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Behind the Curtain: Unpacking Racism in Casting Practices

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Abstract

This research studies systemic racism in Hollywood against Middle Eastern actors, claiming that such actors' almost complete absence from blockbuster film and television is both structural and not incidental. Using Critical Race Theory (CRT), it examines systemic racism through longitudinal content analysis of the top 10 highest-grossing films released from 1995 to 2025 and comparative role analysis of Middle Eastern actors compared to white actors. The findings show that there are sharp contrasts: only 12 of the 310 blockbusters have actors identified as Middle Eastern with a significant role and all 12 were male; nearly half of each role taken by Middle Eastern actors conformed to a limiting stereotype (terrorists, hypersexualization, and tokenism). Qualitative analysis of how these portrayals of Middle Eastern actors are overshadowed by the complexity and depth shown about the roles of white actors implies that the last bias is an accepted stereotype and masks active discrimination from society. First-hand accounts from actors, comedians, and filmmakers such as Riz Ahmed, Rami Malek, and Salma Hayek all illustrate how typecasting, tokenism, and whitewashing are still impediments to legitimate representation in Hollywood. Lastly, it is further argued in the study that Hollywood's exclusion of Middle Eastern actors has implications for real-life prejudice and hate crimes against Middle Eastern communities. By engaging with CRT's notion of structural racism, this study calls for a structural shift in Hollywood, advocating for more diversity at the level of executive leadership, investment in Middle Eastern-led productions, and accountability for systemic replication of racism in casting. Representation must go beyond being a symbolic gesture for Hollywood to ensure that Middle Eastern actors can embody visible, humanized voices that are perceived to be complex.

Keywords: Hollywood, systemic racism, Critical Race Theory (CRT), representation, middle eastern actors, casting practices, typecasting, tokenism, whitewashing, stereotypes, media and society, film industry, blockbuster cinema, visibility politics, gender and race, orientalism, cultural erasure, narrative power, diversity in media

1. Introduction

In this research paper, I will be arguing that racism directed at Middle Eastern performers is systemic in Hollywood. I am coming from the perspective of Critical Race Theory (CRT) to make my point clear: this is not an isolated case of a "few bad apples", this is an entire system that has consistently and purposefully discriminated against Middle Eastern performers. I do not believe it is merely a coincidence that there is a nearly absolute absence of Middle Eastern performers/characters in film and television; it is a deliberate act of exclusion, of silencing an entire demographic.

I will not engage in psychoanalysis and hypothesize about Hollywood's unconscious rationale for their discriminatory and racist attitudes toward Middle Eastern performers, because it would lead me to an endless rabbit hole of inquiry; while an interesting line of investigation, that is not the intention of this paper. Instead, I will present the metrics, collect and analyze the statistics from reputable studies that lead us to the only

unavoidable conclusion: that systematic racism toward Middle Eastern performers is real, and has always existed in Hollywood.

This research is not merely about film as an art form. Film is one of the most potent instruments for influencing public perception and opinion. My argument is that systemic racism portrayed by film in some manner is not "just" a reflection of racist attitudes or stigma within public society in general, but develops and strengthens it. In other words, the systematic erasure of Middle Eastern people is effectively normalizing their marginalization.

2. Critical Race Theory

This research extends the considerable foundations of CRT established by scholars such as Richard Delgado, Jean Stefancic and Derrick Bell, which highlights the systemic nature of racism against Black people, taking many forms in the United States. I will be using the same methodology to identify the identical patterns of systemic racism within Hollywood. Critical Race Theory, as described by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, is:

> "The critical race theory (CRT) movement is a collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power. The movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, setting, group and self-interest, and emotions and the unconscious. Unlike traditional civil rights discourse, which stresses incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory examines the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law" (Delgado and Stefancic, 2001, p. 3).

CRT reinforces the idea that racial inequity is a common and normalized occurrence rather than a random, unique, or sporadic event. Racial inequities that are present within government policy, the media, and representation are reinforced by the majority of people in society, who likely have no idea that they are complicit in perpetuating systemic racism. CRT upholds the goal of using storytelling and lived experience as a means of negating the dominant culture, which often defends or excuses accountable inequalities and systemic injustice. For this study, CRT represents one of the lenses through which we will identify exclusion and stereotyping related to Hollywood casting.

Similar to Critical Race Theory, this study employs both qualitative and quantitative forms of inquiry to unveil and address systems of inequality. Traditionally, CRT scholars articulated statistics and personal narrative alongside the assertion that statistics have limits when it comes to capturing the daily experiences of racialized people. To this end, this study uses CRT as a springboard to not only shed light on systemic trends in casting by measuring the percent of trope-reliant roles are composed for Middle Eastern actors using quantitative measurement, but it also acknowledges the qualitative nature of narrative and counter-narrative in which to amplify the voice and stories of those directly affected. By sharing personal stories, such as those of Riz Ahmed, Rami Malek and my own, actors paint a more comprehensive picture than an anecdotal example, which can be read as counterstories that stand against entrenched myths/assumptions in the industry. Such stories relevant to CRT methodology redirect how underrepresentation can be framed, not as failures of individuals or the market, but as rituals with prescribed avenues of exclusion in Hollywood.

3. Methodology and Data Collection

For a longitudinal content analysis, this paper examines the top 10 highest-grossing films worldwide from 1995 to 2025, using BoxOfficeMojo and IMDb as data sources. In prioritizing the most lucrative films released each year, or those with the most significant financial reach in terms of international release. Considering the cultural imprint of Hollywood films, this study aims to examine the visibility and portrayal of Middle Eastern representation in popular cinema.

The analysis determines whether a Middle Eastern actor is in a lead or "top billing" role, as opposed to a more token or background role, as these often represent a convenient and superficial lens of representation. Each lead or top-billing role is scrutinized against a few established tropes, such as villainy, token inclusion, and hypersexualization, and classified by genre and character placement in these films. This study is important because blockbuster films shape public perception on a global scale and have the ability to establish what is normalized regarding who is heroic or human and who is worthy of being a central character. Ultimately, by documenting the near total lack of Middle Eastern actors (specifically women) in leading roles, over the past 30 years. This paper examines the overwhelming absence of representation of Middle Eastern actors from Hollywood films, and considers what this means for the politics of visibility and representation for women in Hollywood. This paper provides evidence to challenge exclusion in casting by carefully documenting the data.

