

**The Representation of Persians as Villains in a Movie '300':  
An Analysis of Orientalism Perspective by Edward Said**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper investigates the ways the Persians are represented in the movie '300'. Furthermore, the study also analyzes the relationship between the movie and the current socio-political issues between the United States and Iran. This study uses Edward Said's (1978) *Orientalism* as the main theoretical framework and Davis, Mules and Thwaites' (1994) character and characterization as the supporting theoretical framework. In addition, Brian's (2005) *Film and Politics in America* is used to analyze the relationship between the movie '300' and the socio-political issues between the U.S. and Iran. The study finds that Persians are characterized as being inferior, evil, savage, bestial, and corrupt, amplifying their positions as the villains in the movie. This negative portrayal, from a perspective of the Orientalist, are forms of pejorative stereotypes. With regard to the relationship between the movie and the current socio-political issue between the U.S. and Iran, it seems apparent that the movie is used as propaganda by the U.S. government. This can be clearly seen from the negative representation of Persians as villains, the movie producer, and the time of the movie release. All the findings above indicate that a film can be used as a tool for a propaganda.

**Keywords:** *Orientalism, Orient, Occident, Character and Characterization, Representation, Persians.*

## INTRODUCTION

The misrepresentation of the Eastern people, the Orient, by the Western people, the Occident, is commonly found in the media, especially movies. Hollywood as the representative of the movie industry in the United States has released some movies which present negative portrayal of people in the East, specifically in Middle East. Aguayo (2009) states that the negative portrayal of Muslim in Hollywood's terrorism-centered movies like *Black Hawk Down*, *Jarhead*, and *The Kingdom* is reinvigorating Orientalist discourse and colonial violence. The static depiction of muslim as terrorists in movies that set in Middle-East has led most of the Occident think that the muslim people in Middle-East are really terrorists.

"300", a movie adaptation of Frank Miller's graphic novel, is another example of the Occident's misrepresentation of the Orient. Written and directed by Zack Snyder, the movie was released by Warner Brothers in 2007. "300" tells about the battle of Thermopylae where 300 spartans army successfully stand against the invasion of thousands of Persian army for 7 days in the mountain pass of Thermopylae. Ever since it was released, the movie has been criticized because it inaccurately presents the history of the battle of Thermopylae and racially insult

the Iranians who are the direct descendants of the Persians (Tait, 2007).

The film is interesting to be investigated since it was released by one of the major film producers in the U.S., Warner Brothers, at a time when the U.S. government are concerned about the issue of the development of Iran nuclear programme. Tait (2007) reports that Iran officials government and Iranian bloggers describe the movie as an American's attempt to demonize Iran at a time when the U.S. Government intensifies their pressure over the Iran's nuclear programme.

Furthermore, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's cultural advisor, Shamaqdari (Joneidi, 2007) states that the film is an American's attempt for creating 'psychological warfare' against Iran. Moaveni (2007) believes that the movie was secretly funded by the U.S. government to prepare Americans for a war against Iran. The film can be considered as the U.S. propaganda in telling their people that Iran is dangerous and should not have nuclear program. This presents study aims to analyze the representation of Persians in the movie '300' and its relation with the current socio-political issue between the U.S. and Iran.

There are some theories used in the study. The first is Orientalism which according to Said (2003, p.202) is the “Occident’s imperatives, perspectives and ideological biases that misleadingly describe and explain the Orient in the form of regularized writing, visions and studies”. In other words, Orientalism can be described as the Occident’s perception or opinion of the Orient which somehow leads to misrepresentation.

Moreover, Orientalism is a discipline and the Orient is the learning focus. Said (2003) argues that in the Orientalism study, the Orient has become a topic of learning, discovery and practice for the Occident or West people. Further, Said (2003) also states that Orientalism deals with rules which are related to the area of convention, habit, expectation and assumption. In viewing the Orient, European uses conventions among scholars and the assumptions they found in texts or discourses as foregrounds. Ashcroft and Ahluwalia (2009) explains in several discourse that the European tends to describe the West as a site of power, while the Orient is considered merely as an object of knowledge and also the subordinates of the Western societies.

The second is about Occident and Orient. The term “Occident” is used by Said (1994) in reference to the Western or former colonialists which include most of

European countries and U.S.. The Orient, in contrast, refers to eastern or former colonized people from Africa, Asia and South America (Said, 1994). Further, he also asserts that in defining themselves, the European use the term the Occident and the Orient in a binary opposition where positive attributes such as being superior, civilized, good and educated are associated to the European, and negative attribute such as being inferior, uncivilized, evil and uneducated are associated with the Eastern. These negative portrayals, also known as pejorative stereotypes, are oftenly used by Hollywood to represent people in the middle-east, as well as Persian characters in ‘300’ movie.

