

Orientalism and the Representation of ‘Others’ in *The Mummy* by Ridha Mikdadi

*Why can't the heterogeneous West create its own
images of splendor and desire without reproducing
tired stereotypes of a lush Orient that never existed
anywhere but in the desire-drenched recesses of their
collective minds? (Susana Loza 166)*

*I*n 1979 Edward Said published his brilliant and still highly controversial work, *Orientalism*. In this book he proposes the following idea: the Orient is actually a Western invention, a way of differentiating between East and West, white man and brown man, and although this Orient didn't and doesn't actually exist, it was this idea of what the Orient and therefore the Oriental should be that defined and continues to define an entire region of the world. Said defines the Oriental as the Other, the seemingly opposite of the Occidental or Westerner, and suggests that this way of distancing oneself from one's opposite allowed the appropriation of entire cultures without the responsibility of having to defend one's colonialist actions. In 2002 it is obvious that the West continues to think of the East in Orientalist-terms, especially in the cultural stereotypes produced and promoted in Hollywood's film industry.

While Said defined the Other in terms of the Arab, it is a term that can be applied to any group of people that is denigrated at the expense of another group of people for the express purpose(s) of the group doing the denigrating. "In *Orientalism*, Said expressed the hope that additional studies of other aspects of the phenomenon would follow his own, and indeed cultural critics and theorists have taken up Orientalism as an intriguing and compelling paradigm for the representation of race, ethnicity, and gender in the media and particularly in film" (Bernstein 4). American cinema has long been fertile ground for fostering cultural stereotypes by no means limited to Arabs. Any cultural minority, foreigners, women, homosexuals and even aliens have been traditionally depicted as the Other, as a way for the white hero to be depicted as that hero. After all, every hero requires a nemesis, and as film is a visual medium, one very easy way to define a movie's characters and their innate goodness or badness is by what makes them different from or similar to the pre-approved status quo, which includes race and skin color.

In 1999, Hollywood released *The Mummy*, a PG-13 rated action-adventure movie set in the ruins of ancient Egypt. Headed by a primarily British and American cast, *The Mummy* is guilty of virtually every cultural stereotype possible pertaining to Arabs as Others. The glorious Egyptian past is highlighted with amazing scenes of pyramids, gold and physical beauty, while the modern-day Arab circa 1923 is ugly, dirty and uneducated. Not only that, but the modern Arab man has been reduced to a treasure hunter within his own lost civilization, a useless human being written into the script for the purpose of having someone to laugh at. Simultaneously, in a somewhat redeeming twist, *The Mummy* doesn't limit itself to the Arab population, but also stereotypes its British and American characters, although those particular stereotypes seem to be more comical than racist. Americans are depicted as violence-loving cowboys, gamblers and not particularly smart individuals, while the British are depicted as colonialists, racists and elitists. In fact, the only positive representation in this movie is that of Evie, the half-British, half-Egyptian incredibly intelligent if somewhat ditzy heroine.

The plot of *The Mummy* is fairly simple. Once upon a time, Pharaoh Seti I's mistress, Anck-su-Namun and the High Priest Imhotep fell in love. But no other man was allowed to have Anck-su-Namun, and so the two lovers murdered the Pharaoh which led to her death and Imhotep's eternal damnation as the undead. Fast forward three thousand years to 1923 Egypt, and Imhotep has become a myth, legend and Hamunaptra, the city where his body is buried, is now a fabled and cursed city of gold lost somewhere in the vast Sahara desert. With the help of a treasure map, the three protagonists Rick, Evie and Jonathan (to be later joined by a mysterious Arab nomad) are thrown together to try and find Hamunaptra and hopefully bring

back untold riches. Instead, they end up unleashing Imhotep and must then spend the rest of the movie trying to save the world from the curse of the Mummy.