Furthermore, this paper investigates the question of whether there is bias against Middle Eastern actors in Hollywood by examining the careers of 10 currently active Middle Eastern actors (both male and female) who

are considered successful in Hollywood. I surveyed some of the more successful and notable Middle Eastern actors working in the United States and reviewed their entire ongoing filmographies on IMDb. Each of their roles was categorized so that I could determine the percentage of roles that contained stereotypical and/or villainous characters. To clarify the results and enrich the analysis, I did the same thing for a group of Caucasian actors.

The results will show that Middle Eastern actors, particularly early in their careers where they are often forced to accept whatever roles that they are offered, are much more likely to play villainous or stereotypical characters. Once Middle Eastern actors gain prestige and can pick and choose the roles they accept, the likelihood that they play stereotypical or villainous characters drops.

I will focus on Riz Ahmed as an illustrative case. A review of his first 10 roles reflected consistent villainous or negative forms of representation: terrorists, social deviants, isolated or villainous characters. However, once Ahmed gained prestige and the ability to selectively choose his roles, only one of these characters was villainous (*Venom*, 2018), a blockbuster film that, somewhat paradoxically, allowed him to gain even further prestige despite these discriminatory representations. This contributes to the notion that Middle Eastern actors are typically typecast in their initial roles. Once they achieve success and can create new categories for characters, they will actively choose roles that undermine these harmful, stereotypical roles early on.

3.1 Representation in Top-Grossing Films (1995–2025)

This study examines 30 years of blockbuster movies and their potential for serious inquiry into Middle Eastern actors, particularly in the roles they portray. This analysis examines the number of roles based on previously established tropes and the distribution of leading and supporting roles. The data is from BoxOfficeMojo and IMDb. The BoxOfficeMojo site lists the worldwide top-10-grossing films each year; I then used IMDb to analyze the cast lists from those films. This study will analyze films from 1995 to 2025. The yearly focus on the top-10-grossing films is intentional; notably, these blockbuster films tend to have the broadest societal reach and impact, which have significant influence over who is represented and who is not in mainstream global cinema.

Year	**Count**	**Actor(s) & Film(s)**
2025	0	
2024	0	
2023	1	Rami Malek (*Oppenheimer*)
2022	1	Mamoudou Athie (*Jurassic World: Dominion*)
2021	1	Rami Malek (*No Time to Die*)
2020	0	
2019	1	Multiple actors (*Aladdin*)
2018	2	Riz Ahmed (*Venom*), Rami Malek (Bohemian Rhapsody)
2017	0	
2016	1	Riz Ahmed (*Rogue One*)
2015	0	
2014	0	
2013	0	
2012	0	
2011	0	
2010	0	
2009	0	
2008	1	Faran Tahir (*Iron Man*)
2007	0	
2006	1	Alfred Molina (*The Da Vinci Code*)
2005	0	
2004	1	Alfred Molina (*Spider-Man 2*)

2003	0	
2002	1	Tony Shalhoub (*Men in Black 2*)
2001	0	
2000	0	
1999	0	
1998	0	
1997	1	Tony Shalhoub (*Men in Black*)
1996	0	
1995	0	

4. Key Findings from the Data

- There were zero Middle Eastern women in any of the top-grossing films from 1995 to 2025.
- In 2007, *300* was one of the year's top 10-grossing films. The villains in the movie were all Persian, yet the main Persian character, Xerxes, was portrayed by Rodrigo Santoro — a Brazilian actor.
- The only lead roles played by Middle Eastern actors were Mena Massoud as Aladdin (*Aladdin*, 2019) and Rami Malek as Freddie Mercury (*Bohemian Rhapsody*, 2018).
- Between 1995 and 2003, the only representation was Tony Shalhoub, who appeared in a supporting role outside the top five billing in *Men in Black* (1997) and *Men in Black II* (2002).
- Between 2009 and 2015, there were no Middle Eastern actors in top roles in any of the top 10 box office films.
- Only five roles were among the top three billed characters in the film. Of those, three were lead villains.
- In total, only 12 out of 310 films featured a Middle Eastern actor in a significant role, which is just 3.87%.
- Of those 12 roles:
    - Five were villains.
    - Three were protagonists.
    - Four were minor supporting characters with limited screen time.
- 21 out of the 31 years (68%) had zero Middle Eastern representation in top-billed roles.
- There were no instances of Middle Eastern actors cast as romantic leads or superheroes.
- Just six actors accounted for all 12 roles identified.

Genre Bias Observed

Most of the roles that did exist were concentrated in:

- Action/sci-fi blockbusters
- Spy thrillers
- Franchise films

There was zero representation in genres such as:

- Animated voice roles
- Romantic comedies
- Dramas
- Coming-of-age stories

The prejudice is undeniable. The fact that, out of the top 10 highest-grossing films each year for the past 30 years, not a single Middle Eastern woman has been included in the main cast is nothing short of discriminatory. I predict that if I extended this study across the entire century-long history of Hollywood, I still wouldn't find a single Middle Eastern woman in a leading role in a major blockbuster film. It is important to note that the films dominating the box office are not obscure or niche — they are the films with the biggest budgets and global reach. In my study, franchises like the Marvel Cinematic Universe, DC Universe, Disney animated films, the Jurassic Parks series, Star Wars, Harry Potter, and The Lord of the Rings were consistently among the top 10

highest-grossing films of each year. Not a single one of these major franchises has cast a Middle Eastern woman in the main ensemble.

This absence is not an oversight. Instead, it reflects entrenched practices of an industry that continues to erase entire communities. Even when Middle Eastern actors are cast, they are often overwhelmingly villainous roles, minor roles or bit parts that allow them little complexity, depth or the importance that is available to white characters in these narratives. The fact that six actors account for the limited appearances over three decades reinforces how narrow the industry's imagination regarding inclusion truly is.

Moreover, the genres where representation has occurred are revealing: 0 in romantic comedies, dramas, animated films, or coming-of-age stories—genres that often make connections to evoke cultural empathy and humanity in characters. Instead, representation is limited to action, sci-fi, or spy films that reinforce one-dimensional representation aligned with the negative stereotypes that often accompany these genres. Representation and diversity in global blockbusters are about so much more than opportunity; they are also about visibility, power, and the right to be viewed as fully human.

5. Comparative Analysis of Role Typecasting

To conduct a comparative analysis of role typecasting, the following actors were selected based on their prominence and active presence in the Hollywood film industry. The sample comprises 10 Middle Eastern actors (5 male, five female) and 10 white actors (5 male, five female).