The third is character and characterization. Bal (1997) asserts that character is a constructed creature which is not a human being but represents one that is made up from fantasy, imitation and memory of a writer. Whereas, according to Davis, Mules and Thwaites (1994) characters are fictional people that carry out the events in narrative. Therefore, character can be defined as a writer’s imaginative humans or creatures which carry out events in narrative stories that can be treated or viewed as real ones by referring to the characteristics of real humans that the readers or the viewers get from reality.

Moreover, Davis, Mules and Thwaites (1994) explains that characters, whether in fictional or non-fictional genre of narratives, are combinations of signs where these signs signify personality traits through characters' attitudes and external appearances. Thus, the characters characterization are shown within the texts through characters' attitudes and physical appearances.

The construction of characters' image depends on the data or information from the reality. Bal (1997) states that the influence of data from reality can determine the imageconstruction of characters in a narrative. The ways the readers construct the image of a character in a narrative are different from one other. Bal (1997) explains that the readers might have different interpretations or representation of the construction of characters' image since the personal situation, knowledge, background, historical moments of the readers are different.

Furthermore, social conventions determine the construction of characters and its characterisation. Like other aspects of a narrative, such as plot and closure, characterization often illustrates the ways in which a narrative works through conventions (Davis, Mules and Thwaites, 1994: p. 125). The social conventions then

lead to stereotypes which according to Davis, Mules and Thwaites (1994) are several attributes that people consider suited or ideal to certain characters. Certain figures or characters can be recognized in only few details such as clothes, make-up, speech style or ethnicity.

The last is the representation which according to Hall (1997) is the use of language in producing meaning. Representation does not just involve the visual depiction of things that are seen by people, but also the symbolization constructed within it. Hall (1997) gives an example of a cross where the portrayal of the cross is only two wooden planks nailed together. However, in Christianity, the cross symbolizes the suffering and the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Thus, representation is the way people see beyond visual representation of a thing.

Through representation, people can recognize things around them or what certain things such as pictures symbolize. Hall (1997) explains that people recognize things in the world because their thought are processing and decoding the visual perception of the objects that they have in their minds. However, people's conception or representation of things in the world is different. Hall (1997) asserts that the conceptual map that people carry in their mind is different from one another, which

may lead people to have totally different interpretations of the same things. People can share their thoughts or ideas about the world to others, but the interpretation of the ideas are probably not similar because the distinction of the conceptual map they have in minds.

## METHODOLOGY

This present study employed descriptive qualitative method because it attempted to describe, understand, and interpret the representation of Persians as villains from Orientalist perspectives and focused on the analysis on the data in the form of texts which included words, sentences, dialogues and narratives. This is in line with Flick (2009) who asserts that in qualitative research, texts are not just the essential data of the finding, but also the basis of the interpretations and the central medium for presenting and analysing the findings.

There are several steps in the data collection procedures. The first step is identifying the data from the selected words, phrases, sentences, dialogues and narrations that show any characteristics which can represent the Persians as villains. The second step is categorizing all the data which represent the Persians based on Davis, Mules, and Thwaites' (1994) character and characterization into

characters' attitudes and physical appearances.

The third step is Analyzing and interpreting the data by using Orientalism theory proposed by Said (1978) which focuses on the construction of self and other and the use of pejorative stereotypes in the moviescript. Last, is Making conclusion of the research and giving suggestions for future studies on the same topics.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study found that the movie script represents the Persians characters in negative ways by implying some pejorative stereotypes such as savages, inferiors, evils, bestial and corrupt to strengthen their position as villains. Meanwhile, the Spartans are described as heroes who hold positive characteristics such as civilized, superiors, good, human and loyal. It proves what Said (2003) have argued that as an attempt to define themselves, the European use a binary opposition where good personality traits belong to the European, while the East or the Orient is characterized using negative stereotypes.

The binary opposition puts the Persians characters as the *other*. On the other hand, the Spartans characters are positioned as the *self* where their visions, thoughts and attitudes determine how the

Persians characters should be viewed or treated. Moreover, the contrasting representation mostly positions the Spartans above the Persians by looking at the description of characteristics that each character has shown or carried.

The movie script places the Persians as the large army where some of them are considered as the elite and high-skilled army. However, they become powerless when they face Spartans in the battlefield. The large number of Persians army from several countries in Asia count for nothing and can easily be defeated by the Spartans in the Mountain pass of Thermopylae. This represents the inferiority of the massive and highly skilled Persians army toward the 300 Spartans.

These prove what Ashcroft and Ahluwalia (2009) have stated that the European tends to describe the West as the site of power, and the Orient is the subordinate of the Western society. It is true, however, that the scriptwriter through some characters in the movie script empowered the Persians characters through the characters' saying and attitude. However, by empowering the Persians with the massive and high-skilled army, it only makes the Spartans' victory over the Persians in the battlefield become more valuable since it is gained by defeating the best and superior army. Hence, no matter

how strong Persians characters are characterized in the movie script, they are only inferior villains to the Spartans heroes.

