



## ENCYCLOPEDIA OF WOMEN AND ISLAMIC CULTURES

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Stereotypes: United States: Arab Muslim Women as Portrayed in Film  
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Motion pictures are one of the most powerful teaching tools ever created. “There exists today no means of influencing the masses more potent than the media” (Pope Pius XI). “The cinema must and shall become the foremost cultural weapon of the proletariat” (Nikolai Lenin). This entry examines how image-makers have presented the Arab Muslim woman in film. History reveals that since the beginning of cinema, in fact for more than a century, Hollywood's movies have humiliated, demonized, and eroticized the Muslim woman. Obviously, filmmakers did not create these images, but inherited and embellished Europe's pre-existing Arab stereotypes. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries European artists and writers offered fictional renditions of women as swathed and submissive exotic “objects.” The stereotype that came to be accepted as valid, becoming an indelible part of European popular culture, has been transferred into American filmmaking.

I began my research on Arab Muslim women as portrayed by Hollywood in 1960. By locating, viewing, and studying more than 60 movies, I discovered many portraits that are dangerous and destructive and should be taken seriously, as well as others that are less offensive. In films ranging from yesteryear's foreign legion thrillers up to and including contemporary political dramas, producers associate the Arab Muslim woman with violence, sex, and oppression. Locked into a cycle of predictable character-types, she has appeared in every sort of film imaginable: sword-and-sandal soaps, musical comedies, magic carpet fantasies, historical tales, movie serials, and terrorist shoot-'m-ups. In films that feature any image of an Arab Muslim woman, stereotypical idiosyncrasies abound that can be seen as rigid and repetitive.

It all began with two silent shorts – one censored, the other uncensored – Fatima (1897) and Fatima's Dance (1907). Both feature Fatima, the star of Chicago's 1896 World's Fair, as a veiled bosomy belly dancer. To see Arab belly dancers appearing in early films is not surprising. At the turn of the century, in vaudeville and burlesque circles, the dancers were familiar fare. Hollywood simply emulated this image. In Arabian Nights fantasy films such as *The Sheik* (1921), *Slave Girl* (1947), and *John Goldfarb, Please Come Home* (1964), Arab women appear leering out from diaphanous veils, or as unsatisfied, disposable “knick-knacks” lounging on ornate cushions, or scantily-clad harem maidens with bare midriffs, all closeted in the women's quarters of the palace and/or on display in slave markets. The phantasm of the harem still persists. In Disney's remake of *Around the World in Eighty Days* (2004), for example, Arnold Schwarzenegger portrays Prince Hapi, a Middle Eastern shaykh with “one hundred or so wives.”

Many films feature Arab women in far less alluring images. In features such as *My Favorite Spy* (1959), *Shark* (1969), and *Deception* (1992) women lurk in the background as unattractive, covetous beasts of burden carrying jugs on their heads; others lie as they rob Westerners; still others are portrayed as obese and revolting. Films

like Protocol (1984) and *The Sheltering Sky* (1990) feature Muslim women as a cackling horde of crows, and as shapeless black bundles of covered, ululating women, trekking behind their unshaven mates.

The portrayal of Arab women as black magic vamps began in 1917, with Fox's silent *Cleopatra*, starring Theda Bara. Studios promoted them as “serpents” and “vampires,” as a result of which the word “vamp” was added to English dictionaries. Movies such as *Saadia* (1953) and *Beast of Morocco* (1966) feature Arab women as enchantresses in cahoots with and possessed of devils.

A very different image of Arab women is projected in films that portray them as active agents of warfare, most specifically as bombers. Perhaps the most overlooked portrait of the Arab woman is the bomber image. The Arab woman as bomber began with Republic's movie serial, *Federal Agents vs. the Underworld Inc.* (1948). Since then, Hollywood has released six feature films showing Palestinians, Moroccans, and other Arab women not as exotic, bumbling and subservient maidens, but as terrorists invading the United States and killing American civilians. *Federal Agents* displays Nila, Hollywood's first-ever Arab terrorist. Described as an “alien threat,” this Egyptian “female fanatic” and her Arab cohorts move to bring down United States federal agents. Nila tries to eradicate the agents by administering a deadly “rare oriental herb,” firing a pistol, and tossing a bomb at the American “infidels.” But she's no match for the Western protagonists. In the end, a huge statue crushes her. Nila gasps her last as the hero quips, “Seeking to destroy others, Nila succeeded in destroying herself.”