Middle Eastern Male Actors

- **Rami Malek** – Egyptian-American (*Bohemian Rhapsody*, *Mr. Robot*)
- **Omid Djalili** – Iranian-British (*The Mummy*, *The Infidel*)
- **Alexander Siddig** – Sudanese-English (*Syriana*, *Kingdom of Heaven*, *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*)
- **Riz Ahmed** – British-Pakistani (*Sound of Metal*, *Nightcrawler*)
- **Shaun Toub** – Iranian-American (*Iron Man*, *Homeland*)

Middle Eastern Female Actors

- **Shohreh Aghdashloo** – Iranian-American (*House of Sand and Fog*, *The Expanse*)
- **May Calamawy** – Egyptian-Palestinian (*Moon Knight*, *Ramy*)
- **Yasmine Al Massri** – Lebanese-Palestinian (*Quantico*, *Caramel*)
- **Sarah Shahi** – Iranian-Spanish-American (*Person of Interest*, *Sex/Life*)
- **Golshifteh Farahani** – Iranian (*Paterson*, *Extraction*)

White Male Actors

- **Brad Pitt** (*Fight Club*, *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*)
- **Leonardo DiCaprio** (*Inception*, *The Revenant*)
- **Ryan Gosling** (*La La Land*, *Drive*)
- **Tom Cruise** (*Mission: Impossible* series, *Top Gun*)
- **Chris Evans** (*Captain America*, *Knives Out*)

White Female Actors

- **Jennifer Lawrence** (*The Hunger Games*, *Silver Linings Playbook*)
- **Scarlett Johansson** (*Black Widow*, *Marriage Story*)
- **Emma Stone** (*La La Land*, *Easy A*)
- **Amy Adams** (*Arrival*, *Enchanted*)
- **Jessica Chastain** (*Zero Dark Thirty*, *Molly's Game*)

Some key characteristics we are looking for when seeing the characters these actors played are:

- Terrorist
- Socially Deviant or Isolated
- Emotionally or Psychologically Disturbed
- Hypermasculine or Misogynistic
- Incompetent / Buffoonish

- Tokenized or Backgrounded
- Perpetual Foreigner Tropes
- Over Sexualized Women
- Male Gaze female
- Saved by white protagonist

These are some common tropes that middle eastern actors are found playing and I will consider all of them when gathering data.

Data detailing the research on Middle Eastern Actors:

Actor	Trope-Aligned Roles	Total Roles	% of Roles with Tropes
Rami Malek	18	32	56%
Omid Djalili	42	64	66%
Alexander Siddig	40	63	64%
Riz Ahmed	11	36	31%
Shaun Toub	38	89	43%
Shohreh Aghdashloo	40	78	51%
May Calamawy	12	35	34%
Yasmine Al Massri	15	35	43%
Sarah Shahi	21	65	32%
Golshifteh Farahani	47	73	64%

Data detailing the research on White Actors:

Actor	Trope-Aligned Roles	Total Roles	% of Roles with Tropes
Brad Pitt	5	102	5%
Leonardo DiCaprio	2	54	4%
Ryan Gosling	3	51	6%
Tom Cruise	2	53	4%
Chris Evans	3	63	5%
Jennifer Lawrence	5	38	13%
Scarlett Johansson	9	84	11%
Emma Stone	4	57	7%
Amy Adams	3	65	5%
Jessica Chastain	2	62	3%

For Middle Eastern actors the two most typical tropes were villainous roles and token roles. Of the 570 roles assessed, 280 were considered to be in those trope-aligned categories — 49.1%. For white actors, there were a total of 669 roles, of which only 38 were in trope-aligned categories, representing 5.7% of the total roles.

Additionally, it is essential to note that many of the roles assigned to Middle Eastern actors were based on stereotypical definitions. In comparison, when white actors portray villains, directors and producers tend to take their time in defining their characters. DiCaprio and Cruise have played villains, but they were not one-dimensional gun-wielding “terrorists”. They were fully-fledged villains. These characters made choices, typically defined by complex motives. In addition to the quantitative differentiation, I also observed a clear qualitative differentiation, particularly in complexity, narrative prominence, and narrative importance. Middle Eastern characters are frequently relegated to one-dimensional pathways; there is no distinction, independent agency, development of different layers, or opportunities for growth relative to their white counterparts.

This comparative analysis demonstrates the difference in casting between Middle Eastern and white actors in Hollywood. For instance, what I observed in the data is that almost half (49.1%) of performances by Middle Eastern actors are trope-aligned — villain, token, or otherwise reductive. For white actors, the estimate is that

only 5.7% of their performances were of the trope-aligned type. This difference in experience is not only quantifiable; there is also a qualitative difference: white actors receive layers of narrative and depth of character, while Middle Eastern actors often take the situation they are in and re-perform a flattened character over and over again. Overall, this analysis lends support to the argument that typecasting is systemic and a racialized one where reckless stereotypes are prevalent and harmful for Middle Eastern performers everywhere, effectively encumbering growth opportunities for performers. Hollywood's claim to diversity remains hollow so long as it continues to deny Middle Eastern actors the complexity and prominence readily offered to their white counterparts.

Examples of Common Tropes

As mentioned in the preceding section, a majority of roles that Middle Eastern actors tend to be cast in are stereotypically associated with familiar tropes such as terrorist or hypersexualized women. In the film *From Dusk Till Dawn* (1996), Salma Hayek played a seductive dancer; she embodied the exoticized and hypersexualized stereotype of a Middle Eastern woman. Her escape from violence and death occurred solely through her sexuality, and her sole purpose was to reinforce segments of the male gaze and Western, orientalist fantasies—a complete absence of any genuine cultural authenticity or nuancing.

Riz Ahmed's character in *Four Lions* (2010) is a would-be jihadist, anchoring yet another stereotype of a Middle Eastern man as a terrorist. Although the film is a dark comedy that seeks to poke fun at extremism, there remains a much broader pattern of representation where Middle Eastern men are represented as terrorists or inner city killers. In Ahmed's case, while he is aware of the context of the critique of Islamism and turf wars among British Muslims, it pushes a much larger narrative. Middle Eastern actors are regularly cast in stories that connect violence, fanaticism and danger, and take steps backwards for a very limited, often damaging, representation of their communities and lived experiences.

Another example is Rami Malek in the television mini-series *24: Legacy* (2017), in which he plays Marcos Al-Zacar, a young man who is manipulated into the role of a suicide bomber. While the show attempts to imbue psychological complexity into Al-Zacar's character, the role ultimately regurgitates a heavy-handed stereotype about the Muslim man as a radicalized threat. In general, Malek's character is representative of how Middle Eastern actors get cast in the association of their identity in portraying a character of terrorism, perpetuating harmful cultural tropes in mainstream Western media.

