with polarized dialectics comes an inherent dominance of one side or the other. For example, in the male/female dialectic, the male is the societally favored side. In the case of orientalism, the West is the dominant figure in the polarization of the East/West dialectic.

Hegemony and American Media Dominance

The concept of hegemony, credited to Antonio Gramsci, was a broader interpretation of Karl Marx's theories on economic and social inequality (Lull, 2003). Marx argued that economic status was the greatest factor in predicting social differences. However, in today's society there are far more factors than money complicating the issue of social domination. Gramsci introduced the concept of hegemony, a construct in which one group exerts power over another by "force, consent, or a combination of the two" (Croteau & Hoynes, 2002, p. 165).

Hegemony is often used to describe how media companies propagate certain images. For example, Fox News broadcasts feature conservative framing. This is an example of hegemony because in Western society, the media tell audiences what to think about and often present very selective, tailored information. The audience consents to this consumption but is still subject to the media decisions of Fox News. Lull argues that media companies have the power to take grounded institutions, such as religion, and convert them into pop culture. Every religion can be considered a unique culture, so it is not so far removed to say that the media can also convert, for example, a national culture into pop fodder. This is precisely what Western media has done to Islam and the Arab people.

Orientalism has roots in hegemony. The idea of a powerful West creating a barbaric East is hegemonic, as the West is deliberately creating an inferior "other" in order to promote and declare their own dominance and superiority.

Finally, the concept of American Exceptionalism, as proposed by Nayak and Malone (2009), is a modern rethinking of Western hegemony and orientalism. Nayak and Malone claim that, according to the theory of American Exceptionalism, "the United States has a unique place in history, differing fundamentally and qualitatively from all other countries; it also emphasizes a "God-given destiny" to guide the rest of the world according to the mainstream US political, social, and economic worldview" (p. 254). Exceptionalism goes beyond orientalism and "others" every nation that is not the United States, creating what is tantamount to the social classes of "us" and "them." As Gramsci predicted, the United States has based its hegemonic blanket on much more than economics, including political ideology, religion, and cultural norms. Most of these are now disseminated through the media.

Social Function of Superhero Comics

Stan Lee, the creator of Iron Man and many other Marvel superheroes, said, "Whenever I want to communicate to others, I always try to do it in a lighter-hearted way and make it as entertaining as possible" (2005, para. 3). As Lee discovered, comic books are an effective and popular method of conveying important issues. The entertaining nature efficiently carries the message without being too heavy or somber for audiences. Umphlett (1983) points out that the rise and popularity of comic book superheroes was symptomatic of the instability and insecurity that Americans felt. "It was all very comforting to know that there were champion crusaders like Captain Marvel…taking on whatever the Axis powers had to throw our way" (p. 102). Many superheroes developed during times of political uncertainty. For example, Superman rose to popularity during the Great Depression and World Wars. Captain America, with national

10

pride in his name, was "a symptom of the fears of our time…when we needed positive heroes" (p. 102). Today, superheroes are much more than a symbol of our cultural, political, and economic struggles. Some, like Spiderman, address the fears of the average individual; others, such as Iron Man, speak to more domestic problems such as substance abuse.

Umphlett also speaks of the indefatigability of superheroes. It can be said that superheroes are an advocate of, and therefore a symbol of, America. They may be defeated, they may even be killed, but they always come back for another fight. Superman, the quintessential champion of America, has died at least twice by fans' estimates (2007). This is a representation of "the innate American attitude that would never admit defeat" (Umphlett, 1983, p. 102). Comics therefore served to bolster morale through this expression of America's survivalist nature, as well as through providing a fantasy diversion for readers.

In a less subtle example, the true-comic series *War Against Crime!* was created under J. Edgar Hoover's administration to restore faith in the legal and police system. Though it is not specifically a superhero comic, the series features an anthropomorphic manifestation of Lady Justice, who never forgets a crime and always draws full payment from criminals (Lovell, 2002).

Unfortunately, despite their social function, comic books have carried on other, less noble traditions. Shaheen (1994) analyzed 215 comics portraying Arabs in various roles and was unable to find a single heroic Arab figure. Arabs may be portrayed as commoners, "moderates" (p. 123), or villains, but are never portrayed "fighting the good fight." Shaheen identifies the following archetypes: the terrorist, the sinister sheikh, the bandit, and the sexual predator (which can either be male or female). Ironically, Shaheen also includes a quote from the Code of the Comic Association of America: "Stereotyped images and activities will not be used to degrade specific national, ethnic, cultural, or socio-economic groups." This is not to say that the comic writers are intentionally and maliciously portraying Arabs in such narrow roles, but Shaheen's identification of such a narrow array of archetypes in a sample of well over 200 Arab figures is a strong indication of very definite stereotyping. Whether this is out of malice, fear, or ignorance is in question.