Not until some 30 years later, in *Black Sunday* (1977), did Hollywood aggressively show another Arab terrorist. Like books, movies last a very long time. Thanks to network and cable systems, at least once a year, usually days before the annual Super Bowl game, generations of viewers have witnessed Dahlia, a Palestinian, trying to blow up the Super Bowl and everyone in it. In *Black Sunday* Dahlia arrives in the United States, acquires a bomb, then seduces a former Vietnam prisoner of war and enlists his aid. She proceeds to help gun down American citizens “where it hurts”: in Los Angeles, Washington D.C., and Miami. Final frames show Dahlia and the veteran steering a blimp over Miami's Super Bowl stadium, intending to detonate a cluster bomb that would massacre 80,000 spectators, including the American President. In time, an Israeli officer, not an American agent, terminates them.

Four years later Shakka, a dangerous Moroccan terrorist, surfaced in the 1981 drama, *Nighthawks*. Aware that Shakka is in New York City, the city's security chief warns his colleagues to be wary of her: she was “born in Tangiers, of wealthy parents; a spoiled broad who kills without provocation.” His profile proves correct – moments later Shakka shoots him dead. In the end, Shakka and her cohort, a German assassin named Wulfgar, hold the families of United Nations officials hostage in a cable car dangling 250 feet above the East River. As expected, the Western protagonists save the day and the terrorists are shot dead.

*Wrong Is Right* (1982) portrays hateful Arab students as terrorists. Clad in robes and checkered headscarves the students march on Times Square and tussle with New York policemen, shouting “Death to America.” One young Arab woman fastens a plastic bomb onto her body, blowing up herself and injuring onlookers. In the James Bond thriller, *Never Say Never Again* (1983), Fatima, a nuclear terrorist working with SPECTRE, attempts to detonate two nuclear bombs in the West. She fails, terminated by James Bond.

The greater Los Angeles area is the setting for *Wanted: Dead Or Alive* (1987). Here, Palestinian and homegrown Arab Americans go on a killing spree, blowing up more than 200 men, women, and even children. Just outside the city, the camera reveals an Arab-American terrorist factory. Inside the plant are more than 50 chemical weapons that are about to be released into the atmosphere, intended to kill millions. When Malak, the primary villain, and Jamilla, his loyal sidekick, find out the powerful explosions could also kill them as well as their fellow conspirators, Malak cancels the mission. The angry Jamilla protests. Determined to launch the

weapons, she is willing to die for the cause. Malak shoots her dead. *True Lies* (1994) presents Juno, a female Palestinian terrorist, who with her fellow Palestinians, members of the “Crimson Jihad,” move to launch nuclear missiles over American cities. Final frames show the movie's hero and the Marines kicking “Arab ass.”

The message contained in all seven of these films showing Arab women as terrorists, and especially in the four that portray her as a nuclear terrorist, is that Arab Muslim women are capable of the most malicious actions and that the solution is to rid the United States of their presence. In contrast, only a handful of old-fashioned, out-of-date movies – such as *The Return of Chandu* (1934), *Princess Tam Tam* (1935), *Baghdad* (1949), *Flame of Araby* (1951), and *Princess of the Nile* (1954) – present the Arab woman as characterized by intelligence, courage, and beauty. Admirable Egyptian queens appear in the 1934 and 1963 versions of *Cleopatra*, and in *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1946). When, on rare occasions, the dark-complexioned, heroic Arab woman tries to woo a Western protagonist, she is inevitably disappointed. Films such as *Outpost in Morocco* (1949) and *Secondhand Lions* (2003) assume that an Arab woman in love with an American protagonist must die.

In most Hollywood films, then, the portrayal of Arab Muslim women is as exotic, violent, and distinctly other. Arab women are seldom projected to look and behave like most of the viewers. Producers never show them at home with family, or functioning in the workplace as professionals. Instead of revealing a common humanity, Hollywood movies from the beginning have fostered xenophobia and prejudice by their assumption that women under Islam are in a pathetic state, thus helping alienate the Arab woman from her international sisters, and vice versa.

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