As previously mentioned, these roles occurred early in the actors' careers, during a period when freedom of choice was severely limited and actors often had to accept whatever opportunities were available to gain visibility in the industry. The systematic pattern of Middle Eastern actors in roles typifying terrorism, and hypersexualization of one kind or another, or social deviance, is not an innocent coincidence; the entire reality shows where systemic issues in Hollywood reside. These roles are interrelated and positioned with a much broader representational harm as complex selves and identities are flattened into depersonalizing character tropes. By consistently casting Middle Eastern performers in simplistic and harmful ways, the industry devalues their range and potential. It reinforces public perceptions that shorthand Middle Eastern identity to danger, violence, or exoticism.

Firsthand Accounts of Industry Bias

The casting process in Hollywood has disappointed numerous Middle Eastern actors. Riz Ahmed has been a significant voice in the battle against negative portrayals of Muslims in film and television. In an article for *The Guardian* titled "You've got to try and worry about something bigger than yourself: Riz Ahmed on rap, racism and standing up to Hollywood", Ahmed details some of the barriers he has endured as a Muslim actor in the business. During the press tour for his Academy Award-nominated performance in *Sound of Metal* (2019), Ahmed noted that nearly every interview he participated in included inquiries about his race and religion. The fact that a Muslim actor was nominated in the lead role was noted as strange, even alien to the Academy, which certainly indicates what a rare and underrepresented experience it is for an actor from a Middle Eastern background to achieve recognition at this level.

One particularly salient point during the interview is when Ahmed reflects on the conversation happening around his nomination:

> "That *Sound of Metal* even exists then is a hail-mary; that it went on to be nominated for Baftas and Oscars is altogether more unexpected and impressive. And so, when it started being noticed that a Muslim had never previously been in the running for the most prestigious acting award, Ahmed felt conflicted. "Some people go like, 'Oh, first Muslim, this and that,'" he says. "And your initial reaction is like, 'What's that got to do with anything?'" Then you have another feeling: 'But actually, wait that is relevant, insofar as like, why hasn't this happened before? That's weird.' So always that kind of push and pull."

Ahmed continues to feel that push and pull; he has it now in our interview. It would be much more straightforward to talk about learning to play the drums, instead of having to explain why it matters that, in the 200 most popular films made between 2017 and 2019, only 1.6% of the nearly 9,000 speaking characters were Muslim. That, in 181 of those 200 films, there were no Muslim characters at all. "There's a voice in my head right now that's just going, 'Oh my God, come on, get off this stuff, man!'" Ahmed admits. "Like 70% of my interviews end up being about politics and representation and all that" (Lewis, 2021).

Furthermore, later in the interview Ahmed discusses the moment in his career when he finally beat the stereotypical roles he played and was able to play more complex roles.

> "*The promised land*," is what Ahmed calls the phase of his career that he's entered. In an essay in 2016 for *The Good Immigrant*, a book about race and immigration in the UK, he defined it as a place "where you play a character whose story is not intrinsically linked to his race. There, I am not a terror suspect, nor a victim of forced marriage. There, my name might even be Dave" (Lewis, 2021).

In another *The Guardian* interview, Rami Malek reflects on his experience as a Middle Eastern actor navigating post-9/11 Hollywood. Journalist Charlotte Edwardes notes "this being a post-9/11 United States, he found he was offered parts playing terrorists, the kind of thing where he would be discovered in the boot of a car" (Edwardes, 2025). Malek also addresses a darker truth in the industry by invoking the phrase "white passing." He describes how, although he is Arabic, his appearance occasionally allows him to pass as white, which helps him avoid certain biases in the casting process. This reveals a more disturbing truth: being Middle Eastern is not the problem — being perceived as Middle Eastern is. It is the visual component of one's ethnicity that Hollywood seems to find problematic, and demonstrates the industry's bias against not just one's identity, but also their appearance. Malek explains:

> It's difficult to rid yourself of that sense of difference. "I don't know how you ever get over that. I'm what's called 'white passing', but I have very distinctive features, and we definitely didn't fit in." He and Sami developed finely tuned antennae; felt they could see an agenda a mile off. "We just had an uncanny way of sensing people." He relates how another actor recently observed this to Corrin: "'From the second Rami walks in the room, he is assessing every single situation, how it will affect him, or others, the domino effect of it all.' I don't know if it's a blessing or a curse," he adds. "Sometimes I find it detrimental." I ask if he can turn it off. "No. You can't help it." "I got thrown on the bonnet of an LAPD cop car because someone had robbed a liquor store and stolen a woman's bag. They said the thief was of Latin descent and, 'You fit the description" (Edwardes, 2025).

Malek's experience with an LAPD officer demonstrates the relationship between social conceptions and Hollywood; it illustrates how various ethnicities — Latin, Middle Eastern etc. — are often mishandled as "good enough". When one refers to broad-groupings; we see this practice not only on the streets, but we see this also in Hollywood casting practices, since Hollywood allows "diverse" identities to be treated as indistinguishable. The tension to "white-wash" oneself or suppress one's ethnicity is a recurring aspect of Critical Race Theory, and for many actors of color, not just to get roles, but to participate in a system in which whiteness is normalized.

Chapter 23 of *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, titled "Working Identity", writers Devon W. Carbado and Mitu Gulati discuss how people of color are often expected to whitewash themselves to fit in at work. They write, "To fully appreciate workplace discrimination, then, one has to examine and raise questions about not only the employer's conduct (whether it is legitimate for employers to behave in ways that adversely affect outsider employees) but the employee's conduct as well (whether it is legitimate for employees to be pressured to behave in particular ways to avoid discrimination)" (Carbado & Gulati, 2013, p. 224).

The concept of whitewashing can be found in Rami Malek's interview. He raises the issue that his appearance does not immediately signal that he is Middle Eastern, so he is racially ambiguous, which comes with the connotation of being "flexible". In Hollywood terms, this means more work. Malek's experience is indicative of how Carbado and Gulati describe people of color implicitly having to manage how they present themselves to navigate and survive institutions that can and do work to exclude them actively. The concept of whitewashing will be discussed further in this paper.

Salma Hayek, who has achieved great success in Hollywood and has Middle Eastern and Mexican heritage, has spoken extensively about her place in Hollywood and the challenges she sometimes faces. A common trope for Middle Eastern actresses often involves hyper sexualization. This illustrates a bigger issue, because Middle Eastern actresses encounter the double bind of marginalization for their ethnicity as well as gender.