There are many characters in *The Mummy* and the Other is represented in a variety of forms. The main group of Arab characters are Imhotep, the mysterious Arab nomad, a prison warden and to a lesser extent Anck-su-Namun and Seti I. Then there are the protagonists, Rick, Evie and Jonathan. Also included in the movie are a group of American cowboys searching for Hamunaptra as well, scores of Arabs as diggers, prisoners and zombies and a variety of minor characters, all set against the magnificent backdrop of ancient Egypt's splendor.

The first scene of the movie introduces Imhotep, Seti I and Anck-su-Namun, set against the ancient city of Thebes; Egypt shown at her best, three thousand years in the past. All three characters are physically beautiful, covered in gauzy material, gold and make-up, and each contain a measure of power. There is no West at this point in history, so it is acceptable to show Egypt as a powerful nation, but there is the insinuation of the Other through the murder of Seti I, that Imhotep and Anck-su-Namun are treacherous and disloyal - the Arab as untrustworthy. It is worthwhile to note that it is Anck-su-Namun that strikes the first blow, the Oriental femme fatale - beautiful, sexually alluring but deadly. As Gaylyn Studlar says, "[...]the imaginary topography of the East[...]held the promise of a different feminine identity-preposterous and improbable-but also destructive of the claims of prevailing ideology and, therefore, "evil""(qtd. in Loza 167). Each character is given a brutal death through murder, suicide or torture, and there is the ever-present idea of magic and the supernatural pervading the scene with Imhotep's promise to raise Anck-su-Namun from the dead and his subsequent damnation as the eternal undead.

Three thousand years later the audience is introduced to 1923 Cairo, a place with a glorious past and a lousy present. Evie and Jonathan are siblings, working for an Egyptian curator that employs them because their parents "were the museum's most generous patrons" (*The Mummy*), the Arab as greedy/money-loving. Jonathan is a con-artist, depicted as a British colonialist - arrogant, elitist, racist but somehow inescapably charming and funny. It is Jonathan that makes the majority of the racist jokes in this film, but that doesn't stop him from being portrayed as a coward, physically weak and hopelessly dependent on his little sister, Evie.

Evie, on the other hand, is depicted as beautiful, courageous, intelligent and extremely knowledgeable about ancient Egypt. It is she that discovers the treasure map hidden in a "puzzle-box," but she is also responsible for unleashing Imhotep and then later finding the only way to kill him. Evie also admits, while drunk, that

her “father loved Egypt so much that he married my mother, an Egyptian” (*The Mummy*).

Notice that she doesn't say her British father loved her Egyptian mother, he loved Egypt and married an Egyptian as a result. It is also important to point out that Evie speaks with a British accent throughout the movie, and dresses as a European until losing all of her clothes in a shipwreck, whereupon she is dressed as a pseudo-traditional Arab woman. Only Evie's outfit is sheer, while the Arab women who dress her are covered from head to toe in heavy black material. It is also dressed as a seductive Arab girl that Rick, the American treasure seeker who agrees to lead them to Hamunaptra in return for being freed from a Cairo prison and certain death, finds Evie sexually desirable. Once again it is the image of the Oriental woman, covered and veiled in a *sheer* material, that is sexually alluring, or rather the repressed British librarian dressed as the Oriental that gives Evie a sexual dimension.

Rick, the movie's hero, is depicted as an American mercenary, treasure-hunter and bad-boy - he is initially jailed for “just trying to have a good time” (*The Mummy*). He is the brawn in this movie, carrying at least two pistols and a shotgun at all times, with physical strength and the ability to win a fight. He is not, however, extremely intelligent and spends the movie, much like Jonathan, at the mercy of Evie's intelligence, always coming to her rescue but unable to defeat Imhotep without her help.

