Popular Culture in the Middle East and North Africa
A Postcolonial Outlook

Edited by Walid El Hamamsy and Mounira Soliman
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Introduction

In *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, Marshall McLuhan coined the term 'global village' to indicate how the advancement in technology has brought the world closer by eradicating traditional boundaries (291). Moreover, with the pervasiveness of the Internet, knowledge is no longer the domain of the educated few but has become available to all. In spite of the accessibility and easiness of obtaining information, certain stereotypes of the Arab world persist to this day, especially in the medium of film. This is not limited to representations of people but extends to include Arab lands as well. Given that the world has become a global village, such misrepresentations are not acceptable. In addition, countries like the US have maintained, especially since September 11, 2001, that they want to overcome misunderstandings between the Arab world and the West. Such representations willfully reinforce misconceptions. One image of the Arab city exists. In this chapter, I analyze the reason behind these false portrayals from a postcolonial and postmodern perspective, drawing on work by Albert Memmi, Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, and Jean Baudrillard, reflecting on films such as Disney's *Aladdin* (1992) by Ron Clements and John Musker, *Body of Lies* (2008) by Ridley Scott, *Syriana* (2005) by Stephen Gaghan, and *The Siege* (1998) by Edward Zwick, and comparing them with two Arab films, *Captain Abu Raed* (2007) by Amin Matalqa and *City of Life* (2009) by Ali F. Mostafa.

The Desertscape in Hollywood Film

The second stanza in the opening scene in *Aladdin* states that Arabian nights are as hot as days ("Song Lyrics: Aladdin"). The verse occurs in a section of the soundtrack song accompanying the opening scene of the Disney Classic animated film, *Aladdin*, titled “Arabian Nights.” The opening scene depicts a solitary turbaned man riding a camel in a vast desolate desert. The credits and the title of the film are presented against a background of a blazing fire with red flames rising that transform into yellow sands. We
Initially hear the voice of the camel rider, who we later learn is the peddler: the man leaves a negligible trail in the sands, which sharply contrasts with this immensity. The peddler-rider introduces himself as someone who comes from a faraway barbaric flat scorching desert land, in which camels dwell. He adds that in his homeland, the wind blows from the east and the sun rises from the west ("Song Lyrics: Aladdin").

Although the Arabized version of the animation Aladdin (1992) also states that the sun rises in the west, the lines of the opening stanza talk of a fantastical world, the world of Aladdin, a world of flying carpets and enchantment, a world of golden and bronze palaces. The first couplet states:

Ana jay min bilad a'jab minha ma feesh  
Feeha qusur min dhahab wa nihas. (Aladdin, "Arabian Nights")

Oh I come from a land  
From a fantastical land  
Where the palaces are gold and copper. (my translation)

The impression one gets from the Arabic lines is that of a chimerical place rather than a barbaric one, a magical place with astonishing tales. Granted, the place is just as mysterious and enchanting, and at this stage there is nothing untoward. Obviously, the Walt Disney Production is taking into consideration the audience it wants to target; the same is true of its English version. The audience is primarily an American one, and beyond that the English-speaking world along with the international audience conversant in the English language. They have been trained to expect that evil people and deeds linger furtively in the Arabian Desert.

Alan Nadel states that the original English version of Aladdin "participates in a series of clichés—often self-contradictory—narratives" (185). The narrative of the land is such a cliché. The landscape depicted is very hostile, almost uninhabitable. Such a locale can only be inhabited by certain individuals who are nothing but extensions of this cruel and harsh environment. In this version of mythical Arabia, we are told the sun rises from the west and sets in the east. This line establishes an antithesis of what is normal. In every country, the sun rises in the east, but in Arabia it rises from the west. Not only is this land barren and overbearing, but it has also defined the rationale of nature. Edward Said writes that it is normal for humans to designate in their minds a familiar place, which they label as theirs, as opposed to a place that is unfamiliar and becomes considered as the other's space, the land of the barbarians (54). Said elaborates:

In other words, this universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is "ours" and an unfamiliar space beyond "ours" which is "theirs" is a way of making geographical distinctions that can be entirely arbitrary. . . . [I]maginative geography of the "our land-barbarian land" variety does not require that the barbarians acknowledge the distinction. It is enough for "us" to set up these boundaries in our minds; "they" become "they" accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from "ours." . . . All kinds of suppositions, associations, and fictions appear to crowd the unfamiliar space outside one's own. (54)

The desert with its heat, its inhospitable terrain, and its vastness is conversely opposed to the green pastures and forests of most of Western Europe. This notion of the other and the other's land is adopted by most American films without any questioning. Jack G. Shaheen similarly states that in "the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European artists and writers helped reduce the region to a colony. They presented images of desolate deserts, corrupt palaces, and slimy souks inhabited by the cultural 'other'—the lazy, bearded heathen Arab Muslim." (Reel 13).