Hayek in an interview in 2019 with Vogue noted that Hollywood studio heads told her that she was born in the wrong country, that she could never be a leading lady in America as, when she spoke, she'd remind people of

their maids.

> "I battled racism by using their sexism," says Hayek of navigating all the naysayers back then. "So, I invented this sexy character." That was what [Hollywood] was able to open up to, that's how I went in. I remember understanding this, and making a choice: 'Am I degrading myself?' I didn't sleep with people. It was just that this was something they could understand. In their head, the audience is attracted, and with this me on the screen, they could forgive the accent. So, I said, 'OK I can do that.' "With each "hot girl" part Hayek won, she would delicately inject more character, pushing the limitations of the role: "Let me add a little bit of intelligence — then they would say, 'You cannot be intelligent, we do not want this character to be intelligent, take this out'. Let me add some comedy — 'This is too funny, you cannot be funnier than the guy'. OK, let me add some warmth or humanity. If I could inject something into one or two scenes, I did. I did the best with what I had there. Does this still happen? Yes, it still happens. But trust me, we've come a long way. It's a process; revolutions are very messy," she smiles, sagely." (Evans-Harding, 2019)

Although actors of Middle Eastern descent face numerous challenges in the Hollywood scenario, the challenges are more pointed for the Middle Eastern female actors when gender-biased racial attitudes come into play. Their roles are thus not only subject to stereotyped portrayals of race but also to Orientalist versions of Middle Eastern femininity. These films and series commonly caricaturize Middle Eastern women, depicting them as either hypersexualized beings or oppressed beings who cookie-cutter need to be liberated by the West.

The other tropes include the "oppressed woman," which is reinforced through films as varied and widespread in theme as *Not Without My Daughter* (1991) and *The Stoning of Soraya M.* (2008). In these films, Middle Eastern societies are assuredly oppressive; Western intervention is practically the only method to liberate women. Such tropes oversimplify complex sociopolitical realities by reinforcing the stereotype that Middle Eastern cultures are inherently oppressive.

Hyper sexualization of Middle Eastern women regularly occurs. Films such as *The Mummy* (1999) and *Aladdin* (1992) where Middle Eastern women, as alluring and secretive characters, exist mainly to seduce or unnerve their male counterparts; in this way, such portrayals are objectifications rather than fully-realized individuals. Even in contemporary settings, Middle Eastern women remain mostly relegated to being side characters, with little hope or acknowledgement of being the main object of their own narratives. The lack of representation impacts not only the portrayal of Middle Eastern women in films and television but also the chances available to Middle Eastern actresses in Hollywood.

Personal Connection

I was born in Vancouver, British Columbia Canada, a significant location for Hollywood movies, so I was well-positioned to pursue acting as a career. While my ethnicity is Afghan, I was as Canadian as anyone else. I wanted to be like the greats in Hollywood, actors like Leonardo DiCaprio and Marlon Brando. They were my heroes, and I can only admire the acting talent that those two had in their ability to play so many different characters.

I was particularly taken with Brando's ability to portray such diverse characters; he played the ill-tempered Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), and a few years later, he played the kind and soft-spoken Terry Malloy in *On the Waterfront* (1954). I wanted to achieve that as well. Like many young aspiring actors, I dreamed of playing a wide range of roles with emotional and psychological depth.

However, for the first time in my life, my ethnicity became my identity. As soon as I began acting, I was typecast as a villainous terrorist. Here are a few roles that I have auditioned for in the past few months. Due to confidentiality, I cannot disclose which TV shows or character names these roles were for; however, all of these roles were for popular shows on streaming platforms.

- Middle Eastern Hotel Guest/Assassin / 20s-50s. A Middle Eastern man with a thick accent, he initially appears to be an unassuming, baffled hotel guest who is clueless about the source of all the gunfire. But in fact, he is a Saudi assassin, under orders to capture four women.
- Male, 20s, Iranian (or Iranian descent). Speaks Farsi. One of an international assortment of elite soldiers. His arrogance can make him cynical and negative, yet has a strong sense of duty to his mission and saving the world… RECURRING GUEST STAR.
- Male, 15, a disturbed, disheveled kid. A truly violent anti-social by nature, not peer pressure. An outlandish act lands him in the crew, and his presence in the gang ups the ante on their violence.

A few characters I have been cast as are "Young Praying Jihadist" and "Young Afghan Thief". "Young Afghan Thief" was originally named "Young Afghan Terrorist" however after speaking to producers I got them to agree

to change the name so I could avoid further typecasting. Although the name was changed, it did little to avoid typecasting.

A common thread in these roles is violent, gun-wielding, angry and villainous. This is a common occurrence for middle eastern actors. It is these roles that directly contribute to negative societal perceptions of middle eastern people. I soon realized that my goal of becoming an actor with range and depth quickly turned into supporting racist stereotypes that have plagued my community.

Black Tokenism Policy

The concept of "Black Tokenism Policy" is a crucial lens through which we can understand the current state of Hollywood's treatment of Middle Eastern actors. CRT scholar Derrick Bell coined this term in his groundbreaking book *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, in chapter 7 titled *"A Law Professor's Protest."* There, Bell examines the systemic racism embedded in academic institutions, with a particular focus on Harvard University. He describes how institutions maintain an appearance of inclusivity through what he calls the "formalizing of a black tokenism policy: 'Hire one if you must, but only one'" (Bell, 1992, p. 113). Bell supports this claim with disturbing statistics: "According to Harvard's Affirmative Action Plan, during the 1988–89 school year, only 15 of the 957 tenured faculty (1.6 percent) were Black. Moreover, there were only 26 Blacks (1.1 percent) among the 2,265 tenure-line faculty positions" (Bell, 1992, p. 112). These figures reveal how tokenism enables institutions to cite minimal representation as evidence of diversity, while doing little to challenge the underlying structures of exclusion.

Bell also argues that significant reform often only comes after a tragedy — a pattern that should not be necessary. In a fictional parable, he illustrates how change is often a reactive rather than proactive process. The George Floyd murder is a recent and powerful real-world example of this: change followed, but it should not have taken a tragedy of that magnitude to spark action. Reform should come before the breaking point, not after it has occurred.