Another negative characteristic implied in the Persians characterization is savage. The Persians characters as savage villains are best described by a story told by a child who was the only survivor of a village destroyed by the *Immortals*. The child told the Spartans and the Greeks armies about the tragedy. He explains how the *Immortals* heartlessly slaughtered all the villagers. In addition, the statement of King Xerxes to King Leonidas when he personally asked Leonidas to be his general is also the evidence that the Persians place themselves as the savage. King Xerxes stated that he will not be hesitated to slaughter his enemy and he is willing to sacrifice his own men. Even though, it is only a saying, but his statement indicates that King Xerxes positions himself as a dangerous and savage villain.

Furthermore, to strengthen their image as villains, the Persians characters are also described as evils. The depiction of Persians as evil villains are evidenced from the descriptions of the *Immortals* from several characters. Daxos, the leader of the Greek army assumed that the *Immortals* are like ghost or invincible

army that comes from the darkness to hunt men's souls.

Moreover, Dilios explained that the evil trait is implied in the *Immortals* through words 'served the dark will of King Persians', 'teeth filed to fangs' and 'soulless'. Dilios states that the *Immortals* have served as the personal guard of King Xerxes for 500 years. It makes them the executors of the dark will of king Xerxes. They would heartlessly kill or slaughter people who stand against Xerxes' will just like what they did to the villagers. Meanwhile, the depiction of the *Immortals*' teeth shows that the *Immortals* are physically described as being similar to a beast or a monster. Last, the idea of the *Immortals* as evil villains was strengthened by Dilios' description, which describes the *Immortals* as soulless army who hunts for the men souls.

Persians are also described as a beast or an animal. The child, the only survivor of a village destroyed by the *Immortals*, characterized the Persian using the characteristics of an animal or a beast such as 'claws' and 'fangs'. Furthermore, the narrator also described the *Immortals* as a soulless army. This characteristics shows that the *Immortals* are just like animals or beasts that do not have a soul.

Furthermore, corrupt is also one of the negative characteristics used by the movie script to describe the Persians

characters as villains. It is evidenced from the Persian emissary and the traitors of Sparta, Theron (Sparta councilman) and the Ephors (priests of Sparta old god). King Xerxes through Persian emissary gave a bribe (gold and women) to the Ephors and Theron to prevent King Leonidas from going to war. Because of their treachery, King Leonidas did not have much choice except to bring a small force after lying to the councilmen about his purpose of going to the Hot Gates of Thermopylae. He told Theron and other councilmen that he went to the Hot Gates for a leisure walk and the 300 army he brings with are his personal guards.

Based on the discussions above, it can be concluded that in representing the Persian characters, the scriptwriter uses pejorative stereotype such as as inferior, savage, evil, bestial and corrupt to strengthen their position as villains in '300' movie.

In addition, '300' movie is considered as a U.S. propaganda tool to turn its people against Iran. There are three factors that show that the movie is the U.S. propaganda. The first is that the movie was released at a time when the U.S. government was intensifying the protest against the development of Iran's nuclear program. Tait (2007) reports that Iran officials government and Iranian bloggers describe the movie as an American's

attempt to demonize Iran at a time when the U.S. Government was intensifying its pressure over the Iran's nuclear program.

The second factor has to do with the producer of the movie. Warner Brothers, as the producer of the movie, is known as a movie studio which often produces propaganda movies. Brian (2005) asserts that in 1939, Warner Brothers produced a movie entitled *A Confessions of a Nazi Spy* that presents the idea of the threat of Pro-Nazi organizations in America. Furthermore, Warner Brothers in 1941 also released a movie, entitled *Sergeant York* (1941) which was considered as Hollywood's propaganda in creating a war hysteria and supporting the involvement of the U.S. in world war II.

The third factor is the negative representation of Persians as villains in the movie. The negative portrayals of Persians characters in the movie can be assumed as the U.S. attempt to demonize Iranian people, which are the direct descendant of the Persians. The movie is believed to have a contribution in molding public perception about the danger of the peoples of Iran. It can create the belief in the people's mind about the imminent threat resulted from the development of nuclear energy program

## CONCLUSION

Based on the findings, it is found that Persians characters are represented by using pejorative stereotypes. The movie treats the Persians as *the other*, describing them as inferiors, savages, evils, bestials, and corrupt people, amplifying their portrayals as the villains in the movie in contrast to the Spartans heroes who are described as possessing positive characteristics such as *the self* or the center, superiors, civilized, good, human and honest people.

Furthermore, the movie can be considered as U.S. propaganda because of three factors. The first factor is the time of the movie release. The movie was released at a time when the U.S. government was intensifying its protest against the development of Iran's nuclear program. The second factor is the producer of the movie. Warner Brothers, which produces the movie, is known as a movie studio which often produces propaganda movies. The third factor deals with the portrayal of Persians characters using pejorative stereotypes to strengthen their position as villains in '300' movie.

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