There are two important Arab characters in this movie that are never named. The first is the mysterious Arab nomad, a member of the Med-Jai, an ancient group of Arabs dedicated to keeping Imhotep from regenerating and unleashing his curse upon the world. “In the movies, where Arabs always seem to be Bedouins, they were gifted with remarkable powers as warriors who could corporealize out of nowhere from beyond the next sand dune[...]” (Leuchtenburg 21). This Med-Jai spends the first half of the movie trying to stop and later kill Rick, Evie and Jonathan so that they will not find Hamunaptra and Imhotep. However, once the creature is released, he must join the protagonists since he needs their help to stop Imhotep. There are several interesting and disheartening facets to this character. First, he is never named. Here is the representation of a “good” Arab and he never has a name. A name is what defines and identifies a human being to other human beings, and yet this character doesn't have a name until the sequel. Simultaneously, he is never depicted as one hundred percent good - he tries to kill the protagonists for the first half of the movie. However, once East and West are united under the common cause of fighting against the ancient East, this Med-Jai is given a more positive role. Which doesn't stop him from being characterized as a machine-gun toting, horseback-riding, never-haven-flown-in-an-airplane or driven-in-

a-car Bedouin, who cannot possibly hope to save the world from Imhotep without help from the British and the Americans.

The second character is the Arab prison warden, a superfluous character written into the script as the butt of every joke who's sole function is to be the culturally stereotypical Arab. He, like the member of the Med-Jai, is also never named, and is depicted as a "bad" character until his untimely and horrible demise. In one scene he is characterized as the personification of a camel narrated by Jonathan, "never did like camels. Filthy buggers. They smell, they bite, they spit. Disgusting." (*The Mummy*). He is the formulaic Hollywood Arab - smelly, rude, ugly, ignorant, lascivious, greedy, gluttonous and violent; a formula derived from an Orientalist perspective.

Finally there is the reborn Imhotep - an ancient threat come to bring about the end of the modern world. In a lot of ways, the character is reminiscent of Saladin, a barbaric Eastern threat bearing down on the civilized West, bringing with him the promise of the destruction of their world. Imhotep is not so much a stereotyped character as he is the personification of the Arab threat to humanity. Here is an all-powerful, unstoppable supernatural force that is, of course, stopped by an American, two Brits and an ambiguous Arab with no name who seemingly sacrifices his life while trying to help these Westerners kill the evil Imhotep.

In the last scene of the movie, Imhotep has been vanquished, returned to his grave, Hamunaptra has disappeared beneath the sand taking most of her treasure with it and Rick, Evie and Jonathan are left standing. At this point the mysterious Arab reappears, having survived his ordeal, to humbly thank his Western counterparts for having saved the world. As he says, "you have earned the respect and gratitude of me and my people [...] may Allah smile upon you always" (*The Mummy*). He then proceeds to kiss his hand, press it to his forehead and bow to the group. Of course Jonathan can't resist this last display of Arabness, and reduces the thanks to a caricature of the Christian Trinity. What is interesting about this last little speech is that it is the first time in the movie Allah is mentioned, it is the last scene and therefore the last impression the audience is left with of this character, which is that he may have helped out, but he is still an Arab, a member of Islam and most importantly, his character is shown as riding off into the absolute opposite direction of his Western counterparts, who ride off into the sunset. So back to the dark the nameless Arab goes, where he belongs with his people somewhere in the desert, riding a horse and living in a tent.

No less important to the Oriental portrayal of *The Mummy's* characters are the scores of nameless and faceless Arabs who fulfill the role of what I like to call can-

non fodder. These are simply bodies to be blown up, shot, run over, eaten by scorpions or melted by salt acid from ancient Egyptian booby-traps. They are killed, turned into zombies and shown in the most unattractive light possible, close-up shots only including men without their teeth. They are hordes of brown-skinned, turbaned natives dying, killing or cowering before their white masters.

Arab women aren't portrayed positively either. In the middle of the movie there is a scene that includes an obese bellydancer with her stomach hanging over the sheer skirt of her costume, waddling alongside a man who is so drunk that when he steps into the fountain he thinks someone has spilt their drink. Besides Evie and Anck-su-Namun, this caricatured bellydancer and a gaggle of screaming, fully-covered Arab women are the only other representations of women in this movie. So modern Arab women are immensely unattractive and ancient Arab women are beautiful but evil.