Bell outlines four key causes of racial inequality in universities: "white superiority, faculty conservatism, scholarly conformity, and tokenism" (Bell, 1992, p. 118). To explain society's resistance to diversity, he uses a compelling analogy from classical music: just as audiences tend to prefer the musical styles they are most familiar with, institutions often cling to the "sounds" they know. "Initial introduction to an art form, as to one's native language, creates a strong preference for that mode. Other styles can seem dissonant and unmusical—inaccessible without considerable effort" (Bell, 1992, p. 120). This resistance to change is not just about comfort — it is about power, and it shapes who gets hired, who gets heard, and who gets seen.

This same pattern is also evident in Hollywood. Bell's notion of tokenism maps almost perfectly onto the industry's treatment of Middle Eastern actors. Out of the 310 most successful box office films in the past 30 years, Middle Eastern actors were cast in lead roles only 12 times — and not once was a woman of Middle Eastern background in a lead role. That is not inclusion — it is erasure. The roles given to Middle Eastern actors in blockbuster films are either nonexistent or token at best. A fitting analogy would be pointing to Ross's Black girlfriend in *Friends* as proof the show was "diverse." Accurate representation would mean that one or more of the six main characters reflected racial and cultural diversity — not just a guest appearance. This kind of tokenism makes it nearly impossible for Middle Eastern actors to break out and build lasting careers, which is why only six have ever booked a lead role in a top 10 box office film over the past three decades.

Bell's critiques of *white superiority* and *faculty conservatism* in academia apply just as well to Hollywood. He argues that change cannot happen unless institutions elevate diverse voices into real positions of power. In film, the most powerful roles are not in front of the camera — they are in the executive suites. Moreover, if we examine the current heads of major Hollywood studios, such as Paramount, Disney, Warner Bros., Sony, and Netflix, we observe the same pattern: all five are led by white men. Representation in casting is important, but it is not enough. Until the people who greenlight scripts, hire directors, and control budgets are diverse, we will continue to see systemic inequality reproduced on screen. Bell's framework helps us understand that the problem is not just a lack of Middle Eastern faces in Hollywood — it is the deeper structures of power that continue to exclude them.

Whitewashing

Whitewashing has been a longstanding practice in the entertainment industry, particularly in Hollywood. It is not limited to just Middle Eastern identities — from the beginnings of Hollywood, it has had a persistent history of white actors in characters made for people of color. One of the most visible and egregious forms is blackface. In terms of Middle Eastern representations, whitewashing is a persistent practice that exists to this day, and new examples continue to be revealed. *300* (2006) takes place primarily in ancient Persia and is a fictionalized retelling of the battle between the Spartans and their "evil" opponents, the Persians. In addition to the film's ugly racism and dehumanizing representation of the Persians as monstrous and villainous, the lead characters, the

Persians, were not even portrayed by people of Persian descent. A precise instance of whitewashing that only serves to fortify Hollywood's ability to create narratives.

Scholar Brooke K. Gentry articulates that whitewashing is not only about white actors taking on more roles than actors from a Middle Eastern background, but it is also about narrative control. By erasing authentic representation, they retain primacy in narrative power and hold a monopoly on representations of how these communities are perceived and understood. As Gentry states:

> "Over a century ago, shortly after Thomas Edison founded the first film studio, his initial film screened was *The Dance of the Seven Veils.* Since then, thousands of feature films with Muslim characters have been produced, with representations ranging from the international terrorist to the desert sheik. Jack Shaheen suggests that this misrepresentation of Muslims is not benign. Instead, it is a deliberate use of "repetition as a teaching tool, tutoring movie audiences by repeating over and over, in film after film, insidious images of Arab people." Ironically, many of the early Hollywood films depicting Muslim characters never consulted with or cast any actual Muslim men and women. This concept, called 'whitewashing,' refers to a casting process in the United States where white actors are given historically non-white character roles. Hollywood's whitewashing engages in erasure, where Muslims are erased completely from the screen, and inaccuracy, where Muslims are represented inaccurately, which can lead to invented stereotypes and fabricated history and identities. By casting white actors in these roles, Hollywood never gives Muslims a chance to defend themselves or call for more historically accurate representations" (Gentry, 2018, p. 15).

Whitewashing is a double-edged sword, it not only impacts the actors who have been excluded, but also the culture and identity of Middle Eastern communities. Gentry points out several notable examples in film that have highlighted the effects of this practice, including *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *The Sheik* (1921). With numerous other examples in the realm of more recent films, such as *Exodus: Gods and Kings* (2014) and *Prince of Persia* (2010).

Exodus: Gods and Kings stars Christian Bale, a Caucasian actor, as a Hebrew character—leading to criticism for his portrayal of Moses. When contacted, director Ridley Scott responded to the backlash stemming from his casting decision, ultimately resurrecting the worst traditions of old-school Hollywood, saying, "I cannot mount a film of this budget and then say my lead actor maybe Mohammad so-and-so from so-and-so" (Reed, 2021, p. 712). Not only does this quote reflect the bias that has objectively existed in the industry, but it also highlights an inherent belief that only a white lead actor is capable of "selling" a film.

For decades, the standard argument has been that films with a Middle Eastern narrative will not reach Western-leaning audiences, and that this ethnic diversity, along with the willingness to center those stories around non-white leads, could be too risky from a financial perspective. Most recently, several articles have been published that dispute this argument. A recent report titled "Diverse Films Make More Money at the Box Office", presented by UCLA's Center for Scholars & Storytellers analyzed over 100 films released from 2016 to 2019 shared that films that include representations other than white actors, for the most part, were more successful than white-cast films on a worldwide measure. Newman writes "They found that films ranked below average for diversity take a financial hit at the box office, compared to films ranked above average. Even after accounting for critical acclaim, big-budget films lacking in diversity make about $27 million less on their opening weekend, with a potential loss of $130 million in total. Regardless of the critical acclaim of a film, money is still being left on the table if the film lacks authentically inclusive representation" (Newman, 2021). *Black Panther* (2018), *Aladdin* (2019), and *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018) are just a few of the box office hits that have proven audiences are not only interested in engaging with diverse stories but also actively seeking them out.

Middle Eastern narratives such as *The Breadwinner* (2017) and *The Night Of* (2016), garnered numerous accolades and significantly wide recognition, suggesting stories based in Middle Eastern culture can resonate broadly across cultural boundaries even if it bears its roots in Middle Eastern identity. Simply as long as the stories are authentic and come from a place of care. The perception that casting Middle Eastern identities is a financial risk that should not be attempted is as outdated and unsupported as a lack of diversity in representation in Western-centered cinema. However, as the international market continues to grow and audience demographics evolve, it becomes increasingly clear where the true strength lies — and just as clear that the industry is running out of excuses.