Foreboding Lands

In his study on Algeria during the French Colonization, Frantz Fanon saw a similar pattern in the way the Arab is portrayed: "In Algeria there is not simply the domination but the decision to the letter not to occupy anything more than the sum total of the land. The Algerians, the veiled women, the palm trees and the camels make up the landscapes, the natural background to the human presence of the French" (201). Hostile nature, obstinate and fundamentally rebellious, is in fact represented for the colonists by the bush, mosquitoes, natives, and fever, and colonization is a success when all this indolent nature has finally been tamed.

Even though French colonialists saw themselves in this landscape, they were never seen as part of it. Algerians and the way their land was perceived, however, became the static landscape (despite its nature seemingly being rebellious) against which the French enacted what they perceived as civilized as opposed to that which is not perceived as such. The rebellious nature of the land and its barbaric connotations pit generic and indistinguishable humans who are seen as extensions of the land's wilderness. The contrasting nature of the Arab countries' sands, monotone colors of the desert portrayed, and rubble signal them as a total other. It is a terrain that is unmanageable. Shaheen writes that the "desert locale consists of an oasis, oil wells, palm trees, tents, [and if any edifice is shown] fantastically ornate palaces [or disorderly shacks] . . . and of course, camels" (Reel 14). The latter formula applies irrespective of the depicted country. The repertoire of images which Aladdin presents to perfection—of the mythical Arab—lives to this day. Arabian lands and cities cannot be any different. Furthermore, the inhabitants of these lands are seen as people with opposing physical
characteristics: the dark against the European or American white. Whiteness becomes the standard against which every color is measured.

Similarly, Judith Martin et al. reflect that because of power and a privileged status in society, white identity was never questioned (129). It is considered the norm and anything else is a deviation. In their study of disparity between cultures and individuals within cultures, Florence Kluckhohn and Fred Strodtbeck also come up with a set of values which can be applied to understand these cultural variations. One of the values that they discuss in their study is the human's relationship to nature. They contend that in Western cultures, humans tend to believe that they are capable of both controlling and subjugating nature. The desert, however, has proven to be rather inaccessible to those who are not its native dwellers. It is a terrain that is completely hostile, and deemed uninhabitable by those who are unaccustomed to its climate. To an outsider, it is an unfamiliar and impenetrable place, and the assumption stands that anyone who dwells there cannot be fully human, or to some degree must be endowed with the characteristics of the place: a harsh environment begets coarse humans. It is not perchance that colonizers have labeled the Arabian Peninsula's desert, which extends from the southern part of Saudi Arabia to parts of Oman, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen, “the Empty Quarter,” the assumption being that no life can exist there. The original name of the region is Sahra' al-Ahqaf (Desert of the dunes) or “Wadi al Niran,” which can be translated as “the valley of the flames,” referring to the intensity of its heat. Even though deserts may cover vast stretches of Asian and African Arab lands, the terrains in the Arab world vary tremendously. Assuming that all lands are desert-like, the connotation surfaces that this desolation is primitive. Moreover, deserts are considered dead lands in which nothing grows; they are barren and can never become fertile. Their ‘primitive’ dwellers are incapable of changing this reality. The latter supposition exposes a certain prejudice regarding the citizens of these countries. What is subconsciously at play is that these people are wild, and will never be able to tame the land. Nonetheless, the ability to make deserts bloom is the so-called prerogative of the white man, as in the examples of European Jewish settlers in pre-1948 Palestine and white South Africans.