Analysis

The plot of *Iron Man* revolves around billionaire and genius inventor Tony Stark, whose company, Stark Industries, primarily manufactures weapons. During a demonstration of his newest weapon for the US Army in Afghanistan, Stark is kidnapped by Afghan terrorists who want him to manufacture a powerful missile for them. He escapes by building his supersuit, becoming Iron Man, and then setting out to reverse and prevent the effects of his company's weapons falling into corrupt hands. He eventually discovers that the plot to kidnap him was masterminded by his longtime mentor and primary stockholder in Stark Industries, Obadiah Stane.

Orientalism

The first criticism that can be drawn from *Iron Man*, not three seconds into the beginning of the film, is with regard to the setting, The opening and much of the first third of the film takes place in the Kunar Province of Afghanistan, which is presented as a mountainous region that is, for lack of better categorization, a desert. In reality, the Kunar Province of Afghanistan is actually quite green. It is rocky and mountainous, but it is not the harsh, dusty landscape that the film portrays. This raises the question of why it is "necessary" to portray Afghanistan in such a factually incorrect way. Is this a result of lack of research? Would American audiences not believe that there actually are trees in the Middle East? The fictionalized setting serves three major functions. First, it reinforces American preconceptions of Middle Eastern geography, perhaps to enable more comfortable consumption for audiences. Secondly, it emphasizes the danger inherent in the setting by making the region uninhabitable, even by plants.

11

Finally, it draws a parallel between the physical features of the land and the character of the people who live there, emphasizing the brutal and barbaric nature of the Afghan villains. It emphasizes the "other" by making the Kunar Province vastly separated from the rich, densely populated, and advanced infrastructure of America.

Possibly the most noticeable representation of orientalism in *Iron Man* is the portrayal of the Arab characters. They are ostensibly Afghan, as Stark is captured in the Kunar Province of Afghanistan. However, the character Yinsen mentions that he speaks many languages, although "not enough for this place," where people speak Arabic, Urdu, Dari, Pashto, Mongolian, Farsi, Russian, and probably more. If so many languages are spoken, it follows that the members of the gang that captures Stark are also ethnically diverse. However, they are all "generic Arabs," with no noticeable difference in the dress or physiology of the minions.

The physical attributes of the Arab characters are consistent with stereotypical Western images. Stark's captors fall into the "terrorist" archetype described by Shaheen (1994). The two most prominent Arab villains demonstrate the contrasting, though enduring, portrayals of Hollywood Arabs. The terrorist leader is dark with "dark-hooded eyes" and a large hooked nose (Brown, as cited in Shaheen, 2001, p. 52); his perpetual scowl and predatory motions mark him as undeniably evil. His main henchman is short and round, with a full fluffy beard and the "large bulbous [nose]" that Shaheen (2001, p. 51) attributes to the buffoonish villains in *Aladdin*.

There is only one non-villain Arab character: Stark's rescuer Yinsen. Yinsen is an Afghan native (born in the town Gulmira, which is raided later in the film); however, unlike Stark's captors, Yinsen is refined, educated, and dresses in a Western fashion. In fact, Shaun Toub, the actor who portrays Yinsen, was born in Tehran, Iran but raised and educated in England, Switzerland, and New Hampshire (Internet Movie Database, n.d.). Yinsen looks and sounds like a kindly British professor or doctor, and while this defies Hollywood's Arab stereotypes on his own behalf, Yinsen's appearance draws a sharp contrast to that of the Arab villains. He defies the Arab stereotype by being Westernized, which only serves to mark how non-Western, how Arab, his more malignant brethren are. Yinsen and Stark are united not by their mutual state of being captives, but by their shared aspect of being Western men put in mortal peril by the Arab barbarians. By making the villains so markedly Arab, and by Westernizing Yinsen, director Favreau has effectively covered the gauntlet of Arab stereotyping that Shaheen criticized in his review of *Aladdin*.

Aside from their stereotypical appearance, the Arab villains are portrayed as being technologically incompetent (or far less competent), their tools of persuasion being machine guns and primitive torture (submersion in water, burning with coals). This may appear an unfair assessment, as Tony Stark is supposed to be a technological genius and therefore *anyone* would appear technologically incompetent in comparison to him. "Of course," as reviewer Ross Douthat (2008) points out, "you should never leave a genius inventor alone in a cave with a blowtorch, a pile of versatile machine parts, and the raw materials for a miniature renewable-energy reactor…"

All comparisons to Tony Stark aside, the Arab captors are glaringly incompetent in many regards. There is one notable scene in which Stark is building the Iron Man suit from missile parts and the guards are trying to figure out which pieces are which: "It doesn't look anything like the picture. Maybe it's been modified. The tail is wrong." "It's just backwards." It is difficult to understand how the guards could mistake the chest piece of a suit of armor for the tail of a missile, backwards or not. In fact, it is only the leader of the Arabs (and ostensibly the most intelligent one) who realizes that Stark is not building a missile, and only after he sees Stark trying out a piece that has been strapped to his leg.