Middle Eastern Representation in the Most-Watched TV Shows

A common misconception is that while Hollywood may have been discriminatory in the past, things have significantly improved in recent years. However, the numbers tell a different story. An article published on *The*

Independent titled "*The 100 Most-Watched TV Shows of the Past Year Revealed*" lists the most-viewed shows of the year. Diversity appears to be on display — *Squid Game* tops the list with 27.1 million viewers, and other shows with diverse casts, like *The White Lotus* and *Abbott Elementary*, also performed well (Parkel, 2025).

However, upon closer examination, the reality is more revealing. Of the 100 shows listed, 5 were reality programs, such as *Survivor* and *American Idol*, leaving 95 scripted TV shows. After reviewing the cast lists for every single one of those scripted shows, not a single Middle Eastern actor appears in the top billing. Yes, a handful were given minor, token roles in the background — but not one broke through to lead status. That is not progress — that is exclusion masquerading as diversity.

The Limits of BIPOC: Erasure of Middle Eastern Identity in Hollywood Metrics

Each year, a report titled the *Hollywood Diversity Report* is released, offering a snapshot of diversity in the film and television industry (Ramón, 2024). However, the report does not tell the whole story — and in doing so, it ignores some critical truths. It categorizes diversity into just two groups: white and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). While Middle Eastern individuals technically fall under the BIPOC umbrella, the report fails to address them as a distinct group. If it did, the results would reveal an alarming level of exclusion and discrimination.

In Chapter 45 of *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, CRT scholar Juan F. Perea writes:

> "Paradigmatic descriptions and study of white racism against blacks, with only cursory mention of other people of color, marginalizes all people of color by grouping them, without particularity, as somehow analogous to blacks. Other people of color are deemed to exist only as unexplained analogies to blacks. Uncritical readers are encouraged to continue assuming the paradigmatic importance of the black-white relationship while ignoring the experiences of other Americans who also are subject to racism in profound ways" (Perea, 2013, p. 464).

In the rare instances where the *Hollywood Diversity Report* does mention MENA (Middle Eastern and North African) individuals, the discrimination becomes immediately apparent. The report notes that only 4% of MENA actors are cast in lead roles on streaming platforms. Keep in mind that MENA encompasses over 25 countries across the globe, yet still accounts for only 4%. If we were to break this down further and isolate Middle Eastern actors specifically, that percentage would likely be even lower.

When examining the overall share of all streaming film roles, MENA representation falls to just 2.1%. The numbers for creatives behind the camera are even more telling: only 3% of directors and 1% of writers across streaming platforms are from MENA backgrounds. The data found 0% female MENA writers. Reports like these often celebrate "progress" by pointing to broad increases in diversity. However, when you look closer, it becomes clear that Middle Eastern individuals are still being pushed to the margins — nearly invisible within Hollywood. Hiring more Black, Latinx, and Asian individuals is, of course, necessary and important — but using their inclusion to paint over the exclusion of others is not accurate equity.

As Malcolm X once said, when someone claimed progress had been made through civil rights legislation: "It did not show improvement to stick a knife nine inches into someone, pull it out six inches, and call it progress. But some people, Malcolm observed, do not even want to admit the knife is there" (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 22). Hollywood, through the broad and often vague label of BIPOC, still refuses to admit that the knife is even there — let alone pull it out.

Societal Impact

The societal impact of Hollywood's discrimination against Middle Eastern people is a central concern of this study. I hypothesize that much of the racism and discrimination directed toward Middle Eastern individuals in society stems directly from their portrayal in cinema. In her study "*Impact of Films: Changes in Young People's Attitudes after Watching a Movie*," Tina Kubrak investigates whether films can shape societal attitudes. She begins by noting, "Nowadays films occupy a significant portion of the media products consumed by people. In Russia, cinema is being considered as a means of individual and social transformation, which contributes to the formation of the Russian audience's outlook, including their attitudes towards topical social issues" (Kubrak, 2020, p. 1). The idea that art shapes thought is nothing new — it is a recurring phenomenon throughout history.

Hollywood, as the epicentre of global media and storytelling, is more than just an entertainment hub. It is a cultural institution that both reflects and shapes dominant ideologies. Much like the Russian literary giants of the 19th century — Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Turgenev and Pushkin — who used their works not just to entertain but to influence the moral fabric of society, Hollywood also carries that potential. However, unlike those writers, who often urged readers toward compassion and introspection, Hollywood has too often leaned into distortion, commodification, and spectacle. From the public exposure of sexual abuse by figures like Harvey Weinstein to movements like #OscarsSoWhite, the industry's darkest corners are finally being examined.

Kubrak's study involved 70 university students aged 18–24, who were asked to watch *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* (2011). Using a psychosomatic technique with 25 attitude scales toward the elderly, the study measured attitudes before the film, immediately after, and two weeks later. The findings displayed that while a single film can have a short-term impact on viewers' perceptions, the effects are usually temporary. As Kubrak writes, "In general, the study confirms the potential for a positive impact, as in the case of improving the postgraduates' attitudes, but at the same time demonstrates the need to take into account the individual differences of viewers to achieve desired results" (Kubrak, 2020, p. 10). This insight is important. One positive film featuring Middle Eastern characters is not enough to shift public opinion. If the overwhelming majority of portrayals continue to depict Middle Eastern people as terrorists, villains, or erase them altogether, then the occasional positive representation does little to counterbalance the damage. Only a broader shift in the norm — where Middle Eastern characters are regularly shown as protagonists, romantic leads, and heroes — can begin to reshape public perception.

This matters deeply because, for many people, film is their only exposure to Middle Eastern individuals. As NBC News reported, "Pew reported that 62% of Americans have never met a Muslim. So when the only source of material for your knowledge of Islam and Muslim comes from television images and headlines, that's obviously concerning," said Dr. Bilal Rana (Shankar, 2017). Kubrak also emphasizes that pre-existing attitudes heavily influence how a film is received: "The initially negative attitude towards elderly people among students could contribute to the negative influence of the film on them" (Kubrak, 2020, p. 10). When over half of Americans have never met a Muslim, and most portrayals in media are negative or absent, those existing stereotypes are not just reinforced — they are magnified.

The Real-World Impact of Media Erasure

The aim of this research is not simply to justify the need for more Middle Eastern movie stars. As someone who grew up in North America, I am well aware of the profound impact Hollywood has on the collective psyche of society. Hollywood has the power, like no other institution, to shape perceptions, beliefs, and attitudes among audiences. Muslims are still victims of hate crimes and discrimination, and a lot of this is a result of the depictions and lack of depictions of Muslims in cinema.