On many occasions, cinema has chosen to shoot movies in locales other than the ones in which the events of the films are supposed to take place. This could be due to various reasons, such as cheaper production costs or inability to gain access to the original place. The choice of location, however, tries to provide a mirror image of the original country. In portrayals of Arab lands, and especially in Hollywood films, this rarely holds true. Irrespective of the country in which the action takes place, the landscapes are the same, and the depiction willfully ignores the actual geographical make-up of the country shown. Instead, Arab countries are always presented as an unidentified mass of scorching deserts, and here the emphasis is on the wild, harsh, and uninhabitable terrain on which sporadic barbarian nomads roam, as only they can belong to such milieus. Such landscapes can only be tamed by a superior force. These presentations and tropes are not restricted to cinema but also abound in certain fictional romances, in which the truth is rarely sought. A typical scenario is a blonde heroine landing at an Arab airport in a major Arab capital and, as soon as the passengers disembark, camels are shown roaming around the planes. Invariably, the tarmac borders the sand. With the exception of the dark handsome stranger, usually depicted as an oil sheik or a prince, and an equally dark Arab female, clad in black, presented as the foil of the Western woman who remains the only visible and identifiable character, the others are portrayed as mobs in disarray, drifting through the landscape as an unruly shrub carried chaotically by the wind. As with Aladdin, the dark man must have a dark purpose and move through the desert at night.

**Constructing Realities**

Kathleen Christison states that even though one cannot accurately measure the impact of misrepresentations in media in any scientific way,

films and novels arguably have a qualitative impact that the others lack. Novels and films allow their audiences to probe an issue with a depth that television news shows and most newspapers do not provide, and without seeming to provide news or news analysis that the audience probably does not want. Novels in particular flesh-out and crystallize the media’s general impressions by giving them substance. (397-98)

The same is true of the visual as it functions as a mirror of the real. These immature and uninformed representations persist to this day in film. Christison adds, “With no other ethnic or religious group [than Arabs] do writers try so diligently to ‘prove’ backwardness, political illegitimacy, moral bankruptcy” (397). Such qualities can only exist against a land that appears likewise. Ella Shohat also states,

Through a historiographical gesture, the films define the Orient as ancient and mysterious, participating in what Jacques Derrida in another context calls the “hieroglyphist prejudice.” The cinematic Orient, then, is best epitomized by an iconography of Papyruses, Sphinxes, and Mummies, whose existence and revival depend on the “look” and “reading” of the Westerner. This rescue of the past, in other words, suppresses the voice of the present and thus legitimates by default the availability of the space of the Orient for the geopolitical maneuvers of the Western powers. The filmic mummified zone of ancient civilizations, then, is dialectically linked to the representation of the historical role of the West in the imperial age. (51-52)
Any representation of the land or topography of the Orient can exist in this fixed static state. Ancient sites are usually portrayed as places the Westerner stumbles upon, admires, appreciates, uncovers, and understands. These monuments are out of joint, anachronistic in their presence, unacknowledged by their current dwellers whose lands are deemed an unsuitable home to them. The ancient sites are ones that talk of a bygone civilization that may have had a spark once but is incapable of ever reigniting such a spark; a link is never established between these magnificent sites and the current uncouth dwellers of the land. In film, these monuments are always unearthed by a Western archaeologist. In Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade, Indiana Jones (Harrison Ford) stumbles upon the Nabatean city of Petra on his search for the Holy Grail and his kidnapped father (Sean Connery). In real life, a discoverer can lay claim to a place he or she discovered. The monuments can only belong to someone who is perceived civilized.

Shaheen lists Syriana as a film which tries to break away from the stereotype of the Arab (Guilty 169). Granted, the characters may be more complex than the previous cardboard depictions of the Arab, but the same tropes are at play. The film, which is partly shot in Dubai, the United Arab Emirates, Morocco, Egypt, and Switzerland, covers events in a mythical Arab Gulf state and the intrigues of the oil industry. Syriana opens with the Moslem call for prayer, indicating the beginning of the day for laborers working in a Gulf Arab state. The landscape is a barren desert, and the only humans we see are Asian workers. The camera then shifts to another scene taking place in the Iranian capital, Tehran. The latter is shown as a metropolis with ordinary people on the streets and in their shops. The contrasting landscapes pit two opposing worlds: civilized and uncivilized, the Arab and the Persian. This is later confirmed when Bob Barnes (George Clooney) is told by the US CIA chair that “Iran is a natural cultural ally of the US; Persians do not want to roll back the clock to the eighth century,” which is juxtaposed against the non-cultured Arabs with their empty lands who, by implication, favor a return to the eighth century (Syriana). Even within the Orient, some peoples are considered more barbaric than others. The opening scene establishes that we are in an Arab space, barren except for the workers who are being bused to their respective places of work—a cruel habitat—while the Iranian city emulates a normal life: streets full of people from various walks of life, except for the Arab terrorist who suddenly appears, and when he speaks in Arabic, Agent Barnes, who is trying to find a missing missile, calls the Arab “a goat.” This goat is definitely more at place (as Syna11a).