Hegemony and American Dominance

12

Near the end of the film, Stark's friend Obadiah Stane reveals his traitorous intentions and double-crosses the leader of the Arab terrorists. When he dispatches the terrorists, he quips, "Technology. It's always been your Achilles' heel in this part of the world." This betrayal not only reinforces the Arabs' incompetence, but it also ushers in the idea that no matter how ruthless the Arabs are, no matter how much firepower they have, they are still no match for a wealthy American businessman.

Much of *Iron Man* is effectively a statement on American power and dominance. Tony Stark is referred to as "a true patriot," after all, his industry is manufacturing weapons for the United States army. Stark's initial attitude toward global negotiations is revealed in the following conversation:

> Stark: My old man had a philosophy, "Peace means having a bigger stick than the other guy."

> Reporter: That's a great line coming from the guy selling the sticks.

This conversation reflects Stark's perhaps arrogant confidence in the power of his weapons and their ability to keep what he defines as peace. In either case, the responsibility lies with Stark Industries, the largest weapons manufacturer in the world (in the *Iron Man* universe, at least), to disseminate their influence to countries who are less technologically equipped and less fortunate to have a genius engineer to call their own.

Just as Tony Stark seems to be the most powerful influence on the world's firepower, he also becomes what seems to be the only person capable of righting the wrongs that corrupt weaponization has caused. Much of *Iron Man* echoes the American Exceptionalism rethinking of hegemony that Nayak and Malone proposed, in that it is the United States' responsibility (with Tony Stark as its ambassador) to lead the rest of the world to peace and justice. For example, when the small Afghan town of Gulmira is overrun by the terrorists that kidnapped Stark, no other world power will step in to help the innocent civilians. It is Stark, and Stark alone, who flies in to avenge the citizens. In a bonus scene that follows the credits, Stark discovers that he is not the only superhero flying about and is invited to join a league of (American) superheroes who are affiliated with the (American) military. The message is clear: America has both the means and the motivation to solve the world's problems and bring justice to the "others."

Discussion

An important consideration in assessing *Iron Man* is why, exactly, the villains of *Iron Man* are Arabs. The original comic version of *Iron Man* was first released in 1963, during the Vietnam War. In the original run, Tony Stark's captors were Vietnamese communists. Although it could again be argued that the villain is "Oriental" and therefore can be subjected to criticisms of orientalism, I find it more plausible that the villain was set as Vietnamese because of historical relevance and social necessity.

Comic books have had a longstanding tradition of providing a hero that addresses whatever difficulties are most at the forefront of Americans' social consciousness. Comic books have historically provided, quite literally, "comic relief": an escape and a wishful release from war and crime during times when American morale was low. During the Vietnam War, Americans were desperately searching for any shred of hope and salvation that they could find. The creation of a superhero that could vanquish the Communists and end the bloody Vietnam War would have been a welcome addition to American pop culture. Therefore, in this case, the villain is not Eastern because of a Western conspiracy to defame Asian people, but because what American saw as the villain of the 1960s happened to be an Asian power.

The *Iron Man* comic series kept up its tradition of relevancy to current affairs as decades passed. During the 1990s, Tony Stark was involved with the Gulf War, and the most current iteration is of course the War on Terror. Because of this consistency in placing Iron Man where the predominant struggle of the decade is,

13

it seems probable that the Afghan Arab villains of the film *Iron Man* were chosen for timeliness and political relevance, not because of a consciously racist endeavor to paint Arabs as evil terrorists. It is unfortunate that the current "villains" in American affairs are of the Orient, but terrorism is currently weighing on the minds of many Americans. In keeping with its longstanding comic book origins, *Iron Man* is providing a relevant distraction for anxious American audiences. However, the necessity of an Arab or otherwise Eastern villain does not excuse the propagation of Arab stereotyping, and orientalism is still heavily present in *Iron Man*, as discussed in the prior analysis section.

Another important consideration is that the superhero tradition originated in the United States, and because of its original social function, superheroes are inherently advocates and protectors of "truth, justice, and the American way." Of course, promoting the cultural beliefs of one nation for the benefit of the audiences within that nation is not necessarily harmful. Nationalism is a uniting and often-beneficial phenomenon, and comics have been historically instrumental in keeping American morale high during wartime. What is harmful, however, is the promotion of "the American way" at the disparagement of other cultures. This is where American hegemony and American Exceptionalism come into play. This form of hegemony goes far beyond orientalism, even casting aspersions on "the European way" or "the Japanese way"; these nations are American allies and yet American media still find a way to "other" them and assert complete and unquestionable dominance in the global setting.

Conclusion

The paper has listed many of the cultural aspects propagated by *Iron Man* that may be predominantly negative. Stereotyping, racism, blindness to other cultures, and nationalistic arrogance are hardly the outcomes that we should wish of the media, especially media that has such a large global presence as the United States'. However, *Iron Man* and other comic book stories have important social functions as

well. It is important to recognize when national pride crosses the line of national narcissism. If comic books can increase morale and togetherness, then perhaps the next step can be made, and superheroes can be harnessed to foster cultural awareness and understanding instead of propagating bigotry.

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14

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15