In "Arabs and Muslims in the Media After 9/11: Representational Strategies for a 'Postrace' Era," scholar Evelyn Alsultany gives a perspective on the reality that Muslims in America faced in the 9/11 landscape. Her research reveals the profound impact of inadequate, often stereotype-laden representations, or sometimes no representation at all, on public understandings, which inevitably have consequences for lives.

> "Hate crimes, workplace discrimination, bias incidents, and airline discrimination targeting Arab and Muslim Americans increased exponentially. According to the FBI, hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims multiplied by 1,600 percent from 2000 to 2001. In just the first weeks and months after 9/11, the Council on American-Islamic Relations, the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee, and other organizations documented hundreds of violent incidents experienced by Arab and Muslim Americans and people mistaken for Arabs or Muslims, including several murders. Dozens of airline passengers perceived to be Arab or Muslim were removed from flights. Hundreds of Arab and Muslim Americans reported discrimination at work, receiving hate mail, and physical assaults, and their property, mosques, and community centers vandalized or set on fire? In the decade after 9/11, such discriminatory acts have persisted" (Alsultany, 2013, p. 161).

Hollywood is not the only culprit in shaping harmful perceptions — the media at large has done little justice to Middle Eastern people. However, the influence of film is particularly significant. As Sir Richard Livingstone once put it, film is "one of the new forces of the century which has taken over where the church left off" (Gray 1950, p. 135). In other words, film holds a cultural authority that rivals even religion in shaping beliefs and values.

As George Gerbner famously stated, "Television does not tell us what to think—it tells us what to think about, and how to think about it" (Gerbner et al., 2002, p. 54). It is essential to recognize the profound impact that television and cinema have on shaping a normative view of the social world. Media narratives do not just reflect reality—they create it. They normalize stereotypes and support existing hierarchies, shaping how we perceive collective action and often masking our awareness of the harm it causes once we leave the scripted frame. We need to examine how such an understanding is crucial evidence for understanding how media subtly socializes viewers and shapes their behaviour.

I believe it is hard to deny the connection between three essential realities: the negative or absent representations of Middle Eastern people in Hollywood; Hollywood's reach in shaping society's view of itself; and how these realities affect the discrimination and hate crimes these communities face in the "real world". If we are to

combat the hate and bias that Middle Eastern people are experiencing, we first need to address the root, and that begins with calling for a more honest, inclusive Hollywood. Representation is not just a superficial issue; it is a structural one, and it matters.

The Path Ahead: Rethinking Representation in the Middle East

To effectively address racism in Hollywood, we need more than diversity or representational quotas. We need a deep and widespread transformation of how stories are told, whose stories are cast through, and the vision that these stories are led by. This initiative will begin by hiring Middle Eastern executives, screenwriters, directors, and creatives who can tell authentic stories through their lived experiences. We also need to see meaningful and transparent industry policy reform that changes hiring practices to prioritize all hiring and holds casting decisions accountable, so diversity does not become just another empty symbol.

Raising awareness and advocacy also work in concert with Hollywood biases. When there is widespread awareness of Hollywood's longstanding biases, that in itself puts pressure on studios to provide representations of real lives. The recent success of *Parasite* (2019) and *Minari* (2020) in various markets indicates that audiences want non-derivative stories that are authentic and exquisitely told. Continuing efforts towards activism and media literacy will help restore momentum for new waves in Middle Eastern representation.

For social progress to be sustained, it relies on disrupting systemic inequities, creating opportunities for Middle Eastern voices, and holding Hollywood accountable for how it represents those voices. Far-reaching, systematic social change is often slow to develop. Still, the film industry has considerable cultural power and needs to take the necessary steps to represent Middle Eastern identities truthfully, richly, and with dignity.

Potential Pathways for Change

While changes remain relatively slow to occur in Hollywood, there are paths for progress in improving representation by dismantling specifically exclusionary casting techniques.

These are:

- Diversity quotas in casting and production: Diversity quotas would indeed allow Middle Eastern people to get equal opportunities with other actors and filmmakers.
- More investment in Middle-Eastern-led productions: Studios should actively support and finance films and television programming which present Middle Eastern stories without Western coloring.
- Greater accountability for casting: Industry watchdog bodies must do careful monitoring and publication of racial inequities in Hollywood casting, imposing accountability on studios for exclusionary practices.
- Support for indie and streaming projects: With slow evolution towards change in traditional Hollywood power structures, independent filmmaking and streaming platforms present alternative platforms for Middle Eastern actors and creators for telling their untold stories.

There is a need for Hollywood to take these radical steps, which could liberate it from practices that often bypass Middle Eastern actors. Until then, the burden of representation will continue to lie with those who fight against an industry that refuses to be reformed in a meaningful way.

6. Conclusion

The information, explanations and theory of this inquiry indicate to me the following: systemic racism towards Middle Eastern artists in Hollywood does not exist solely in the past; it exists as a contemporary reality. The evidence is consistent, from the casting of token roles or career-beginning typecasting of Middle Eastern actors, to the glaring absence of Middle Eastern women in blockbuster films and top-billed television shows; it is all a systemic pattern, not a coincidence or casting oversight. This is an entrenched system that continues to systematically erase an entire group of people from the stories that provide context and understanding of our cultural consciousness.

Discrimination, in whatever form, contributes to our collective and individual experiences. When Arab and Middle Eastern identities are erased or vilified on screen, it normalizes societal discrimination off screen. It reinforces a collective view of people that can overlook nuances, complexities, questions of humanity, or, I dare say, a person's inherent goodness. When the stories of people do not exist or exist through violence, hyper sexualizing of people, or the complete absence of their identity, we start to view them collectively through the same lens. As I mentioned regarding the theory and data, and as has already been observed, the media we consume influences how we perceive others and ourselves, how we shape policies, and how our communities will view those individuals. This influence also continues to affect acts of violence, all of which are coincidentally reflected in the media message.

The answer will not come easily, but it is clear: representation cannot be symbolic. Hollywood must not only

create art with Middle Eastern voices for on-screen stories, but also ensure that those voices are represented off-screen, at the lens, in the writer's room, and in the boardroom, making decisions. Hollywood must cast, write, produce and direct Middle Eastern stories with intention. Audiences must demand better, because it stops when it becomes unacceptable to exclude Middle Eastern people in the usual way of proceeding. Hollywood tells the stories that the world remembers. It is time those stories included us.

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