This uneven depiction extends to other Arab cities. The portrayal of Beirut’s so-called Hizbollah suburbs exposes a city that is run by militant thugs and filthy alleys in a rundown quarter of the city, which contrasts sharply with the place in which the Arab summit is held and the hotel in which the dignitaries are staying. The falconry scene in the desert is, on the other hand, measured against the hunting scene in Hondo, Texas, which takes place in lush green surroundings as opposed to desert sand dunes, once again drawing on the dichotomy civilized/uncivilized. I am not implying here that greener landscapes are more sophisticated. Rather, I am pointing out the connotation of what the desert has stood for and still represents to this day (as Woodman tells the Emir, it is a place with tents where people chopped each other’s heads off); the savage uncivilized Arab, an image that has been created by the first Orientalists and continues to be nurtured to this day.

Real Cities: A Different Typology of the Arab City

In City of Life, an Emirati film directed by Ali Mostapha, primarily filmed in modern-day Dubai, the events follow the lives of three main characters, and the unveiling of a city that is vibrant with life, comprising various nationalities from different social strata. The film presents Arabs and non-Arabs alike, and we see how they live in their apartments and houses—from the lavish palace in which Faisal (Saoud Al Kaabi) lives to the simple traditional house of his friend Khalifan (Yassin Alsalman) and the luxurious apartment of the air stewardesses, which is pitted against the simple apartment of the Indian taxi driver. We also see how the Emiratis realistically inhabit their desert, and how the latter can be seen as a place for socializing or a haven for self-reflection. The desert in the eyes of the film’s director is neither threatening nor foreboding; it is a meeting place for friends—as in the scene when Faisal and Khalifan join their friends around a campfire—and a venue for solace—when Faisal mourns the death of his childhood friend, Khalifan. The desert, here, is a welcoming locale, presented more realistically.

In Hollywood’s Arab world, not only are the inhabitants of the desert closer to barbarians than anything that resembles civilized beings, but they...
are also mummified in this state of primitiveness. They, together with their lands, are static. Shohat states that when film associates itself with “the visual medium of maps, cinema represents itself scientifically, as being a twentieth-century continuation of Geography” (53). Therefore, what is portrayed in film is a mirror reflection of reality. Shohat adds that the “portrayal of a Third World region as undeveloped, in this same vein, is reinforced by a topographical reductionism” that affects both the land and its people (55). Thus, the “exposed, barren land and the blazing sands, furthermore, metaphorize the exposed, unpressed ‘hot’ passion and uncensored emotions of the Orient, in short, as the world of the out-of-control Id” (57); uncontrolled lands beget uncontrolled people. These depictions affect the way a native of the land views his or her land, namely, resenting and faulting it. According to Albert Memmi, this devaluation extends to “everything that concerns . . . [the native]: to his land, which is ugly, unbearably hot, amazingly cold, evil smelling; such discouraging geography that it condemns him to contempt and poverty” (67). The land becomes the place from which one flees rather than turn to for comfort. Shaheen also comments on such stereotypical representations of the land, explaining that

“The other” [the native of the land] is always outside the circle of civilization, usually threateningly exotic or dark-looking. He speaks a different language, wears different clothing, and dwells in a primitive place such as Africa’s jungles and Arabia’s deserts—real hostile environments with signposts. The “other” poses a threat—economic, religious, and sexual—to our way of life. (Guilty xii)

Shaheen adds, “In the early 1900s, . . . movie-land’s Arabs appeared as sex-crazed, savage, and exotic camel-riding nomads living in desert tents” (xv). The desert is the one environment that can produce and support these deviant characters.

Tim Jon Semmerling believes that what is partly at play in films that dehumanize Arabs and misrepresent their lands is the “American frontier myth,” which centers on the conquest of the wilderness and the subjugation or displacement of the native peoples who originally inhabited it” (94). Furthermore, as the native savage can only act in extreme fashion, defying any normal law, any confrontation has to happen on the savages’ lands (94). The land that has produced such savagery becomes the grave where the natives are buried. An inhospitable barren land produces sub-humans, and then consumes them, as happens in Syriana at the end. Similarly, Lina Khatib writes that representations of Middle East spaces in Hollywood films depict them as both political and ideological spaces of the other (19). Khatib contends that the actual depiction of the landscape falls within the confines of objectifying the other’s land; there is invariably a glorification of power against a lack of power exhibited by that other (19). Khatib states that this kind of “representation invokes a sense of mastery over the Other landscape. The Other landscape is thus objectified by the American gaze,” and the latter gaze “denies a representation of the intricacies of the Other space” (19).

