

# IT'S TIME TO HOLD HOLLYWOOD ACCOUNTABLE FOR THE APPROPRIATION OF ARAB CULTURE

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HOLLYWOOD

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In high school, when a classmate told me I resembled one of the characters in her favorite television show, I honestly didn't know what to expect. Growing up Arab-American, I never really saw characters on TV who represented my cultural background. So when she showed me Nadia Shanaa from Netflix's 2018 hit teen drama *Elite*, I was pleasantly surprised to see someone with whom I shared some resemblance. But as I later watched Nadia gain confidence only by distancing herself from her Palestinian-Muslim heritage, I was disappointed to once again view the dangerous stereotype of "Arabness" being represented as a threat, both to the well-being of oneself and others.

This flawed portrayal is not unique to *Elite*. Western entertainment industries, particularly that of the United States, have long profited from the underrepresentation and distortion of Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) communities in popular movies and shows. A century ago, for example, the 1921 drama *The Sheik* featured a beautiful Englishwoman falling in love with a brutal, misogynistic Arab tribal leader. Similarly, only fifty years ago, the 1979 adventure series *The Black Stallion* followed a courageous British boy as he saved a horse from violent, thieving Arab men. This vilification and erasure of Arabs in American cinema is systemic—a 2003 study found that of over 900 Hollywood films since 1896, only 5% of Arab roles depicted "normal, human characters."<sup>1</sup> Why have we let this pattern persist for so long?

It is time to finally start calling out Hollywood for its appropriation and distortion of MENA culture.

Let's start with *Dune*, a hit sci-fi film released in October 2021 that follows protagonist Paul Atreides' quest to the planet Arrakis, source of the coveted drug "melange" and home to the Fremen people. The film is a retelling of Frank Herbert's 1965 novel, which intentionally drew heavily from Algerian and Moroccan cultures to criticize the concept of white saviorhood. That being said, however, the film disappointingly features a vague desert setting, villagers clad in suspiciously Berber-style veils, and butchered Arabic words, like Paul's nickname Muad'Dib, roughly translating to "teacher." Furthermore, the main cast includes no actors of Arab descent. *Dune* seems to constitute an attempt to benefit from clearly Middle Eastern

components while simultaneously denying these influences. Its erasure of Arab cultural elements in a story that was intended to be deeply rooted in them centers a white, Orientalist perspective, neglecting a unique opportunity to finally empower MENA voices on broader themes of colonialism that are directly relevant to them.

It begs the question, why is Arab identity only praiseworthy in America when used for entertainment? A 2017 study by the MENA Arts Advocacy Coalition (MENAAC) found that a mere 1% of regular actors on TV are of MENA heritage.<sup>2</sup> It is the responsibility of production companies to proactively seek out Arab actors when utilizing Arab elements, out of respect for the culture and the right of its constituents to benefit from their history. Serena Rasoul, a casting director and founder of Muslim American Casting, echoes that films must avoid the implicit narrative that MENA and Muslim "homes and foods and songs and languages are just right for Western stories, but we humans are never enough to be in them," also known as "creative colonialism."<sup>3</sup>

But hiring more actors is not enough. Even when the entertainment industry makes space for MENA creatives, it can still perpetuate stereotypes due to a lack of representation in the actual screenwriting and directing process. Consider Disney's 2019 live-action remake of *Aladdin*, which starred Egyptian-Canadian actor Mena Massoud. Disney's *Aladdin* claims to be set in the Arabian city of Agrabah, but its details confusingly involve elements from China to Persia. It is as if the cultural influences function not to positively represent Arab culture, but rather to generate superficial, Oriental intrigue from Western audiences. This portrayal only furthers stereotypes of the Arab world as underdeveloped and unimportant compared to the West. A similar form of misrepresentation is exhibited in the recent finding that 67% of MENA characters in scripted US TV shows play trained agents, soldiers, or tyrants.<sup>2</sup> In a 2021 interview with the *New York Post*, Arian Moayed, Persian-American actor in the popular HBO Max series *Succession*, described frequently encountering "terrorist ... and victim [roles]" that he would turn down because Iranians "are not victims either, we're hungry, smart, and trying to make the world work."<sup>4</sup> It is clear there is a serious need for major entertainment companies to hire

more MENA producers as they have a more nuanced understanding of how to appropriately tell stories that feature them, compared to, for example, *Aladdin*'s exclusively white writing team.

Many argue that appropriation actually facilitates a more mainstream awareness of minority cultures and that we should celebrate any representation we can get. This perspective offensively treats diversity like a checkbox. There is nothing wrong with taking inspiration from other cultures, but with inspiration comes a responsibility to avoid stereotypical representations and embrace cultural talent. Others argue that since films are inherently fictional and simply meant for enjoyment, cultural accuracy should not be held over producers' heads. But is taking recognizable elements of a culture and

merely selecting a new time period really "fiction," or just a sly attempt to avoid criticism? Enjoyment need not hinge on the degradation of other

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cultures. Regardless, intention was never a prerequisite for wrongdoing. Still, others claim that there just aren't enough skilled, popular MENA actors out there, that it wouldn't be profitable for companies to produce films with "no-name" actors. Yet even when acclaimed MENA actors like Mena Massoud have publicly stated they still struggle to find non-stereotypical roles, it is hard to believe this counterargument has any merit.

We need to remember that appropriation has consequences beyond the big screen. The way in which MENA individuals are treated on film influences how they are treated in person. Stereotypes taint public perception, especially for viewers who have had little direct interaction with MENA com-

munities. For example, a 2017 study from Texas A&M University San Antonio found that of 513 Texan residents, 46% stated that their views of Arabs have shifted negatively since 9/11.<sup>5</sup> It is only natural to wonder if this troubling statistic would still be the case if popular media didn't continuously portray Arabs as violent and untrustworthy.

There is also, of course, the issue of Arab-American identity. Representation helps determine how Arab-Americans feel about their heritage and self-esteem. A 2012 University of Michigan study found that prolonged television exposure was associated with a decrease in self-esteem for African-American boys.<sup>6</sup> It would not be surprising, then, if on-screen discrimination could contribute to Arab-American youth reporting increased levels of anxiety—and decreased security regarding their identity—compared to their white peers.<sup>7</sup>

But the future doesn't have to be this grim. Hollywood can build on the steps that have already been taken by MENA-led organizations in order to close systemic gaps. MENAAAC, for example, has created databases to spotlight Arab creatives and successfully petitioned for solutions like adding "MENA" as a qualifying category for inclusion standards in Oscar eligibility. We also have great examples of inclusion in high-grossing films like the 2018 movie *Black Panther*, with its nearly all-Black cast and a plot that is not defined by colonization. The card is now in the hands of Hollywood executives, who must take steps to proactively include MENA actors, directors, and scriptwriters in their production process to feature Arabs in an authentic light.



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