However, there is also the depiction of the American as the Other in this movie. Besides Rick, the only other Americans in this film are a group of men, dressed like cowboys and one gangster, seeking the treasures of Hamunaptra. They're shown as gamblers and violence-loving, dumb men. They also all die in this movie, fodder for Imhotep who removes their organs and sucks them dry. In one scene of the movie, Rick, Evie and Jonathan are searching Hamunaptra for treasure. Sandwiched between siblings, Rick endures insults from both:

Jonathan: "Those damn yanks [...] no offense."

Rick: "None taken."

Evie: "Those beastly Americans [...] no offense."

Rick: "None taken."

In short, no group is spared cultural stereotypes in this movie as women, Americans, the British and to the greatest extent, Arabs are characterized as the Other.

What is important about this film and other films like it, is that *The Mummy* makes no political pretenses which is a pretense in and of itself. Every scene and every character is carefully contrived to be a part of the story and propel that movie forward. Plus, this movie chose specific images of specific races to portray, images that promote the Westernized ideal of ancient Egypt, "and these representations rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient" (Said 22).

Film is an important aspect of multiculturalism. It is an all-pervasive medium and America's number one export that decries any inherent politicalness, yet politicizes

even its most minor characters. Film is everywhere, in every country, in every culture, language and level of society. It is mass-produced so-called entertainment for the masses, and as such can never be innocent or harmless. Film has become the literature of the twenty-first century. "Mass production, which has characterized literary dissemination since the early diffusion of print technology, has spread to other material cultural domains that include painting, photography, *film*, television, radio and software. In other words, literature[...] no longer dominate[s] cultural production" (Cochran 73, emphasis added). Which means that if an audience member doesn't know the difference between a real Arab and a stereotypical one, then the identity of an entire race of people comes down to the distorted images that are portrayed of them, and this example holds true for a variety of Hollywood race portrayals.

Added to which only recently have these stereotypes been labeled as such, which hasn't stopped the Hollywood film industry from perpetuating them. Robert Stam writes in his book *Film Theory*, "what is most striking about "official" film theory's relation to race and multiculturalism is that theory sustained for so long such a remarkable silence on the subject" (272). Stam goes on to define mass media as "form[ing] a complex network of ideological signs situated within multiple environments - the generating mass-media environment, the broader generating ideological environment, and the generating socio-economic environment - each with its own specificities" (310). Cinema does have an agenda, the agenda of all the people that work in the film industry whatever that may be, and it is used as a tool that relays information regardless of its truthfulness or accuracy, information which is broadcast to the world.

The Mummy is a perfect example in that it was given a PG-13 rating, has no sex scenes or foul language. It is the kind of movie that parents let their children watch, the kind of movie marketed as fun, filled with adventure, action and enough propaganda to stop a viewer of Arab descent in her tracks. This is a movie that doesn't pose a threat because it's just entertainment, right? The point is that movies are a way of influencing the masses and today the masses means the world, and if viewers don't know the difference between reality and stereotypes, then it is the stereotypes that become accepted truths. As Said says, "in short, the construction of identity is bound up with the disposition of power and powerlessness in each society, and is therefore anything but mere academic woolgathering" (332), or, in this case, *The Mummy* is anything but a mere movie.

I would like to leave you with a specific thought. It used to really bother me that a South African plays Imhotep, a South American plays Anck-su-Namun and an Israeli plays the mysterious Arab nomad. However, upon watching this movie again,

I had an epiphany of sorts- that is, if three separate races can be used to portray a fourth separate race, if we are that interchangeable that a South African, a South American and an Israeli can all be Arabs in this movie, then aren't we as humans more similar than we are different? And at the very least, Otherness cannot be defined physically and that the stereotyping that *The Mummy* promotes is simply an illusion, something that we can question and ultimately reject.

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