Hence, a flat monochrome stretch of yellow sands contrasts sharply with the intricacies of technology or even the masters behind that technology: “the unknown Other space is defined in terms of lack of (of power) . . . which legitimates control over the landscape” (21).

Portraying the land as a savage wilderness presupposes that it should be tamed; power is to be exerted on a barbaric space in order to control and subjugate it, but the Arabian desert treacherously defies control. The landscape is always unknown. In the opening scene of The Siege, directed by Edward Zwick, the American military barracks, which had been the site of an attack, are contrasted sharply with the immense desert setting, representing the Saudi desert, in the second scene of the film. In the barracks, people who are mostly in Western clothes are seen to be moving fast. The desert scene in contrast is slow moving, except for the car that is navigating its way through the sands. The Sheikh (Mike Akrawi) in the car who appears to be the mastermind of the attack is in Arab clothes, and so is the shepherd we meet at the entrance of the village. As the car plods its way through the massive desert, we see the unavoidable camels; in this case, two animals pulled by two faceless Arab men. The village itself boasts a few rubbishes, and—besides its few human inhabitants—has a large population of goats. The shepherd, whose accent in Arabic is strangely Palestinian rather than Saudi Arabian, walks leaning on a stick, even though he is young in years. This image not only marks the man as incomplete/invalid but also anachronistically places him in another time. The people of the desert are not only portrayed as the antithesis of civilization; they are nearly always seen to be speaking roughly, dressing roughly, and displaying “the qualities of what is seen as the opposite of civilization” (Khatib 23). In Hollywood, film representations of the Arabs and Arab lands become “reduced and refined in the crucible of repeated reworkings,” leading to a limited set of elements (Eisele 68). Likewise, Karin Gwinn Wilkins explains,

The processes of media production and reception embody cultural mapping, in that mediated constructions create codes that function as stereotypical plots, settings, and characters. . . . The act of constructing a territory we refer to as the “Middle East” produces a category envisioned from a particular historical and political perspective. Critics of mediated constructions of this territory point to the lack of historical and political context accorded this region, as well as the simplified, stereotypical versions of this landscape. (44-45)

These kinds of representations bear no resemblance to reality; the landscape portrayed becomes devoid of any significance—it is the zero signifying nothing.
Wilkins also adds that Arab Americans are weary of such representations and demand more realistic environs. According to her, Arab Americans register concerns with an overreliance on settings in deserts with camels, groups of people in “traditional” outfits, unexplained violence, and unrealistic backgrounds. The Middle Eastern settings appear to them as unnecessarily backward and foreign, dark and mysterious. Instead of specific Arab places, a more generic backdrop with key features is meant to indicate this region. (46)

This is evident in a film like Body of Lies, directed by Ridley Scott, a more recent film which, like Syriana, attempts at face value to portray Arabs and their lands more accurately. The film takes place in at least four Arab countries: Iraq, Jordan, Syria, and the United Arab Emirates. It attempts to present a more truthful depiction of the Arab city. The portrayal of the Jordanian capital, Amman, is interesting, rather than the portrayal of Dubai—which is depicted as the face of the modern Arab city, and, according to the film, is predominately one of futile opulence, uninhabited high-rises, and massive construction sites of spectacular architecture—or Samarra in Iraq—which is portrayed in its chaotic post-war state with American army patrols controlling its streets under the surveillance of American satellites. The desert with its wandering goats is contrasted sharply with American technology in the scene where Roger Ferris (Leonardo DiCaprio) is talking to Nizar (Mehdi Nebou) in his jeep. The greater part of the film, however, takes place in Amman. The first street scene we see of the city is lined with very high palm trees, which would be more at home in warmer climes, such as the Jordan Valley or Aqaba. During the drive, we pass a roundabout with a fountain; another fountain is seen when Ferris arrives at the Jordanian Intelligence Headquarters. Given the scarcity of water in the Jordanian capital, fountains are a rare occurrence. The “safe house” in which Ferris suspects the terrorists are hiding is located in a poorer neighborhood, which is in line with how an Arab city is portrayed: rundown houses, dusty footpaths, chaotic food and other stalls, children playing in sand, roaming donkeys, overflowing garbage, and rabid dogs, of which two bite Ferris’s leg as he chases one of the suspects. Once he escapes from the dogs, he walks into a desolate area that appears to have been a war zone. When Ferris later meets the head of the Jordanian Intelligence, Pasha Hani (Mark Strong), in the street, we hear the barking of dogs in the background. This is not the first time in the film that we hear the barking of dogs. The current scene takes us back to an earlier one, even though both scenes are separated by another which takes place in a clinic located on a more orderly street, the implication being that Amman is a city of chaos, populated by rabid dogs. In a number of scenes, we see bicycles, suggesting that this is the favored method of transport in the city, which is unlikely in the real Amman, given its steep hills.

The barking of the rabid dogs becomes the soundtrack that identifies the city; this is cemented by yet another barking scene towards the end of the film, in which Ferris is seen talking to Mustapha Karami (Kais Nashif) on the outskirts of the city.

As the city of Amman itself has been identified and the locale has not been presented as some generic Arab one, such depiction is objectionable. Sources provide evidence that the city dates back to the sixth millennium (Donnernann 98–102). Although the actual city of Amman is ancient, built on what is now twenty hills, and famous for its white-stone houses, the city that emerges in the film resembles the typical Hollywood Arab city. Not a single scene of the film reflects a place in the real city; we neither see its Citadel Mountain nor its amphitheater, two locations that are usually associated with the city. The streets of the film’s Amman are at best dirty footpaths, generally covered with a dusty haze; the markets are shacks half covered by torn tents or cloth; the by-standers are shown wearing strange garments that are supposedly, traditional Arab wear. The streets of the city, in reality considered some of the cleanest in the region, are depicted in the film littered and home to a large number of rabid dogs. If the director had chosen cats instead of dogs, then it would have been a more accurate portrayal of the city; Amman is a city full of stray cats. Needless to say, the heat is suffocating. Given that the film was released as recently as 2008, and given the ease with which one can attain information, the portrayal of Amman in such a manner cannot be excused. The place was identified and named, and this requires some accuracy. The actual filming location was not Amman at all; the shooting took place in the south of Morocco, which incidentally is a favored choice for filmmakers. Depicting an Arab capital in this manner is in line with the long tradition of portraying Arab lands as either expansive deserts or neglected, shabby, squalid towns or cities. If grandeur is to be had, it definitely does not belong to this era; it belongs to a bygone era, to antiquity, and preferably to pre-biblical times and historic peoples.

Yet, descendants of these ancient peoples still inhabit their cities. Their historical cities are still alive. The events of Captain Abu Raed, directed by Amin Matalqa, are an example of the latter. The film also takes place in the Jordanian capital, Amman. The movie depicts an aging airport janitor mistaken for a pilot by a group of children, and whose imaginary stories offer an escape from a desolate reality. Most of the film’s action takes place in the eastern and poorer section of the capital. Abu Raed, who lives alone following the demise of his wife and only son, meets with the children on top of the Citadel Mountain, which overlooks the city. Katherine Monk describes the film as follows:

The picture is eerily beautiful: All sandy beige and dusty pink, the city beneath him looks both ancient and magical in the glittering dawn. . . .

These early frames move over the contours of Amman like a gentle caress.
and firmly establish Abu Raed as a fixture within his environment. The old man, with his white hair and threadbare clothes, fits right into the ancient landscape with its worn stones and sun-bleached architecture.

This becomes evident when Abu Raed negotiates the ancient stairs. The old stairs leading to his house have been, and still are, an integral part of the geography of ancient and modern-day Amman. In pre-car days, people of the city used these stairs to get from one place to another. Day after day, Abu Raed is dropped off by the Royal Jordanian Airline bus at the bottom of these steps, which he laboriously climbs to reach his house. In the evening, he drinks his tea on the terrace, with its magnificent view of the other hills of Amman. Other scenes of the film are set in Queen Alia International Airport, and in the richer suburbs of west Amman, such as the house of the airline pilot, Nour, with whom Abu Raed develops a friendship. Abu Raed’s Amman bears no resemblance to that of Airport, and in the richer suburbs of west Amman, such as the house of the other’s vision of his or her city or land endlessly portrayed in this manner creates a chasm between it and the other’s reality. The Arab becomes the victim of this othering, which is eventually internalized.

Notes

1. The original 1992–1993 production had the same verse but instead of the intense heat, it is a place in which ears are cut off for the fun of it. ("Song Lyrics: Aladdin"). Due to complaints by the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), the verse was changed.

Works Cited


